# BRITISH IRONCLADS 1860–75

HMS *Warrior* and the Royal Navy's 'Black Battlefleet'







**ANGUS KONSTAM**

ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL WRIGHT

NEW VANGUARD 262

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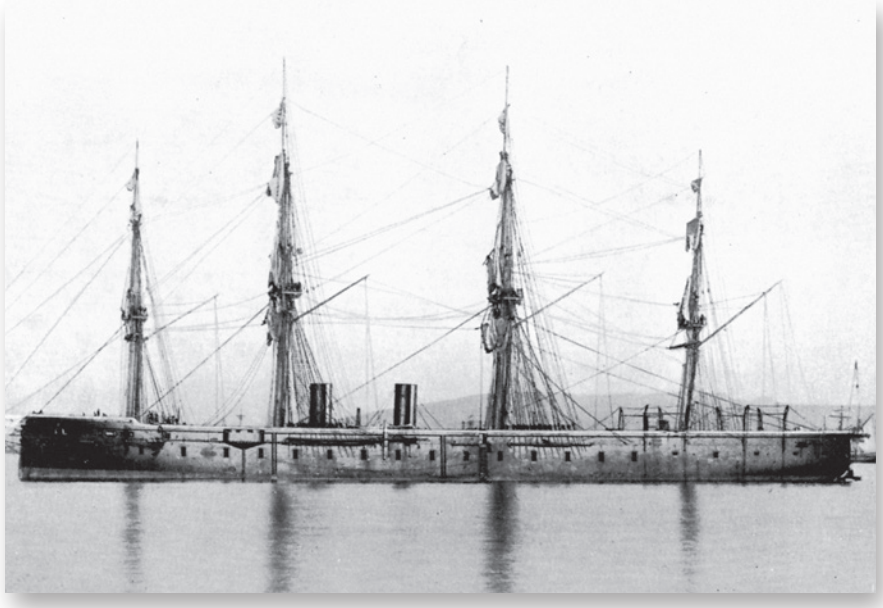

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### INTRODUCTION

On 12 November 1859, Queen Victoria arrived in Portsmouth to witness the launch of her namesake, HMS *Victoria*. She was a steam-powered First Rate ship-of-the-line of 121 guns, the largest wooden-hulled warship ever built in Britain. In other words, she was the ultimate wooden-walled sailing warship – and she would be one of the last. Exactly ten years later, on 12 November 1869, and also in Portsmouth, the keel of HMS *Devastation* was laid. She was a mastless turret ship, the first of her kind. Effectively, she would be the world's first true battleship. Only a decade separated the two events, but the two ships were worlds apart. The first marked the end of the wooden-walled ships that established Britain's predominance as a maritime power. The second ensured the Royal Navy maintained that mantle after a decade of innovation like no other in naval history.

The commissioning of *Devastation* in 1873 marked the start of a new era in warship design. Today this is largely forgotten, overshadowed by a development that utterly transformed naval warfare. That was the launch of HMS *Warrior*, the world's first purpose-built seagoing iron warship. She was laid down in 1859 in response to the construction by the French of the

HMS *Warrior*, the world's first ocean-going ironclad, has been preserved and fully restored, and is now a floating museum ship, dominating the entrance to Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard. When she first entered service in the summer of 1861, *Warrior* was the most powerful warship in the world.

The ship's wheels of HMS *Warrior* on the upper deck were duplicated by these on the gun deck, and another set below them on the lower deck. This was not merely in case of damage – *Warrior* had a small rudder, and a lot of effort was needed to turn her, meaning all three sets would be fully manned while she was under way.

world's first seagoing ironclad. *Warrior*, though, was in a different league to her rival. She was a ship worthy of superlatives: a revolutionary iron-hulled ship, protected by iron plate, powered by reliable engines and armed with a potent battery of heavy guns. *Warrior* and the many ironclads that followed her represented the ultimate fusion of Victorian technological know-how and British naval might. The old ways represented by the *Victoria* were swept aside, and a new age of steam, steel and shell was born.

## DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

### *Warrior*

In the 1850s Britain might still have been the world's leading maritime power, but it was definitely resting on its laurels. During the Crimean War (1853–56) the French had built iron-clad floating batteries which proved impervious to Russian shot. Even though these were not seagoing vessels, they still represented the future of naval warfare. The French were so impressed that they developed their own seagoing version, a wooden-hulled steam-powered warship which had been cut down, then had iron plates attached to her hull. This ship, *La Gloire* ('Glory'), duly became the world's first seagoing ironclad warship. She was still under construction when news of her reached Britain. It was quickly realized that this new warship was more than a match for the wooden-hulled ships-of-the-line which formed Britain's battlefleet. If Britain was to maintain its naval standing, then something had to be done, and done quickly.

Reluctantly goaded into action, the Admiralty responded by calling for proposals from commercial firms for an iron-clad warship which could provide an antidote to this French threat. Of the dozen or so responses, all but two called for an iron-hulled vessel. The Admiralty had experimented with iron-hulled ships during the 1840s, but found them vulnerable to enemy

The initial design requirements for *Warrior* were drawn up by Sir Baldwin Wake Walker, Surveyor of the Navy from 1848–60. However, the final design work was carried out by his successor Isaac Watts and the Navy's Chief Engineer Thomas Lloyd. Walker is shown here in the uniform of the Turkish Navy, having served with them during the early 1840s.