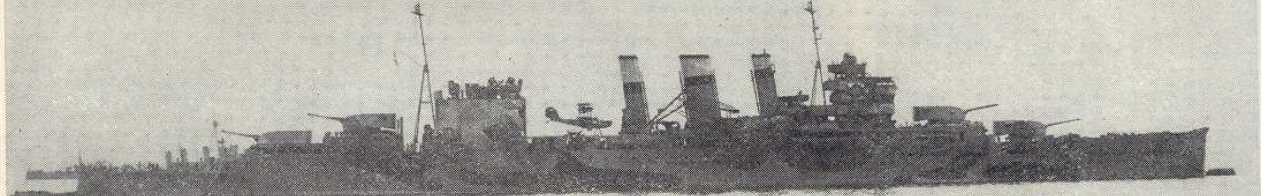


First of the 'Counties'— HMS Suffolk



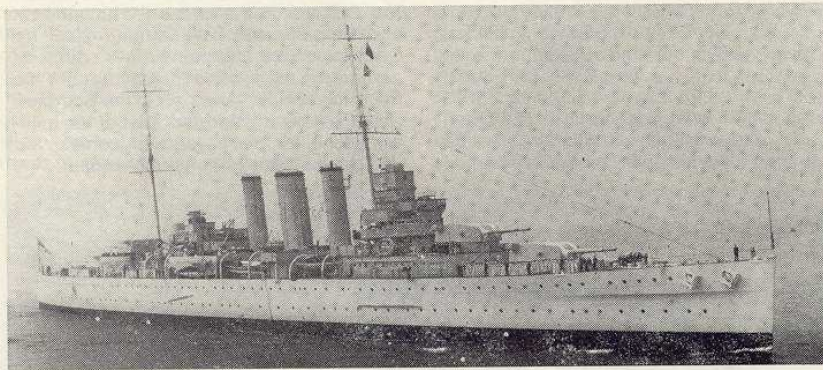
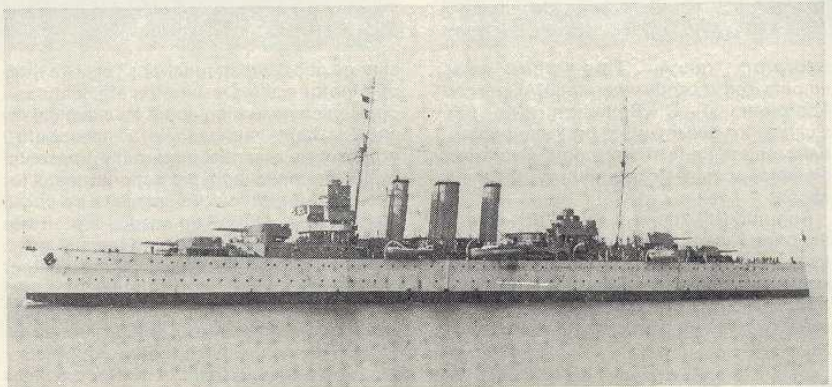
Described by Brenda Ralph Lewis

THE SLAUGHTER and mindless waste of World War 1 dealt mankind one of its greatest psychological blows. In 1918, after four years, the victors emerged disgusted at the bestiality that had been unleashed and, with the exception of Japan, resolved that this should indeed prove to be 'the war to end all wars'.

One result of this resolve was the Washington Conference of 1921-2, at which the United States, Britain and Japan sought to place controls on their ability to make war at sea. Among the consequences of this conference, which fixed the famous 5-5-3 ratio between the participants, was a limit of 10,000 tons (10,160 tonnes) maximum on the size of cruisers. The first British ships built with this limitation in mind were the 'County' Class heavy cruisers launched between 1926 and 1929. Of these, HMS *Suffolk* was the first to slide down the slipway, on February 16 1926.

The curbs agreed at Washington stretched the ingenuity of designers and

Above *Suffolk* in mid-war disruptive camouflage (IWM). **Below** Three views from more peaceful days on the China station, taken in 1930, 1933 and 1935 respectively. In the top two photos she is in standard tropical finish of white hull and light grey upperworks, but in the bottom one she appears in the attractive all-white scheme with primrose yellow funnels, masts and yards applied to all the 'Counties' in the Far East (Wright & Logan).



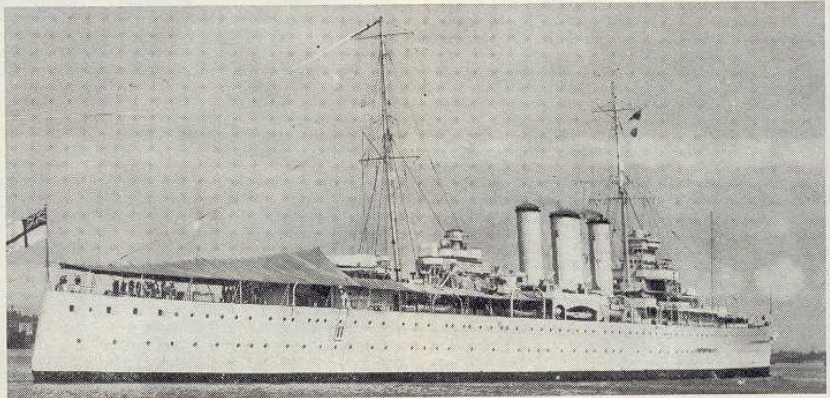
ability to stay at sea over long periods in all weathers at a constant speed. In the case of *Suffolk* and her sister ships, this feat was achieved in service at a speed of 34 knots. This was 2.5 knots above the 'official' speed of these cruisers, whose radius at full speed was envisaged at 2,300 miles. At 'economical' speed — between 11 and 14 knots — the 'County' Class were expected to have four and a half times that range — 10,400 miles.

Suffolk's tonnage and gunnery observed Britain's treaty obligations meticulously. She displaced 9,800 tons and carried eight 8-inch guns, as well eight 6-inch guns and 20 smaller pieces.

In this as in other features, *Suffolk* and

shipbuilders to the utmost. Guns on cruisers were to be no more than 8-inch and the restricted tonnage prompted the use of lighter metals and other weight-saving devices. Rather than take up valuable tonnage by heavily armouring his ships, the designer of the 'County' Class cruiser, Sir Eustace Tennyson d'Eyncourt, opted for structural strength and internal protection. There was no provision for side armour in d'Eyncourt's original design, but ultimately 3-5 inch armour was fitted to the sides, as well as 1.5-3 inch armour on the decks.

No attempt was made to build for high speed, a feature inherent in cruisers since the first modern British cruisers had emerged in the 1880s. Instead, stress was laid on the cruiser's other inbuilt virtue, its

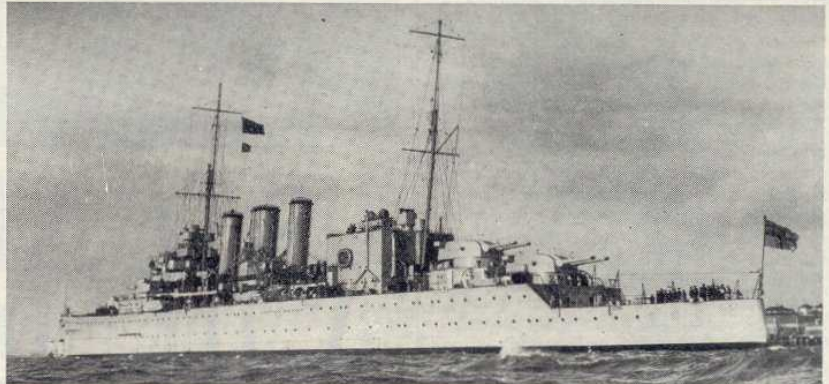
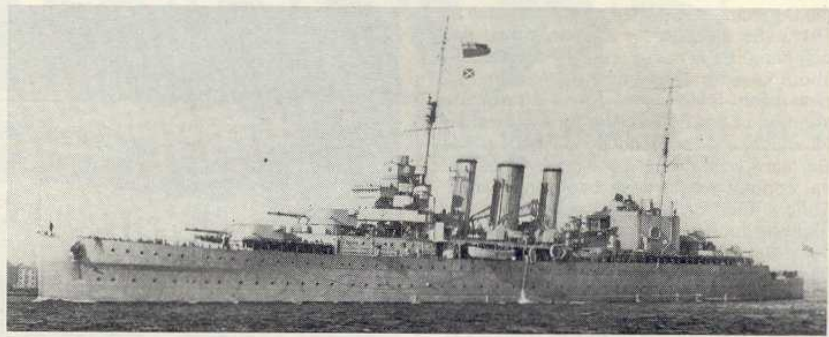


the rest of her class were designed to exploit their limited allowance to the full. The 8-inch guns had more than the usual elevation, to 65 degrees, and an increased ammunition supply that enabled each gun to fire four rounds per minute. With this capability, an 8-inch broadside weighed 2,048 lb!

Suffolk, which possessed three aircraft, with catapult, had an overall length of 630 feet, 23 compartments, a beam measuring 68.5 feet and a mean draught of 16.25 feet.

Soon after completion on February 7 1928, *Suffolk* joined the 5th Cruiser Squadron in Chinese waters, an assignment that continued until 1939. During that period, *Suffolk* was one of several 'County' Class ships to undergo reconstruction. Between 1935 and 1938, the heavy cruisers were provided with a large hangar and extra aircraft, more armour and more modern anti-aircraft armament. All these additions, of course, created extra weight and to compensate, *Suffolk* and another 'County' Class vessel, *Cumberland*, were reduced by one deck abaft the mainmast.

At the start of World War 2, *Suffolk* was one of 15 heavy cruisers of the Royal Navy and by August 1 1939, a month before war was declared, had already returned to home waters. On October 1, she joined the 18th Cruiser Squadron of the Home Fleet. She went into war service almost immediately, as a member of one of the hunting groups scouring the Atlantic for German raiders. Then, early in December, 1939, *Suffolk* became part of the 1st Cruiser Squadron of four 8-inch ships, together with *Norfolk*, *Berwick* and *Devonshire*, all of them from the 'County' Class



Two views of *Suffolk* after modernisation. Notice in particular the large, box-like hangar for her *Walrus* amphibian aircraft, seen clearly in the detail view below. This is how she appears in the Airfix 1:600 and new 1:1200 scale kits.

family.

At this juncture the war was still a matter of watching and waiting rather than all-out

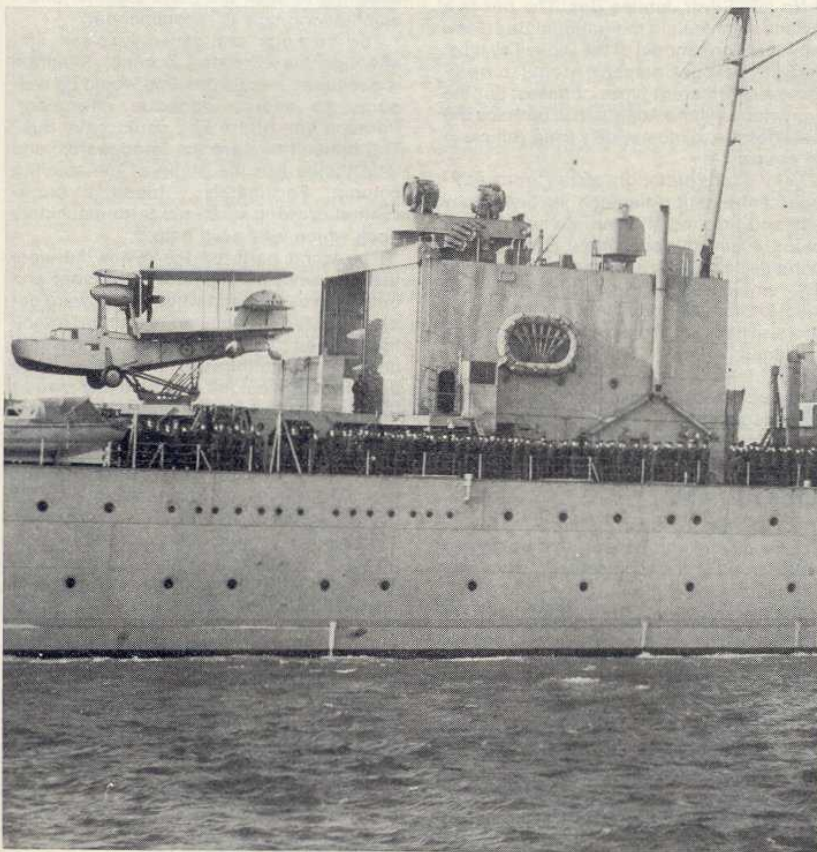
fighting, and in November, *Suffolk* was already acting out her share of this performance in the Denmark Strait, together with her sister ship *Norfolk* and three armed merchant cruisers. Nevertheless, this was no sinecure: the Atlantic was not the only area in which German raiders were at large. An early victim of one of these marauders was the armed merchant cruiser *Rawalpindi*, which was sunk on November 23 by the German battle cruiser *Scharnhorst* as she passed through the Iceland-Faeroe channel.

This melancholy event prompted a full-scale alert in which ships of the Home Fleet were ordered to sea to track down *Scharnhorst* and other German raiders. In this search, *Suffolk* and *Norfolk* were ordered to Bill Bailey's Bank at 60° 3' N, 10° W. However, the *Scharnhorst* successfully eluded the Royal Navy and managed to reach the safety of Wilhelmshaven on November 27.

Just over four months later, in April 1940, *Scharnhorst* was back in Scandinavian waters as part of the naval force supporting the German invasion of Norway. HMS *Suffolk* was back, too, assisting in the desperate, but ultimately unsuccessful, Anglo-French attempt to foil the Germans. On April 17, *Suffolk* bombarded the airfield at Stavanger, only to be pounced on and thoroughly battered by aircraft of the German Luftwaffe. She had to endure continual poundings from the air throughout seven hours of withdrawal. Although her quarter-deck was awash, *Suffolk* managed to struggle back to Scapa Flow, where she arrived on April 18.

About 13 months later, *Suffolk* took part in one of the greatest dramas of World War 2, the hunt for the German battleship *Bismarck*. In this drama, *Suffolk* played a supporting role, but a particularly vital one.

With the *Norfolk*, *Suffolk* was guarding



naval

the Denmark Strait when at 1922 on May 23 1941, she sighted the *Bismarck* and her companion, the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, about seven miles distant. *Suffolk* had by now been fitted with radar, a fortunate addition to her equipment, for the weather in which she proceeded to shadow the Germans was abysmal and continuous visual contact would have been impossible. *Suffolk* and *Norfolk* tailed the Germans all night through rain, snow, ice and turbulent seas. Next morning, *Bismarck* managed to survive only slightly damaged the engagement with the British battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *Hood*. However, the German's subsequent attempts to shake off pursuit in thick fog failed because of *Suffolk*'s tenacious radar. *Suffolk* managed to hold on to *Bismarck*'s signals even when the distance between the two ships lengthened to ten miles.

At 1630 hours on May 24, *Suffolk* was briefly in danger when the *Bismarck* turned on her to enable the *Prinz Eugen* to escape. *Suffolk*'s crew experienced several nasty moments as the German battleship came racing towards her firing a salvo as she approached. *Suffolk* wheeled hard to port and made smoke. As the British cruiser disappeared into the thick black billows, *Bismarck* veered away and made off westwards. Her feat had succeeded. *Prinz Eugen* got clear.

Three days afterwards, *Bismarck* was destroyed by torpedoes and gunfire in the eastern Atlantic but *Suffolk*, unfortunately, was not in at the kill.

Just over three weeks later, the Russians were pitchforked into the war by the German invasion of June 22 1941. In July, *Suffolk* was involved in two expeditions to aid Britain's new ally. One was an attack on German shipping in the port of Kirkenes, in northern Norway, in which she supported a Fleet Air Arm strike force. The other objective was Petsamo, a Russian port now in German hands. *Suffolk*, together with six destroyers, sailed in support of two carriers whose aircraft mounted the assault.

On August 21, she again aided the Russian war effort when she accompanied a convoy carrying 48 Hurricane aircraft from Reykjavik, Iceland, to Archangel in northern Russia. On September 28 *Suffolk* repeated the exercise when she escorted the first outward bound PQ convoy from Iceland to northern Russia.

Suffolk completed her war service in the area where she had first been commissioned — the Far East. In 1944, she was part of what has been called the 'forgotten fleet', the Royal Navy in the Pacific. While being forced by circumstances to play second fiddle to the Americans, the British scored notable successes against the Japanese enemy. *Suffolk* was present on May 17 1944, when a carrier-borne strike was mounted against the port of Sourabaya in Java. The British heavy cruiser was involved in a similar air strike against Nicobar in the Indian Ocean on October 17 and in another on oil refineries in Sumatra on January 1 1945. On April 30 1945, she took part in the bombardment and air strike on Nicobar and Fort Blair, New Guinea.

Three years later, in 1948, *Suffolk*, now 22 years old and a venerable old lady in naval terms, went to the scrapyard to be broken up. □