Victoria Cross Online

Issue 28 January 2025

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the 28th edition of Victoria Cross Online Magazine.

The feature article is courtesy of Janet Tildesley, the grand-niece of Frederick Birks VC MM, telling his story in a very insightful and personal way. Janet has previously written a book on his life.

Following on from the very successful series by your editor on the Medical VCs, my next series of articles based on a Regimental theme will be to feature the recipients of the Victoria Cross from the Royal Marines. I will feature the first three recipients in this month's edition – John Prettyjohns VC, Thomas Wilkinson VC and George Dowell VC.

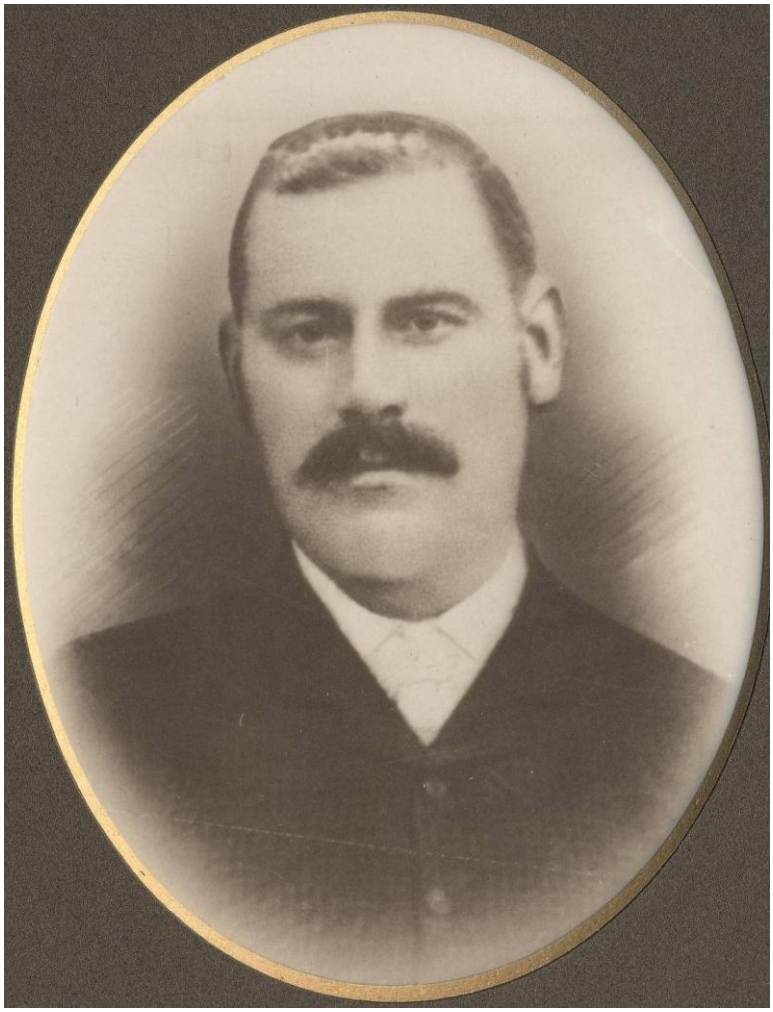
There is also the announcement of a new book in a planned series of books on the Royal Artillery Victoria Cross recipients. The book is a labour of love from an ex-Gunner himself, Brian Drummond.

Contents

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

Fred Birks was born on 16th August 1894 at Garden Cottage, Lane End, Buckley,Flintshire ; the 7th child (and 3rd son) of Samuel and Mary Birks (nee Williams). Both of his parents were from local families.



Samuel's first wife (Ann Dodd) had died in 1872; the couple had one child (George Henry). Samuel then married Mary Williams in 1877. Fred never met his stepbrother George Henry Birks (1872-1956) who had moved away from Buckley before Fred was born.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

George Henry married Ellen Holland and settled in Wigan. Samuel was noted as a Groom at the time of Fred's birth but he was, at times a Collier and Labourer. The 1881 Census notes him as a Licensed Victualler in Liverpool but checks of the Registers of Alehouse Licences as well as the local Street Directories suggest that he was probably an unlicensed Beer Seller. The family had moved to Liverpool around 1879/1880 living at 27, Kitchen Street and later at 10, Grafton Street, they were still there in 1883 but had moved back to Buckley by 1888.

Fred's other siblings were:

•Mary Ann (k/a Polly) 1879-1933. Polly married William Henry Jones (an electrician). They settled in Seaforth, Lancashire and had 5 children.

•Emily 1881-1960. Emily married Richard Isaac Springall and they lived in Toxteth, Liverpool. Emily was a Midwife.

•Beatrice (k/a Beattie) b.1882 Beattie married Ernest Henry Jones (from Washington House, Buckley). They eventually settled in Birkenhead and had 8 children. Ernest's brother, Emrys Edward Jones, was one of 2 young men who emigrated with Fred in 1913.

•Martha Jane 1883-1954. Martha married Samuel Beavan (from Buckley) and they lived at Garden Cottage. They had 2 children, one of whom died as a child.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

- Samuel Birks 1888-1960. Samuel married Sarah Ellen (k/a Sally) Jones (daughter of Joseph Hayes Jones, Clerk/Sexton at St. Matthews Church in Buckley). They lived in Liverpool Road and had 4 children. Samuel served in WW1 in the Royal Field Artillery and was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for services in Italy (Kings Birthday Honours List 1918). He enlisted in Coventry on 1st September 1915 (he was working in Doncaster at that time) and was made a Gunner, promoted to Bombardier in April 1915, to Corporal in September 1915 and then to Sergeant in March 1917.The Meritorious Service Medal was an award made, generally, in recognition of a period of sustained gallant performance rather than a single act and many went to men who were not in a position to carry out spectacular individual events e.g. those in transport services, medical or veterinary corps and the artillery. Samuel was elected to Buckley Urban District Council in 1919 and served for 3 years as the Member for Pentrobin Ward. A pit accident at the Elm Colliery in 1933 resulted in Samuel losing a leg and he did not work again. Samuel Birks was my grandfather

Frederick Birks VC MM

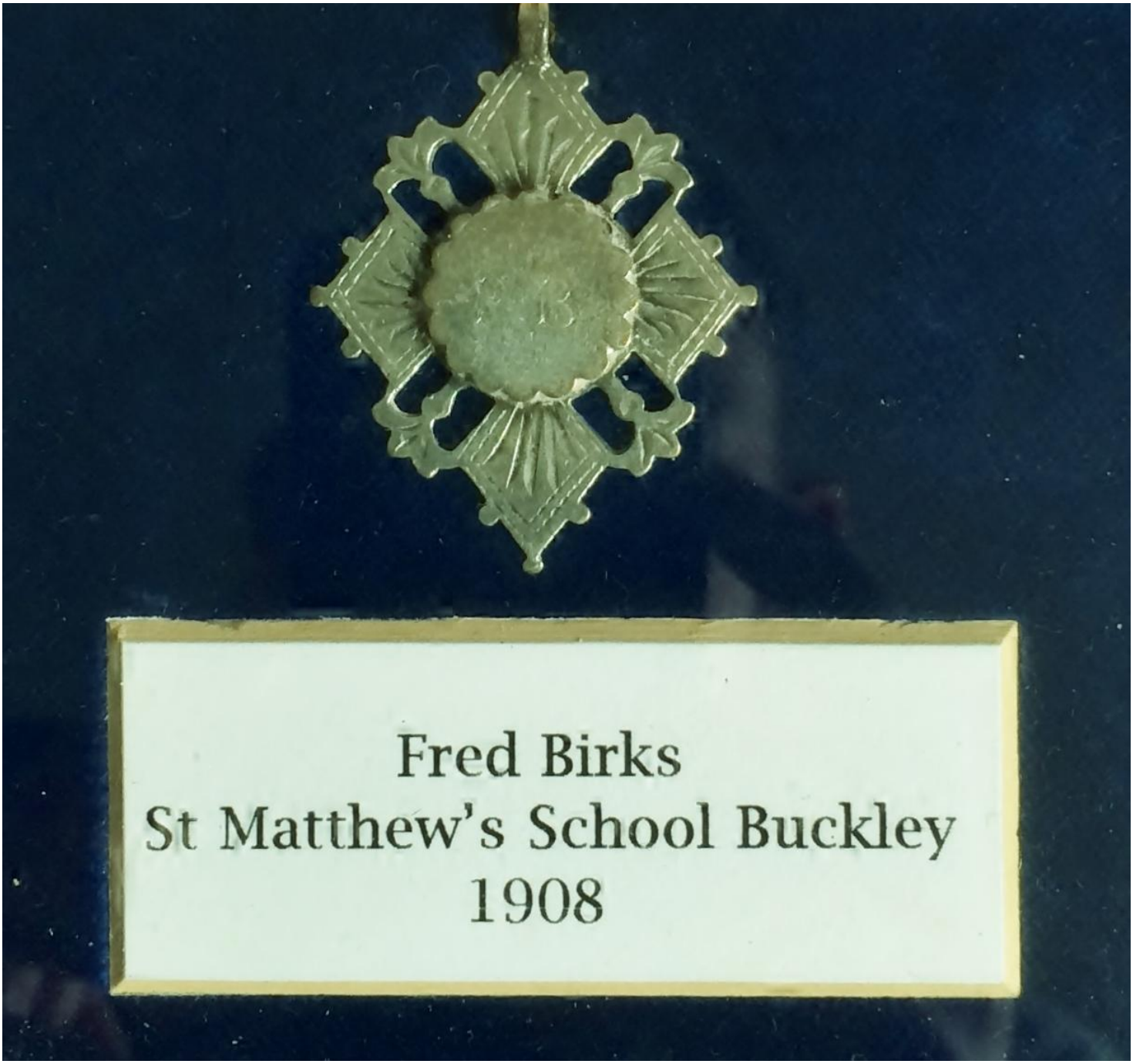
BY JANET TILDESLEY

- John 1890-1959. John lived at Garden Cottage all of his life. He did not marry, living with his sister Martha and her family and later with Martha's daughter (Mary) & her family.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

As a boy Fred attended St. Matthew's School in Buckley and was awarded a silver medal by Flintshire County Council (presented by the Vicar on 23rd December 1908) for 7 years complete attendance. The Headmaster, Mr. Tyson, noted he was "…never absent, never late."



Frederick Birks VC MM

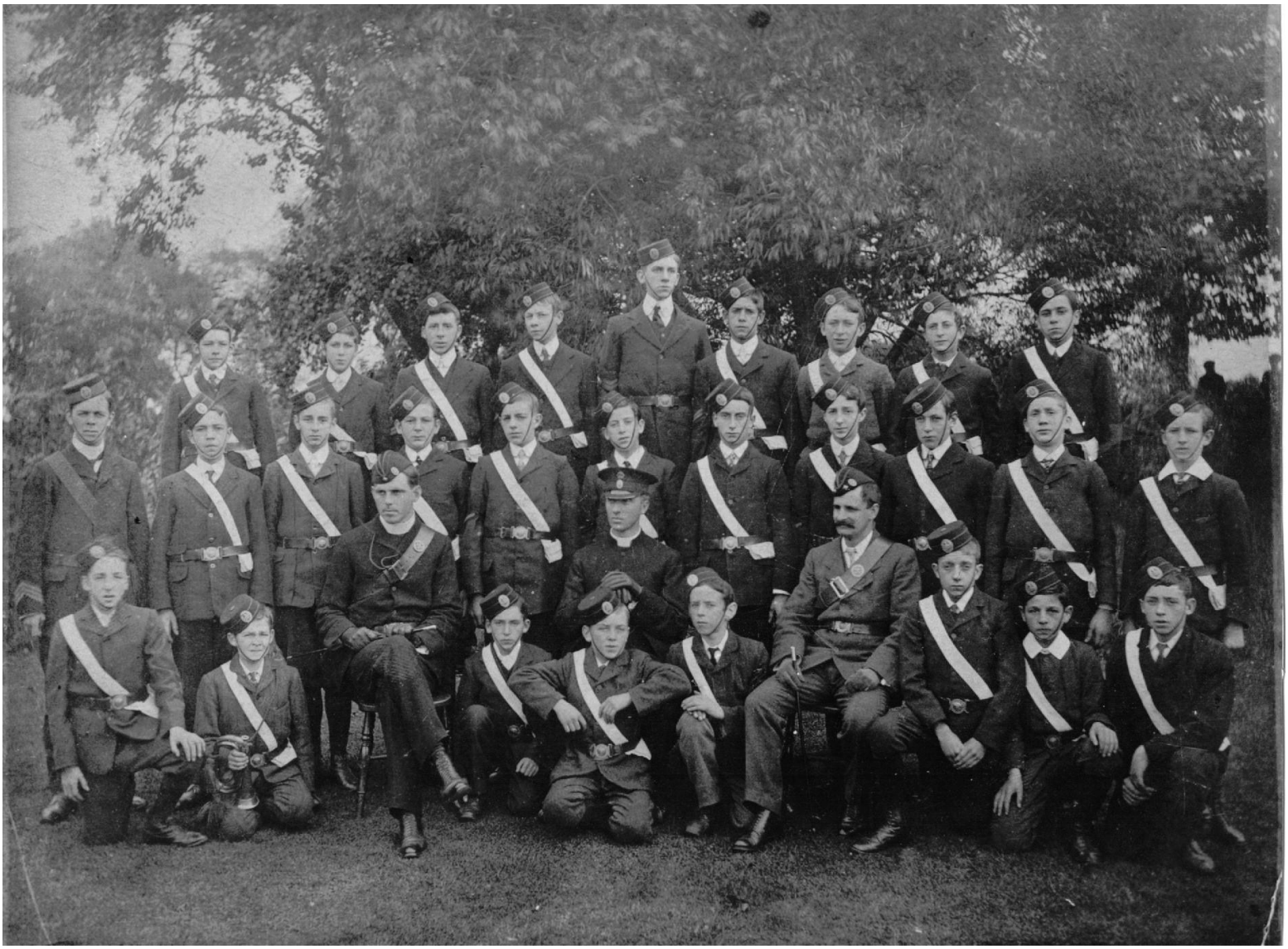
BY JANET TILDESLEY

From all accounts he was an adventurous boy, involved and good at sport, being a member of Buckley Football Team (in the photograph Fred is the tall boy wearing the football strip on the left of the back row). Recollections of Fred from a childhood friend (Edward Lloyd) are described in the magazine of The Buckley Society 1983 and Fred is summed up as "…a naughty little devil, always full of beans."

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

He was a keen member of the Church Lads Brigade and the earliest surviving photograph of him is with the Brigade. In the photograph Fred is sixth from the right in the centre row. This Company distinguished themselves greatly during the War with a Victoria Cross (Fred Birks), Distinguished Service Order (Rev Douglas Pelly), Distinguished Conduct Medal (Charles Dolby), Military Medal (Fred Birks and Ike Powell), and Serbian Cross (John Griffiths).



Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

The Buckley Parish Magazine on 9th May 1918 noted that Fred was the 13th member of the Church Lads Brigade (nationally) to be awarded a VC but the first overseas member. The CLB website notes that more VCs were awarded to former members of the Church Lads Brigade than to former members of any other youth organization (21 were awarded to former CLB members in WW1). The Brigade was founded in 1891 and between 1911 and 1930 it was the largest force of cadets in the country. When Fred emigrated to Australia the Bible Class gave him a bible. Fred carried this bible in his knapsack after enlistment and it was returned to his mother, along with his other effects, after his death. This fact, alongside a letter written by the Battalion Chaplain to Fred's mother after his death, suggests that Fred held a strong faith.

Fred's father died, following a pit accident, in 1899. The Chester Chronicle of the 8th November 1899 notes : *" On Tuesday morning week when Samuel Birks, aged 48, was following his usual employment as a collier, at the Mountain Colliery of Messrs. George Watkinson & Sons Limited, a fall of roof took place and severely injured his back and neck. He was conveyed home and afterwards to the Mold Cottage Hospital but despite all attention he succumbed to his injuries early on Friday morning. Deceased leaves a widow and family most of whom are grown up."*

So life would have been difficult as his mother struggled to bring up the family on her own, although the girls were all older, Samuel was 12, John 10 and Fred just 6 years old. Fred left school aged 14 and, for a time, worked at John Summers Steelworks as a labourer and steel roller-man in the Annealing Plant. He also worked as a Bricksetter. This photo is of Fred circa 1912.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

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In 1913 Fred, along with 2 friends from Buckley (William Gray and Emrys Jones), emigrated to Australia. Both Fred and Emrys had extended family that had already gone out and are likely to have been attracted by stories of life there.

Emrys Edward Jones was one of 14 children. The family lived at Washington House, Lane End and his father had a shop there. Emrys enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force, 5th Battalion on 21ST August 1914. He landed at Gallipoli on 25th April 1915 but was wounded in action the following day (26th April). After a short spell in hospital in Malta, Emrys was moved to England on 7th June 1915 and he visited family in Buckley. He was returned to Australia on 8th October that year and declared as "medically unfit" for duty on 6th March 1916. Emrys married in 1920 and had 2 sons; he died in Adelaide, South Australia on 15th September 1967.

A local newspaper in 1915 carried the following piece:
"PRIVATE EMRYS JONES. Private Emrys Edward Jones, of the- Australian Expeditionary Force who has been staying with his father, Mr. John Jones, Washington House, Lane End, Buckley, for seven weeks, started on the return journey to Australia. on Friday last. He was wounded in action some months ago, his right arm being struck. Two pieces of shrapnel were located by X-rays, and were removed. He has been in hospitals in Malta and Plymouth, and is now returning to Australia to recuperate. Private Jones is a single man, and. is 22 years of age."

This is a photograph of Emrys at that time.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

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William Albert Gray was born in Buckley in 1888, one of 5 children of Joseph and Margaret Gray (nee Teggin). Joseph was an engine driver at a local colliery and the family lived in Alltami. The 1911 census notes William as a Baker. I have not been successful in finding any information about William after his arrival in Australia.

The 3 young men sailed from London on the 29th August 1913 on the SS Otway bound for Melbourne, arriving in the October. The SS Otway was a British Ocean Liner owned by the Orient Line. She had been built by Fairfield's of Glasgow and launched in 1909. With her sister ships of the Orient Line she provided fixed sailings every other week to Australia and New Zealand. She carried 1095 passengers, 280 First Class, 115 Second Class and 700 Third Class. Following the outbreak of war the SS Otway was requisitioned by the Royal Navy and deployed as an armed merchant cruiser. She was torpedoed and sunk by U boat SMUC-49 off the Scottish Hebrides in July 1917.

Fred's sequence of movements on arrival in Australia is not wholly clear. His enlistment papers note him as a waiter and he also worked, probably as a builder's labourer, for an old Buckley friend (Herbert Jones)/ Herbert Jones lived in Tasmania. The Port Melbourne Standard (8th December 1917) notes that prior to enlisting Fred was "working for Mrs Jones on structural work at Messrs Swallow & Ariell's Port Melbourne" (Swallow & Ariell's was a big factory making biscuits). The article further notes that Fred "stayed with Mr and Mrs J Edwards, Rouse Street"; this is likely to have been a Jacob & Sarah Edwards of 185 Rouse Street. Jacob was a Farrier and whilst Edwards provided the potential for a connection to North Wales I can find none. Prior to this, Fred was in Adelaide lodging with a Mrs E Cornelius at 18. King Street , Norwood. Whilst in Adelaide he formed a close relationship with a young woman & his brother, Susie and Edward (Ted) Gelven who lived in Largs Bay.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

For a number of years on the anniversary of Fred's death, Notices were placed in The Adelaide Advertiser by both Ted and Susie e.g.:

1919 In Loving memory of dear Lieutenant Fred Birks VC MM 6th Battalion killed in action at Ypres Sep 20 1917. There is one link death cannot sever. Love and remembrance last for ever-Sadly missed by Susie Gelven.

1919 In loving memory of Lieutenant Fred Birks VC MM 6th Battalion killed in action at Ypres Sep 20 1917. Too far away your grave to see. But not too far to think of you.-Inserted by his loving pal, Ted Gelven (returned)

1922 In loving memory of dear Lieutenant Fred Birks VC MM 6th Battalion killed in action at Glencorse Wood, France Sep 20 1917. Just a memory fond and true. Just a token of love for you.-Sadly missed by Ted & Susie Gelven.

Letters from Herbert Jones, Susie Gelven and Mrs. Cornelius form part of Fred's Military File in the Australian Archives. There is also correspondence from R.C Williams of Woonona, NSW. This was Richard Challinor Williams (1868-1932) Fred's uncle (his mother's brother) who had emigrated to Australia as a teenager.

Following the outbreak of war in Europe the Australian government offered support to the United Kingdom and Fred was one of the earliest recruits, as evidenced by the date of his enlistment and his Service Number of 47.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

He enlisted in Melbourne on the 18th August 1914 and was placed in 2nd Field Ambulance (as a Stretcher Bearer) of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division and sent to Broadmeadows Camp for training. The Brigade comprised four Victorian battalions-5th, 6th, 7th and 8th. On the Enlistment Papers it is noted that Fred had spent 2 years in the Royal Artillery (Welsh) but no evidence to support this statement has been found. He is described as being: 5ft. 9½ inches tall, weighing 12 stone and having dark eyes, hair and complexion.

The battalion was raised within a fortnight of the declaration of war in August 1914 and embarked just two months later on 19th October (HMAT Wiltshire). After a brief stop in Albany, Western Australia, the battalion proceeded to Egypt, arriving on 2nd December at Mena Camp, just west of Cairo.

By the spring of 1915 a decision had been taken to land a combined British, Australian, New Zealand and French force on the Gallipoli peninsula. The troops at Mena Camp formed part of this force and Fred landed at ANZAC Cove on 25th April 1915. Ten days after the landing, the 2nd Brigade was transferred from Anzac to Cape Helles to help in the attack on the village of Krithia. The attack captured little ground but cost the brigade almost a third of its strength. The battalion returned to Anzac to help defend the beachhead, and in August the 2nd Brigade fought at the battle of Lone Pine. The battalion served at Anzac until the evacuation in December when they were moved back to Egypt.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

Fred distinguished himself on his very first day of action (25th April). He was subsequently recommended for a Military Medal as a result of his bravery at both ANZAC Cove and at Cape Helles. The recommendation reading:

“Carrying wounded single handed under shell and rifle fire from the firing line from positions where it was impossible to take stretchers at ANZAC on 25 April 1915. Devotion to duty and good work, carrying wounded from the firing line under heavy fire and shell fire at Cape Helles on May 8 1915”.

On this occasion a Military Medal was not awarded.
Fred had been slightly wounded on the 26th June 1915, returning to duty on June 27th. He was promoted to Lance Corporal on 21st April 1916.
The attached photograph was probably taken during the Gallipoli campaign.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

On 23 March 1916 the battalion sailed for France and the Western Front and in July became involved in the assault on Pozieres Ridge in the Somme valley (5 miles NE of Albert). In this action Fred was again recommended for a Military Medal.

The recommendation (dated 9th September 1916) reads: **"At Pozieres, France on the 29th July 1916 L/Cpl Birks continually led his squad of stretcher bearers through Pozieres Wood and Village from the front line, many of the Regimental stretcher bearers being out of action. He was exposed to heavy shell fire the whole time".** This time a Military Medal was awarded and the news published in The London Gazette on 16th November 1916.

Fred had been promoted to Temporary Wagon Orderly Corporal on the 5th August 1916, this promotion being made substantive on the 10th August. After Pozieres the battalion fought near Ypres for a time, returning to the Somme for the winter of 1916. In the December Fred Birks went on leave and visited family and friends in Buckley. His arrival in Buckley was remembered by many pupils of his former school, St. Matthew's, where he visited to talk about some of his experiences and to show some of his souvenirs including a Turkish flag he had taken in Gallipoli.

Contemporaries recall him cutting quite a dash in his Australian uniform & cape.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

Frederick Birks VC MM

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Fred returned to his unit in France and his army records indicate that he suffered an illness that caused him to stay in hospital for five days in February 1917 (from 9th to the 14th). On the 28th February he was on his way to Officer training school having been selected for a commission. He was attached to the Divisional School which had been set up to train officers and NCOs in the latest techniques. Fred had been part of a medical unit (2nd Field Ambulance) and as he was not a doctor, could not become an officer in that unit. On the 10th May 1917 he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant and transferred on 12th May to the 6th (Victoria) Australian Infantry Battalion .

The family recollection is that Fred had requested the 6th Battalion as his Brigade of stretcher bearers had worked alongside this battalion. In the photograph of 6th Battalion officers, taken in Belgium on 23rd July 1917, Fred is seated first on the right hand side of front row. This is likely to have been the photograph of Fred that was used by the artist F. Hornsby, after Fred's death, to create the oil painted photograph that is displayed on the front cover of this magazine.

By this time the battalion was being moved up to Ypres (17th May) for a period of rest prior to a planned offensive. The Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) began on 31st July. The 1st Australian Division became involved in the second phase of the battle, the Battle of Menin Road, on 20th September 1917, Fred's first major action in his new role. This was the first of four battles in September and October in which the A.I.F. was engaged. The battles were a part of a general offensive to push the Germans off the Passchendaele - Messines Ridge and achieve a breakthrough. For the A.I.F. it was a fight to control Menin Road ridge, the high ground which the road crossed on the way east.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

The 1st and 2nd Divisions, with a combined front of 1800 metres, were at the centre of a 13 kilometre British front. The Australians were positioned along Westhoek Ridge and faced enemy - held Glencorse Wood. The battles were characterized by a sea of mud. Heavy artillery fire had destroyed the drainage systems and this coupled with unusually heavy rainfall had resulted in atrocious ground conditions.

When the battle began at dawn on 20th September, the troops closely followed their own barrage, overcame enemy infantry opposition and an unusually rapid advance took them to the north edge of Glencorse Wood. The assault is reported to have gone almost exactly to plan; the artillery barrage had been devastating with the advancing infantry only having to mop up small pockets of resistance where a handful of enemy soldiers had managed to survive. The Battalion made its way along the southern edge of Glencorse Wood, Fred Birks commanding 16 Platoon of D Company. The Battalion History records the events as follows:

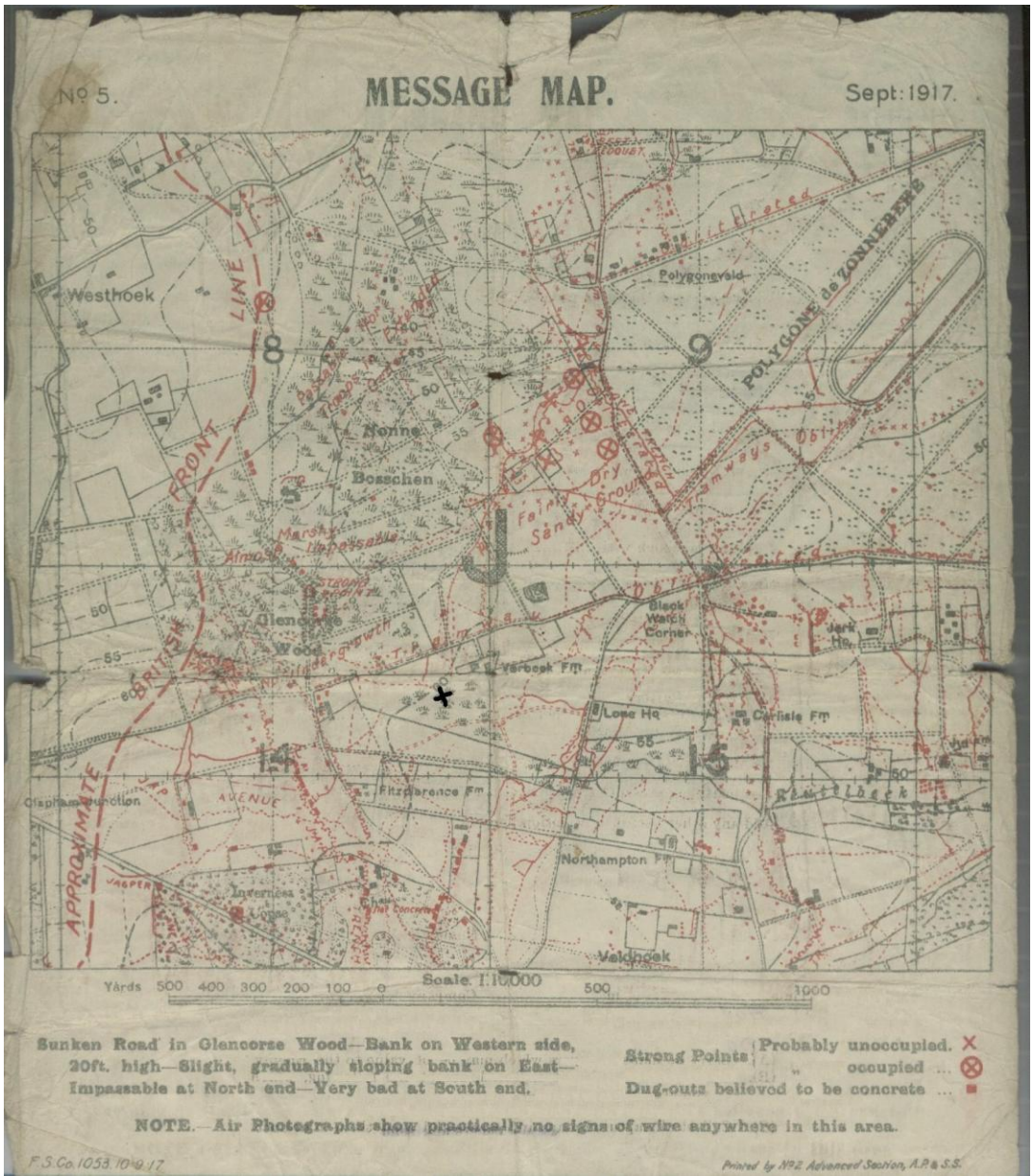
"In Glencorse Wood part of the 6th Battalion was held up by a machine - gun in a pillbox. Second Lieutenant Fred Birks, with Corporal W. Johnston, rushed the post. Johnston was wounded but Fred Birks killed the enemy and captured the gun. At once he organised a small party and attacked another strong point occupied by about twenty-five Germans. Some of the enemy were killed and an officer and fifteen men were captured. Pressing on, Birks reorganised a large number of Australians who had strayed from the units during the attack and consolidated the sector he had captured. By noon that day (20th September) the 1st and 2nd Divisions had taken all their objectives and were at the western end of Polygon Wood."

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

The message map found in Fred Birks' possession after his death gives more information about the action. It is dated 20th September and timed at 7 a.m. clearly showing where he believed his position was at that time.

The reverse of the message map indicates Fred's understanding of his and his men's situation. Other companies were retreating in disorder and he believed that he was being shelled by his own artillery, not an uncommon incident in the confused circumstances of trench warfare of the First World War. Despite this he confidently reorganised men and attacked the enemy strong points with such devastating effect.



Frederick Birks VC MM

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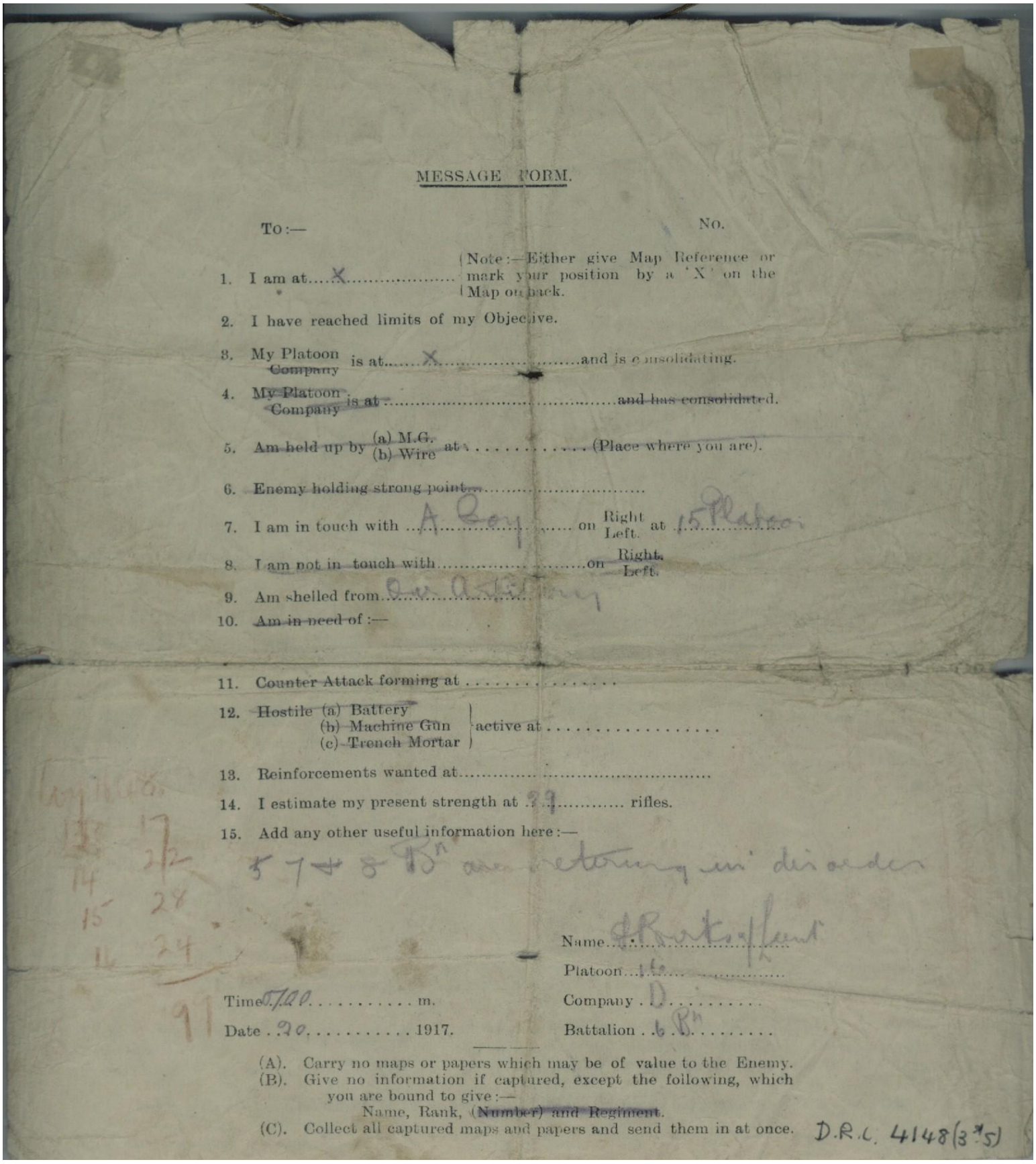


MESSAGE FORM.

To:— No.

1. I am at....X..... (Note:—Either give Map Reference or mark your position by a 'X' on the Map on back.
2. I have reached limits of my Objective.
3. My ~~Platoon~~ Company is at....X.....and is consolidating.
4. ~~My Platoon~~ Company is at .....and has consolidated.
5. Am held up by (a) M.G. (b) Wire at ..... (Place where you are).
6. Enemy holding strong point.....
7. I am in touch with A Coy ..... on Right Left. at 15 Platoon
8. I am not in touch with.....on Right. Left.
9. Am shelled from Our Artillery
10. ~~Am in need of~~:—
11. ~~Counter Attack forming at~~ .....
12. ~~Hostile~~ (a) ~~Battery~~ (b) ~~Machine Gun~~ (c) ~~Trench Mortar~~ active at .....
13. Reinforcements wanted at.....
14. I estimate my present strength at 39..... rifles.
15. Add any other useful information here:—

5 7 & 8 Bns are retiring in disorder

Name.....

Platoon.....

Time 7.20..... m.

Company .....

Date .20..... 1917.

Battalion .....

(A). Carry no maps or papers which may be of value to the Enemy.
(B). Give no information if captured, except the following, which you are bound to give:—
Name, Rank, ~~(Number)~~ and ~~Regiment~~.
(C). Collect all captured maps and papers and send them in at once.

D.R.L. 4148 (3*5)

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

The following day, 21st September, The Battalion record continues *"Before dawn* our *aeroplanes flew low over enemy's lines and fired into their trenches with Machine Guns. They remained up until after daylight. From 0430 ("Stand to") until 0539 our artillery put a stationary barrage in front of our forward lines in case the enemy were preparing for a counter attack. The enemy replied vigorously to our artillery & shelled all our sector heavily. One shell bursting in a post of 'D' Coy Killed Lieutenant BIRKS and 4 Other Ranks and wounded 2 others."*

Fred Birks was just twenty three years old. He was killed at his post by a shell while endeavouring to extricate some of his men who had been buried by a previous shell. On seeing that these men had been buried Fred left the relative security of the trench and led forward a number of men in an effort to extricate the trapped men. Devoid of any shelter Fred stood over the injured men and supervised attempts to dig them out. The German shell then exploded nearby and Fred was one of those killed.

For his actions on the 20th and 21st September 1917 Fred Birks was nominated for the Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry, by Maj. Gen. W. R. Birdwood commanding the 1st Australian Division whose recommendation is dated 27th September 1917. The copy of the recommendation in the Australian Army records reads.

"During the advance on GLENCORSE WOOD East of YPRES on 20th Sept, 1917 this officer accompanied only by a Cpl. rushed a strong point which was holding up the advance. The Cpl. was wounded by a bomb but 2/Lt BIRKS went on himself, killed the remaining Germans and captured a machine gun. Shortly afterwards he organised a small party and attacked another strong point which was occupied by about 25 Germans; after killing a number of these they captured an Officer and 15 men.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

During the consolidation this Officer did magnificent work in reorganising parties of other units who had been disorganised owing to getting too close to our own barrage. By his wonderful coolness and personal bravery he kept his men in splendid spirits through-out. 2/Lt BIRKS was killed at his post by a shell on the morning of 21st Sept. whilst standing exposed endeavouring to extricate some of his men who had been buried by a shell."

The award of the Victoria Cross was made, this was the only Victoria Cross awarded to the 6th Battalion. It was noted in the London Gazette on 8th November 1917. The Victoria Cross was presented by King George V to Fred's brother, Sgt. Samuel Birks Royal Field Artillery at Buckingham Palace on 19th December 1917. Samuel was recalled from service in Italy, where he served in the Royal Field Artillery, to accept the VC from the King on behalf of his brother

General W. R. Birdwood, the Commanding Officer of the Australian forces wrote to Fred's mother:-

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

1st Anzac Corps
B.E.F., France
28th December 1917

Dear Mrs. Birks,

It is only now that I have been able to ascertain your address, for I have been wanting to write to you about your gallant son, who was in our 6th Battalion. I cannot tell you how deeply I sympathise with you in your great loss. Though I realise that there is nothing one can say to be of comfort to you in such a grievous blow, yet I do trust that it will be of some consolation to you to know how magnificently your boy behaved, and that he gave his life fighting gallantly for King and Country.

As you know, we were engaged in all that heavy fighting in Flanders during the autumn. On the 20th September, your son's battalion took part in the advance on Glencorse Wood, and it was in this attack he so particularly distinguished himself. Accompanied by a corporal only, he rushed a strong point which was holding up the advance, and when the corporal was wounded by a bomb, you boy went on by himself, killed the remaining Germans, and captured a machine gun. A little later, he organised a small party, and attacked another strong point, which was occupied by about 25 Germans, and which he captured. In doing this, he accounted for the whole garrison, and took prisoners 1 officer and 15 men.

During the consolidation of the captured positions, your son did further good work in reorganizing parties of other units, and by his splendid bravery and coolness inspired his men with confidence. It was while standing exposed in endeavoring to extricate some of his men who had been buried by a shell, that your brave boy was killed. His loss is a great one to the whole A.I.F., and is deeply mourned by his many comrades, who held him in such high esteem. It was for this very gallant work that your boy was awarded the Victoria Cross - a distinction which he so thoroughly deserved, and it is indeed sad that he was not to be spared to wear it.

With my kind regards, and again my deep sympathy with you in the loss of your gallant son.

Yours sincerely

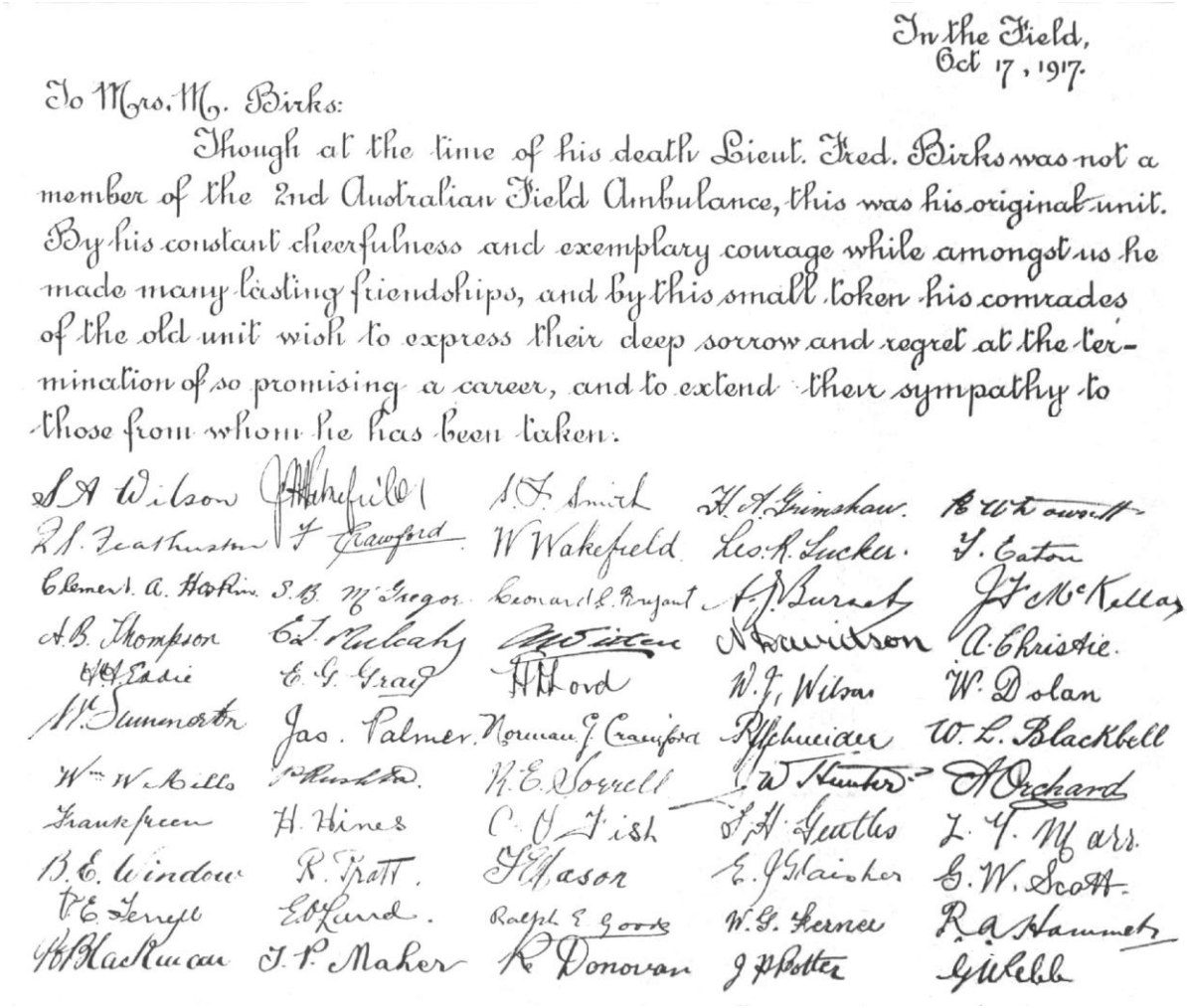
W. R. Birdwood

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

Unfortunately she would not read General Birdwood's letter as Mary Birks died on 25th December 1917.

Very significantly his former colleagues in the 2nd Field Ambulance Unit wrote a short and simple letter signed by 104 of his former colleagues This is a very unusual commendation from colleagues….Fred had left the 2nd Field Ambulance before he went to Officer training. The letter is dated 17th October, a full month before the award of The Victoria Cross and more than 6 months after he'd left the Ambulance Unit…a heartfelt expression of the loss felt by those whom he had served alongside in Gallipoli and the Western Front. The first page of this letter is in the photograph.



In the Field,
Oct 17, 1917.

To Mrs. M. Birks:

Though at the time of his death Lieut. Fred. Birks was not a member of the 2nd Australian Field Ambulance, this was his original unit. By his constant cheerfulness and exemplary courage while amongst us he made many lasting friendships, and by this small token his comrades of the old unit wish to express their deep sorrow and regret at the termination of so promising a career, and to extend their sympathy to those from whom he has been taken.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

Fred's faith was important to him and, following his death, a fellow-officer wrote to Fred's mother "*I pen the following, feeling very sad at heart at the loss of your son Fred. Freddie was a grand chap, and so popular in the mess, and especially in the way of Sports. I had the last Celebration of Holy Communion with Fred a week before going into the line. He and I, whenever there was a Celebration, went together. He was a great Church-man, his faith so strong. Now he has given his life for his country, and what greater can anyone do?"*

The Chaplain wrote *"Lieut. Birks was one of the Officers in my Battalion for whom I felt personally a strong regard, and when I knew that he had been killed in action, I felt I had suffered a personal loss. I hear his conduct during the action was exceedingly brave, and he did noble work. I regret he did not survive the fight to enjoy the distinction he gained. I am glad to tell you he came to the Celebration of the Holy Communion I had just before they went into action."*

These two letter extracts were published in the 1918 edition of Buckley Parish Magazine.

Fred was buried initially where he fell. His body was later exhumed and reburied in Perth China Wall (Zillebeke) Cemetery [Plot 1 Row G Grave 45]. At first, as with all war graves, it was marked with a temporary cross. Zillebeke is a small village near Ypres. As with all military cemeteries maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Perth China Wall is a beautiful and very peaceful spot.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

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A poignant family photograph is of Fred's brother, Samuel, and his sister, Emily visiting the grave in the early 1920s. This journey must have been quite an undertaking at that time.

Frederick Birks VC MM

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

In Buckley arrangements were made for a permanent memorial. The local press announced that the scholars and friends of St. Matthew's School, Buckley would raise the funds for a memorial .By February 1921 the impressive memorial was ready for the unveiling. Built of Runcorn red stone with a ten feet high column the memorial is topped with a wreath of laurel and wattle (the Australian national flower).

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

The local press provided a detailed account of the event

BUCKLEY'S V.C. MEMORIAL
UNVEILED BY
COLONEL T. H. PARRY
-
IMPRESSIVE CEREMONY
(By Our Own Reporter)

Tribute to the memory of Lieutenant Fred Birks, V.C. - a very gallant hero who sacrificed his life in endeavouring to save his men, after performing splendid deeds of valour - was paid at Buckley on Sunday afternoon, when Colonel T. H. Parry, D.S.O., M.P., unveiled a monument in St. Matthew's Schoolyard.

Mr. Dunn, the chairman of the committee, said they could not help but feel a loss at the death of Fred Birks. Most of them knew Fred intimately. He (the speaker) knew him since he was about seven or eight years old - and a finer lad he did not think ever walked. As a brigade lad he was perfect. He was a good lad all round, and and as a boy he attended school ten or eleven years without being absent. Later in his life he went to Australia, and they found that he was one of the first to enlist to fight in the Great War. He was sent to Egypt and from there to Gallipoli. They knew he did great deeds there – as the flag which he captured from the Turks showed. Then he went to France, and the first honour he received was the Military Medal. The second honour was a commission on the field; and the third was the great honour – the Victoria Cross. They had all freely and gladly subscribed to erect that monument to his memory.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

Mr. Tyson, headmaster of the schools, said he could endorse all that Mr. Dunn had said about Fred Birks. He did not think there was a finer chap in Buckley. It had been said "The child is father to the man," and in this case it was true. As a child he created a great record by not being absent for eleven years, as a soldier he created the greatest record of all. They were very proud of all their old scholars who fought in this war. They had a roll of honour in the school for those who fought and over forty had lost their lives. They were very proud of them all. Continuing, Mr. Tyson said they were thankful to Colonel Parry for coming there that day, as they probably knew he had not been well for some time. They asked Colonel Parry, not as Member of Parliament, but as an old friend, and principally because he had done his bit - and a good bit too - and they were all very pleased he was there that day. Amid a hushed silence Mr. Tyson read out from the "London Gazette" the account of Fred Birks' superb bravery and devotion to duty - even unto death, and said he hoped that the memorial would inspire the children of future generations, and it would be a symbol not only for Fred Birks but for all who laid down their lives.

THE UNVEILING

Colonel T. H. Parry then pulled the cord and the Union Jack, covering the monument, fell to the ground. Councillor Sam Birks (brother of the gallant officer) then placed a wreath at the base of the monument and another wreath containing wattle (the Australian emblem) was placed in position by Mr. Tyson. Colonel T. H. Parry said it was a very sincere and real privilege to him to be allowed to unveil that beautiful memorial of their late comrade Fred Birks. It was an occasion when they were celebrating the great valour and devotion to duty of a pupil of St. Matthew's School, who had won the highest award and decoration for valour it was humanly possible to win

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

He (Colonel Parry) also felt that it was a solemn and sad occasion, because, after all, in paying tribute to the valour of their comrade, they were doing it in the form of unveiling a memorial - which meant that he was no longer with them. "He lies in another country where he gave his life for you and for me." I know to-day that there are many sad hearts in Buckley, and I know that the relatives of our gallant comrade are feeling very sore and very stricken in spirit. I am sure I am only expressing the feelings of one and all of us when I say that our hearts go out to them in the deepest sympathy of which we are capable, and we trust that He who is the only consoler of mankind will sustain them in the years that lie before them."

Continuing, Colonel Parry said that Buckley was very much honoured in having had one of its sons to win the Victoria Cross. He believed he was correct in saying that it was the first time in history that the V.C. had been won by a man from Flintshire. When one could see what it meant to win the V.C., then one could understand what a very great distinction had been conferred on the ancient parish of Buckley by their gallant comrade. He had been looking at the figures the previous day, and found that although the war went on for four years, and six million men were under arms, only 579 Victoria Crosses were awarded. They were glad to think that in Flintshire they had got two - one whose memory they were celebrating that day and the other by a young Flintshire man, Mr Weale of Shotton. They felt that the county had been very well honoured by its sons in winning this great distinction

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

“HE DIED AS HE LIVED”

Continuing, Colonel Parry said he was very much impressed in the reading of the gallant record of Mr. Birks when he won the decoration. First of all he attacked a strong position with a corporal - who unfortunately fell. Undaunted Mr. Birks went on and captured the position. Later on, in company with some more comrades, he captured another strong position, and after great bravery in reorganising broken parties he died as he lived in trying to save his brother comrades. Many of those present were his (the speakers) comrades, and they all knew the tremendous havoc that was always waged by the enemy in reorganising a position, and when they thought that Lieutenant Birks fell under very trying circumstance they could surely say he gave his life for others. It could also be said of him that he demonstrated that old, great principle that no man could show greater love than to sacrifice his life for his comrades. They mourned his loss, and they would ever revere his memory - the memory of a gallant hero, who sacrificed his life, ambition, prospects, for his country in the hour of difficulty and danger. Beautiful as that memorial was, there was a memorial of Fred Birks in the hearts of every man, woman and child in Buckley. One and all would look upon the memorial as a sacred one. It was sacred, and later on it would be so dedicated, and he sincerely trusted that it would be the duty of everyone, young and old, to cherish and guard it. It would prove not only a record of gallantry of a late pupil of St Matthew's, but also an inspiration to this generation of scholars and other generations, of patriotism, loyalty and duty. He also felt that a memorial of that kind had a second object. It had the object of reminding them continually of the great debt we owed to all who went on service.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

He sometimes heard, more often then he cared to hear, of people who wanted to forget the war. To him it was unthinkable and not understandable. Think of how many of those, in our lifetime, who would never be able to forget the war. Think for a moment of those who were bereaved, who were not able to do so, and of those who were disabled! "I can see some around me here to-day who can never, while they draw breath, forget the war. Let us ask ourselves a perpetual question. "Are we doing all that we ought to do and all that we promised to do for all that made such great a sacrifice for us." There was such a thing in this world as a debt of honour. It was a debt that could not be enforced in the Law Courts, but it was a debt of honour, because the man who incurred it gave his word that he would pay that debt. That, he understood was the debt that everybody paid whatever their position may be. If that was so with regard to a debt of that kind, what about 'The' debt of honour? We had continually to remind ourselves that we must pay this debt to the utmost possible power within us." In conclusion, Colonel Parry said he believed that we were far too near the war to realise properly what it meant. It was as though one were gazing at a great masterpiece of painting. One got close against it and could not understand it, and saw colours intermingled which represented some very great ideas. The time came when the man responsible for the masterpiece came along, and he would take one back to such a position, where they could get the true perspective of the picture. It was only then that they realised what it meant.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

He believed that we were far too near this picture of the war to realise its true perspective, but Posterity would do so. He could see some years hence a great historian sitting down and writing the war. He would criticise the campaign, the tactics, and the various armies, and he would give praise here and blame there. He would also adequately realise and appreciate the great sacrifices of their comrades. He also thought that the historian would do something else. He would set down what this generation to-day did for those who sacrificed so much. He trusted - although perhaps we could not to-day adequately appreciate the magnitude of the struggle from which we had come and the magnitude of the benefits we received - we could make up our minds that the historian would write that the debt of honour had been paid. It had been said that good deeds never die - let the same be true of their memory. As they stood there that day let them pledge themselves anew to do what in us lies to pay the debt of honour which we owed individually and collectively to those who did so much. (Applause)

God, our help in ages past" was sung. The memorial was afterwards dedicated by the Rev. Gilbert Heaton.

Following the demolition of the old St. Matthew's School the memorial was moved to a position in front of the St. Matthew's Church wall, where it stands today. On Remembrance Sunday, every year, the British Legion places a wreath of poppies on the memorial.

Frederick Birks VC MM

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There was an interesting article in The Liverpool Daily Post 12th November 1917:

"Flintshire's VC.
Some time ago the rector of Flint (Canon Nicholas) who is lieutenant-colonel chaplain of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and who holds the DC, promised a £10 note to the first scholar of a Flintshire elementary school who gained the coveted distinction of the VC. The note has just been claimed in respect of Second-Lieutenant Frederick Birks of the Australian Imperial Force, who has been killed in action. Lieutenant Birks was a Buckley boy, brought up in a Buckley school. He went out to Australia a year before war broke out and returned with the Australian Forces. He won his DCM in Gallipoli and was awarded a commission on the battlefield. He has been awarded the VC but he was killed at his post by a shell while endeavouring to extricate some of his men who had been buried by a shell. His widowed mother resides at Lane End, Buckley, Flintshire and the £10 will be presented to her. In the borough of Flint 2 local officers have won the Military Cross and other men have gained the DCM and MM. The offer which was made by Canon Nicholas is considered unique and the only one in the history of North Wales so far as the war is concerned."

(It is incorrect in saying that Fred was awarded a DCM, the Military Medal having been awarded in France.) It is only very recently that I have found this article and was not aware of the £10 award at all. To date I have been unable to find any other references to the matter and this is an area of research that I will pursue further.
On May 8th 2013 Buckley Town Council erected a blue plaque on the wall of Garden Cottage in commemoration of Fred. A plaque was also put in the Council Chamber at Buckley Town Council Offices.

Frederick Birks VC MM

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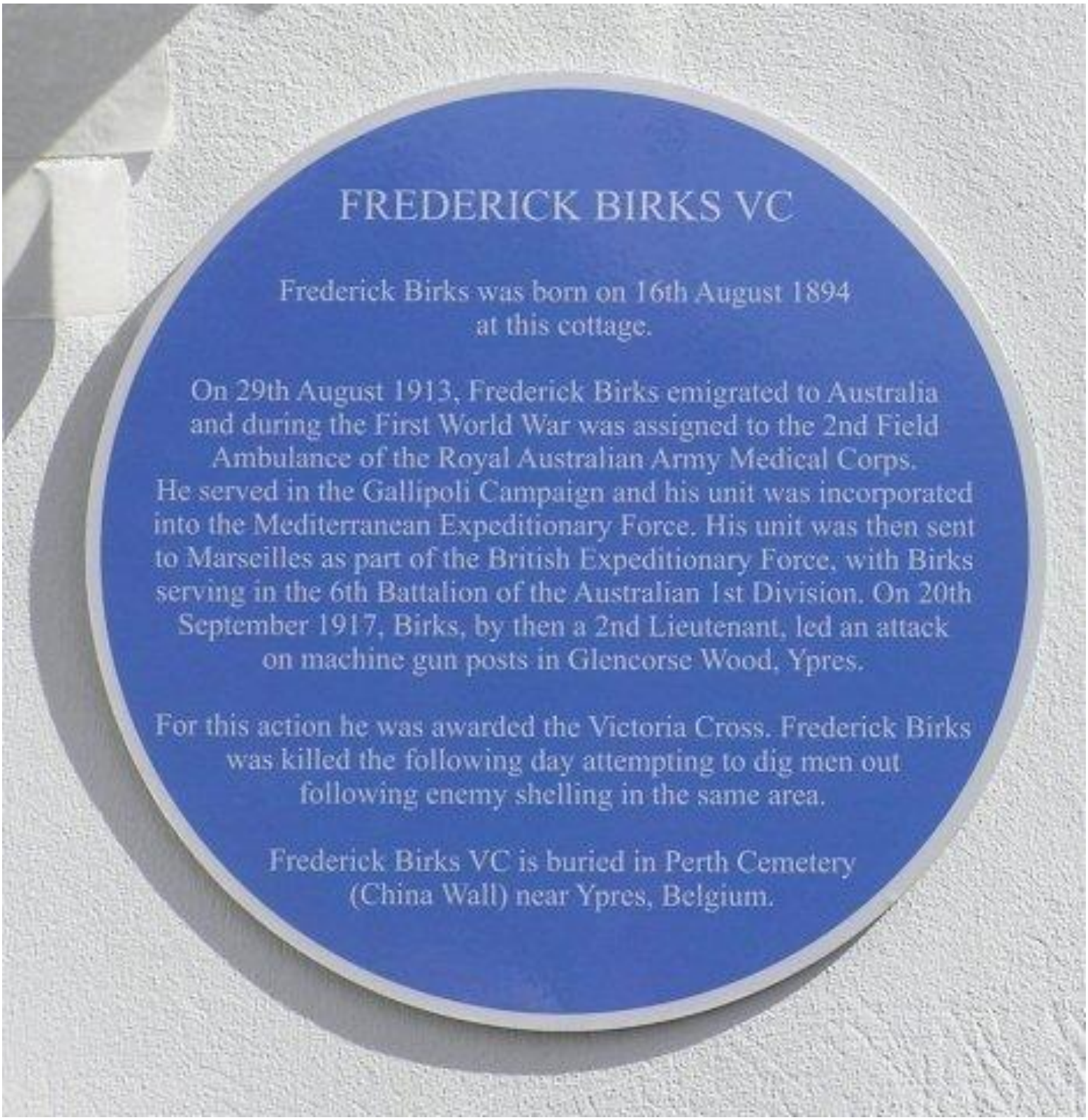

Frederick Birks VC MM

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The memorials focus on the Victoria Cross but Fred's bravery was apparent throughout his time with the AIF. On his very first day in action at Anzac Cove he was mentioned in dispatches and then again days later at Cape Helles. Recommended for a Military Medal less than 2 weeks after arriving at Gallipoli, awarded a Military Medal for bravery on the Somme, promoted to Officer training because of his ability, he won the Victoria Cross because of his actions on his first 2 days commanding a platoon.

As well as at the grave in Zillebeke, Belgium, Fred Birks is remembered on the following monuments:

The Hall of Valour, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
The Buckley War Memorial at Hawkesbury.
The War Memorial at St. Matthews Church, Buckley.
The Family Headstone in St Matthews Churchyard.
The North Wales Heroes Memorial, Bangor.
VC Memorial at Queen Victoria Building, Sydney.
Fred's medals (Victoria Cross, Military Medal, 1914-15 Star, British War Medal and the Victory Medal) are displayed at the Australian National War Memorial in Canberra where they are on loan from his family.

Information is also held on Frederick Birks VC MM in Belgium at The Cloth Hall Museum (Ypres), the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 in Zonnebeke and at Buckley Library (Heritage Display Case) in Flintshire.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

His family has established the ‘Fred Birks VC MM Award’ at a local primary school in Buckley. This annual Award is presented to a Year 6 pupil who has shown Strength, Courage or Compassion- qualities exemplified by Fred, during his short life. Established in 2017, commemorating the centenary of the award of the VC, there have now been 8 recipients at Westwood School. The school uses Fred’s Story as part of the curriculum, connecting with young people in a way that goes beyond medals and memorials.

Frederick Birks VC MM

BY JANET TILDESLEY

A short film has also been made about Fred, by a family member. As well as telling Fred's story, the film uses archive photographs and film and is a poignant and important resource. It is shown widely to local community groups across North Wales.

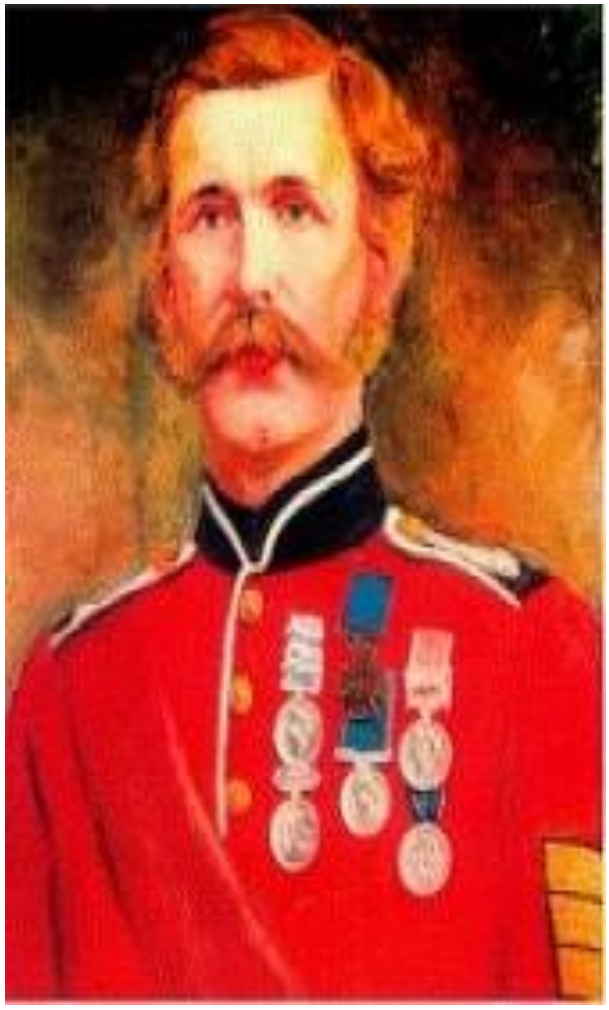
Fred's Army records can be viewed on line at www.awm.gov.au

Further background information can be obtained from reading :

***As Rough as Bags; The History of the 6th Battalion 1st AIF 1914-1919* by *Ron* Austin**
They Dared Mightily* by *Lionel Wigmore
***Heart of a Dragon. The VCs of Wales & the Welsh Regiments 1914-82* by W. Alister Williams**
***The White Ghurkhas: Australians at the Second Battle of Krithia* by Ronald James Austin**
***VCs of the First World War: Passchendaele 1917* by Stephen J Snelling**

The editor's thanks go to Janet Tildesley for this wondeful article and for permission to use all the photographs.

Royal Marines VCs
1. John Prettyjohns VC



John Prettyjohns (1823-1887) was born at Dean Prior, Buckfastleigh, near Ashburton, Devon on 11th June 1823, and was baptised at the local church of St George's on 9th December 1827.

He worked as an agricultural labourer until the day prior to his 21st birthday, when he journeyed to Plymouth and enlisted for unlimited service in the Royal Marines; collecting his 2/6d for attestation and bounty of £3.17/6d when he took the oath the following day – his 21st birthday.

He was now a Private in the 59th Company, Plymouth Division – at which rank he would stay for over 7 years. He was based at Stonehouse Barracks until 22nd March 1845 when he embarked on HMS Melampus for the south-east coast of America, and later the East Indies.

After 4 years at sea, he returned to Chatham Docks in Kent on 23rd August 1849. After 14 months back on dry land, he returned to sea on HMS Bellerophon on 7th November 1850, though it mostly stayed in home waters, until it sailed for the Mediterranean in January 1852, when he was promoted to Corporal.

On the outbreak of the Crimean conflict in 1854, the HMS Bellerophon was part of the Anglo-French fleet off the Russian port of Sebastopol.

Royal Marines VCs
1. John Prettyjohns VC

It took part in the first bombardment of Sebastopol on 17th October. Shortly afterwards, Lord Raglan requested a Royal Marines Battalion to relieve the Army units on the eastern heights overlooking Balaklava harbour against any flanking manoeuvre by the Russians. Around 1,200 Marines including Prettyjohns were selected under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Hurdle.

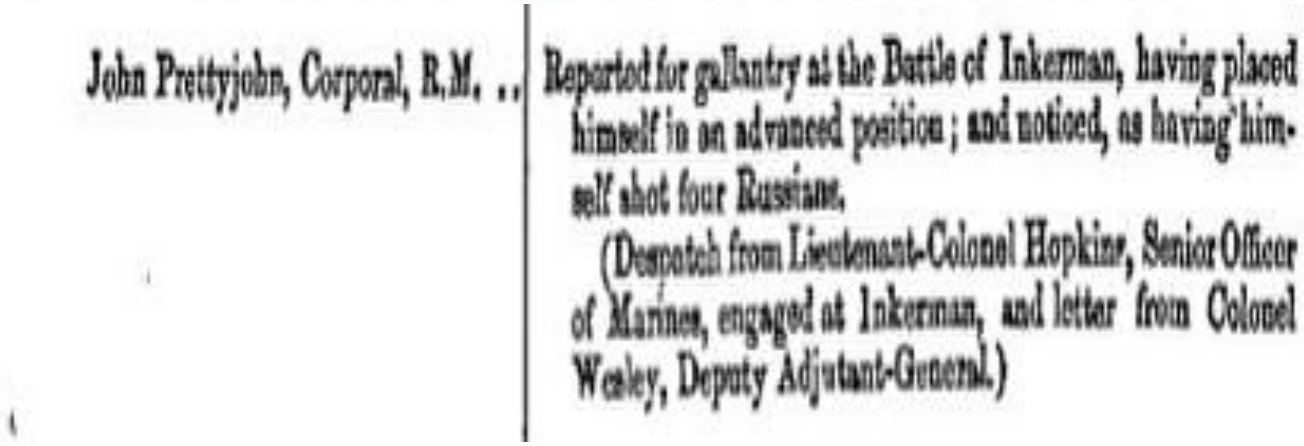
On 5th November 1854 at the Battle of Inkerman, the Inkerman caves were full of sharpshooters who were picking off officers and gunners. The caves were ordered to be cleared and the Marines were selected for the task. A division under Sergeant Richards and Corporal Prettyjohns was tasked to do the job. Richards and Prettyjohns managed to clear the caves but the ammunition was almost spent, and the enemy began to creep back up the hillside to re-take the caves. In a report by Sergeant Turner, RM, the following then happened....

“Prettyjohns, a muscular West Countryman, said, ‘Well lads, we are just in for a warming, and it will be every man for himself in a few minutes. Look alive, my hearties, and collect all the stones handy, and pile them on the ridge in front of you. When I grip the front man you let go the biggest stones upon those fellows behind’.

As soon as the first man stood on the level, Prettyjohns gripped him and gave him a Westcountry buttock, threw him over upon the men following, and a shower of stones from the others knocked the leaders over. Away they went, tumbling one over the other, down the incline; we gave them a parting volley, and retired out of sight to load; they made off and left us, although there was sufficient to have eaten us up.”

Royal Marines VCs

1. John Prettyjohns VC



John Prettyjohn, Corporal, R.M. .. Reported for gallantry at the Battle of Inkerman, having placed himself in an advanced position; and noticed, as having himself shot four Russians.

(Despatch from Lieutenant-Colonel Hopkins, Senior Officer of Marines, engaged at Inkerman, and letter from Colonel Wesley, Deputy Adjutant-General.)

Prettyjohns was awarded the VC for his actions (24th February 1857) and following Inkerman, he spent three months in the trenches and lines at Sebastopol. Upon returning the UK from the Crimea he was promoted to Sergeant in January 1856 and embarked on HMS Sanspareil on 12th March 1857 sailing for Hong Kong. Not long after its arrival, news was brought of the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny, and a detachment of Royal Marines and the 90th Regiment were transferred to HMS Shannon and sailed for Calcutta.

Prettyjohns then served at Fort William, Calcutta until joining HMS Assistance and returning to China and was involved in the Second China War. On 29th April 1857 he was promoted to Colour Sergeant, and on the 26th June that year his VC was sent to the Admiralty and despatched to China for presentation. On 28th and 29th December 1857 he was involved in the capture of Canton. He then served aboard HMS Tribune in Canada before he was discharged from service on 16th June 1865 after 21 years of service.

Prettyjohn returned to the UK and retired to the Greater Manchester area. He became a golf club steward at Whalley Range Bowling Club in Withington. He died on Thursday, 20th January 1887 at the age of 63 in Chorlton upon Medlock. He was buried on 26th January 1887 at the Southern Cemetery, Manchester. His wife Elizabeth and two daughters Bessie and Alice survived him.

Royal Marines VCs

1. John Prettyjohns VC

Grave Photo courtesy of Kevin Brazier.

Royal Marines VCs
1. John Prettyjohns VC

Medal group image when displayed at the RM Museum, Southsea courtesy of Thomas Stewart

https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/john-prettyjohns-vc/

Royal Marines VCs

2. Thomas Wilkinson VC

Thomas Wilkinson (1831-1887) was born in York in 1831. From a young age, he enlisted with the British Army and became a Bombardier in the Royal Marine Artillery, just prior to the outbreak of the Crimean War.

On the 7th June 1855, he was singled out for his gallantry when he was in the advanced batteries at Sebastopol. He was under heavy constant fire, when he continued to place sandbags on the batteries to replace the damaged bags. He was recommended for his award by the commanding officer of the Artillery of the Right Flank of the attack.

Wilkinson's Victoria Cross was announced in the London Gazette on 24th February 1857, and he was one of the first 62 men to be decorated with the medal at Hyde Park by Queen Victoria on 26th June that year. He was also awarded the French Legion of Honour. He left the Royal Marine Artillery in 1859 aged 28, and returned to his native York where he became the manager of Rymer's Sand Yard in North Street.

Wilkinson died on 22nd September 1887 aged 56, and was buried with full military honours in York Cemetery. His medals are displayed at the Royal Marines Museum, Southsea, Hampshire.

Royal Marines VCs

2. Thomas Wilkinson VC

Courtesy of Terry Cooling

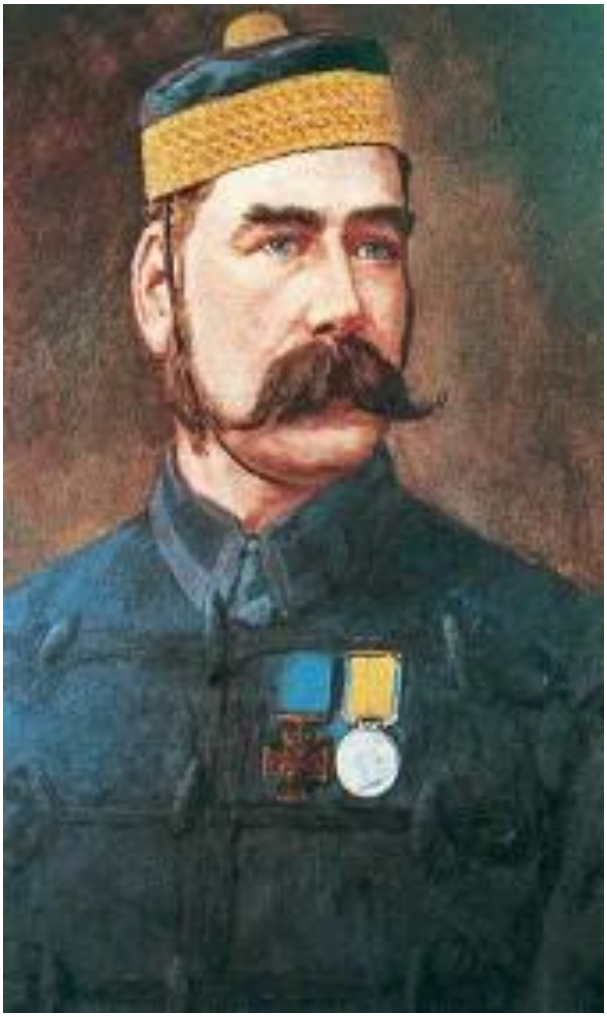
Royal Marines VCs
2. Thomas Wilkinson VC

Courtesy of Thomas Stewart

https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/thomas-wilkinson-1855-vc/

Royal Marines VCs

3. George Dare Dowell VC



George Dare Dowell (1831-1910) was born on 15th February 1831 in Chichester, Sussex, the son of George Dowell, a Paymaster in the Royal Navy and his wife Anne (nee Tulman). He was educated at the Royal Naval School, New Cross and entered the Royal Marine Artillery as 2nd Lieutenant on 26th July 1848, and in June 1849, joined the Artillery, to which branch of the Service he remained attached.

He was promoted to Lieutenant on 6th October 1851, and on 29th November 1852, he was appointed to the Magicienne steam vessel under Captains Fisher and Vansittart.

On 22nd May 1854, Lieutenant Dowell was in action with the batteries at Hango Head, and afterwards was repeatedly in action, helping on 11th January 1855, in destroying the Cossack battery at Portsoiki. The following day, he was involved in the assault on Witog. Dowell was heavily involved in the assault and the subsequent actions in the Gulf of Finland. Early on the 13th June 1855, the boats of HMS Arrogant engaged the Russian gunboats, together with the fortress of Viborg.

Royal Marines VCs

3. George Dare Dowell VC

On 13th July 1855, during the action at the fortress of Viborg, an explosion occurred in one of the three cutters of HMS Arrogant. Lieutenant Dowell, who was aboard HMS Ruby, took three volunteers and went out, under very heavy enemy fire and went to the assistance of the cutter. He took up three of the crew, and having rescued the rest and also the Captain of the Mast (George Ingouville), he then towed the stricken boat out of the range of the enemy's guns.

Dowell was amongst the first recipients of the Victoria Cross (London Gazette, 24th February 1857) and was present in Hyde Park on 26th June that year for the first investiture of the medal from Queen Victoria. He was then given the Brevet of Major (17th September 1861) and Lieutenant Colonel, and became an Inspector of Musketry.

He married Mary, daughter of Colonel Robert and Mrs Mansel at Alverstoke, Hampshire. The couple went on to have nine children in total including five sons: George Cecil, Clement Coltman, Robert Arthur, Ernest and James Alaric. Their son George Cecil later became a Colonel in the Royal Artillery. The couple's 4 daughters were Mary Constance, Clara Josephine, Gertude Annie and Lucy Violet. Lieutenant Colonel Dowell and his family emigrated to New Zealand, and Dowell died on 3rd August 1910 at The Haven, Remuera, near Auckland aged 79. He was buried in Purewa Cemetery in Auckland. His medals are held by the Royal Marines Museum, Southsea, Hampshire.

Royal Marines VCs

3. George Dare Dowell VC

Royal Marines VCs

3. George Dare Dowell VC

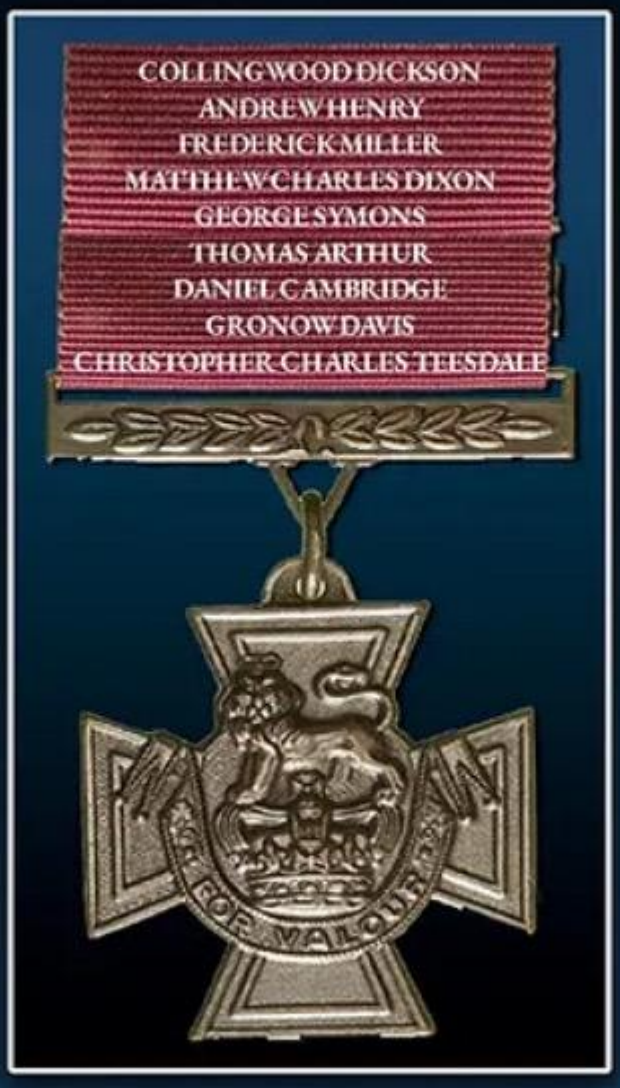
Courtesy of Thomas Stewart

https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/george-dare-dowell-vc/

Ubique VCs book

UBIQUE

THE 62 VICTORIA CROSSES OF THE ROYAL REGIMENT OF ARTILLERY



PART ONE ~ FOR VALOUR IN THE CRIMEAN WAR

BRIAN DRUMMOND

Ubique VCs book

Ubique, The 62 Victoria Crosses of the Royal Regiment of Artillery is a series of six books covering the lives and extraordinary exploits of all the Victoria Cross recipients of the regiment that fought in the wars from 1853 (Crimean War: October 1853–March 1856) up to when Patrick Porteous VC, the last VC Gunner to have earned the cross at Dieppe in August 1942.

Part One - For Valour in the Crimean War brings together the life stories of the very varied group of nine officers and men spanning the period of war on the Crimean Peninsula. Each story will give the reader essential information on their birth, early life, enlistment in Her Majesty Queen Victoria's armed forces, the individuals act of bravery, how being awarded the VC effects their lives up to their death and burial location. And finally, the current location of their Victoria Cross.

A valuable source to reference for any British Gunner historian.

Available from Barnthorn Publishing
https://www.barnthornpublishing.co.uk/product-page/ubique-the-62-victoria-crosses-of-the-royal-regiment-of-artillery-part-one

Or Amazon - https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1917120184/