

A Yeomanry V.C.

Frederick William Owen Potts was born at 54 Edgehill Street, Reading on the 18th December, 1892, the son of Mr and Mrs Thomas Potts. The census for 1901 recorded that his father was a biscuit maker aged 49, his wife aged 44, Frederick aged 8 and his sister Nellie aged 5. Living with them were their grandmother Elizabeth and Mr Chamberlin, a boarder. Frederick was educated locally at Katesgrove School and on leaving there he was apprenticed as a mechanical engineering fitter at the Pulsometer Engineering Company, manufacturers of electrical pumping equipment. Frederick regularly attended church and was a member of the Church of England's Men's Society. For three years he attended evening classes at University College Reading studying mechanics, mathematics and machine construction. He joined in 1907 the Reading Squadron of the Berkshire Yeomanry, whose history can be traced back to the last decade of the 18th century.



In June 1913 Frederick was walking along the towpath by the River Thames and heard the shouts of alarm from a boy who was pointing to another boy floating in the water. Without hesitation Frederick jumped into the river and rescued Charles Rex, a five-year-old the boy who was barely alive. He resuscitated him on the river bank and waited until further help arrived. Then, in his dripping wet clothes he left the scene and walked on home.

The 1st/1st Berkshire Yeomanry were mobilised on the 4th August 1914 and the following day became part of the 2nd South Midland Brigade, 1st Mounted Division. At the beginning of the following month they were transferred to the 2nd Mounted Division and trained for three months on the Berkshire Downs. They were sent to Norfolk in November for home defence coastal duties as it was feared the Germans might land troops on the east coast. In April 1915 the Division embarked at Avonmouth and sailed to Egypt arriving at Alexandria fifteen days later. During May the Brigade was re-designated as the 2nd Mounted Brigade 2nd (South Midland) Division.

The Division was informed in early August that they were to be sent to Gallipoli and that the Yeomanry would fight as dismounted troops. Leaving behind in Egypt sufficient officers and men to look after the horses the Berkshire Yeomanry sailed from Alexandria on the S.S. Lake Michigan on the 14th August and arrived at Mudros three days later. Transferring to the S.S. Hythe, the next day they were landed at 'A' Beach, Suvla Bay and moved into bivouacs on the western side of Lala Baba.

The assault by British forces on Scimitar Hill (Hill 70) was to be the last major offensive of the Gallipoli campaign, involving three divisions. Hill 60 and the W Hills were also to be attacked simultaneously which if successful would link Suvla Bay and the Anzac position. Sadly the attack was a costly and bloody failure. On the 21st August the 29th Division attacked Scimitar Hill and the 11th Division the W Hills, while the 2nd Mounted Division was held in reserve. The 1st Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers reached the summit of Scimitar Hill but were forced to withdraw under intense Turkish fire. As they did so the scrubby undergrowth which had been set alight by shell fire, consumed many of the wounded lying helpless on the battlefield. The 2nd Mounted Division waiting in reserve near the beach at Lala Baba, were ordered to advance. After forming up they moved off in columns across the Salt Lake. Vulnerable and defenceless they were subjected to Turkish shrapnel fire which accounted for many of the casualties. On reaching Green Hill to the west of Scimitar Hill they gained a brief respite from enemy fire. Brigadier-General Lord Longford, the commanding officer of the 2nd Mounted Brigade led the charge up and over Green Hill towards Scimitar Hill and was cut down. The Yeomanry having fought bravely through the battlefield smoke, scrub fires, machine-gun, rifle and shell fire were forced to retire from the summit. A front line was established and consolidated between Green Hill and Scimitar Hill and remained so until the evacuation in December.

The 2nd Mounted Brigade were led by the Berkshire Yeomanry in the advance across the Salt Lake with the 1st/1st Dorset Yeomanry and 1st/1st Royal Buckinghamshire Hussars following in support. They captured a Turkish front line trench, and advanced towards the summit but without sufficient support were unable to consolidate their gains. The exhausted and battle weary survivors fell back singularly and in small groups over the following twenty-four hours gathering together on the western side of Chocolate Hill. The Brigade sustained 650 casualties.

As the troopers of the Berkshire Yeomanry made their final charge to capture the summit of the hill, Trooper Frederick Potts was seriously wounded in the thigh. His courageous determination over the following forty-eight hours and devotion to a wounded fellow trooper would earn for him the first Victoria Cross awarded to the Yeomanry in the First World War. Fortunate to survive he was eventually taken to a dressing station, and evacuated to Malta on a hospital ship. He wrote a letter to his sister Nellie on the hospital ship about what had happened to him on Scimitar Hill:

“On going into action we had to run across an open space to the foot of some hills, a distance I should think of one and a half miles, while the enemy were pelting shrapnel into us. Just a wee bit



hot. The Berkshires did not lose many men in this venture, although some regiments suffered very severely. The next move was an advance up the hill it was perfect hell, chaps being mown down anyhow. When about a quarter of a mile from the summit we were told to get ready to charge. Not a man faltered. We had already captured a Turkish trench and when the order was given to charge over we went. About twenty yards the other side I received a wound in the thigh; it completely knocked me off my feet and I had to lie there. Presently another of our chaps crawled to where I was; he was shot in the groin. We stayed where we were all that night suffering very much from thirst, but it was much worse the next day. It seemed as if we should go mad for the want of a drink. When night came we decided to move if possible. This was no light job as firing had been going on all around us. One bullet actually grazed my ear but we managed somehow. Then we were able to get some water off a man that had been killed. Rather a painful job taking it, but one of necessity. We found a hiding place for the remainder of the night and next day we dare not show ourselves for fear of snipers. Oh! the thirst. I crawled from one body to another, getting water. When we got any it was like wine, although it was nearly boiling. When night came we decided that anything was better than to die of thirst so we crawled to where we thought we might find some English lines.

“The other chap could hardly move and after a few yards had to give up, so I dragged him down the hill bit by bit for about three quarters of a mile. Before we started I prayed as I have never prayed before for strength, help and guidance and felt confident we should win, though when the bottom of the hill was reached we came to a wood. I left the other chap to find a way through. I had not gone more than 20 yards when I received the command to ‘halt’. I had by good luck struck a British trench. I soon told my tale and it was not long before they found stretchers for both of us and had us in the trench where we were treated with every kindness. It must have been through the mercy of God that we got through because as these chaps told us, there were heaps of snipers out on our side as well as the enemy’s. From here we were carried to a field ambulance dressing station and had our wounds dressed. Then we were put on an ambulance cart and sent to the Welsh casualty clearing station and from there on board this boat”.

The British trench at which Frederick arrived was occupied by the 6th Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. Asked how he had managed to reach their trench, Frederick told them about his epic journey. Sufficiently impressed, the officers of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers considered that the details should be brought to the attention of the G.O.C. 2nd Mounted Division. Major W.P.B. Frazer wrote on the 28th August: “31st Infantry Brigade. I have pleasure in bringing to your notice an act of conspicuous bravery and devotion by No1300 Pte Potts, W. of the Berkshire Yeomanry, Mounted

Division, who, though himself wounded in the thigh and buttocks in the attack of Hill 70 on 21st August 1915 after lying out for over 48 hours under the Turkish trenches succeeded in fixing a shovel to the equipment of his comrade Pte Arthur Andrews of the same Corps, who was severely wounded in the groin, and dragging himself across 600 yards of ground to within a short distance of our lines though fired on by the Turkish trench, reaching our line at about 9.30pm on the 23rd instant. Pte Potts remained beside his comrade during the 48 hours, though he could himself have reached the trenches during that period”.

General W.E. Peyton, G.O.C., of the 2nd Mounted Division, had no doubts about Frederick’s outstanding bravery and devotion to Trooper Andrews and recommended to higher authority the award of the Victoria Cross.

Having sustained a serious wound Frederick was taken firstly to a Field Ambulance, then to a Casualty Clearing Station and then evacuated on the hospital ship to Malta. Following treatment there he was returned to the United Kingdom and sent to the 1st Southern Hospital, in Dudley Road, Birmingham. On the 27th September he was transferred to the Orchard Military Convalescence Hospital at Dartford where he was informed that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross.



The announcement of the award appeared in the London Gazette of the 1st October, 1915: His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to award the Victoria Cross to the undermentioned man: No.1300 Private Alfred Potts, 1st/1st Berkshire Yeomanry, Territorial Force. (Note: the incorrect Christian name in the official citation!) “For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to a wounded comrade in the Gallipoli Peninsula. Although himself severely wounded in the thigh in the attack on Hill 70 on 21st August 1915, he remained out over 48 hours under the Turkish trenches with a private of his Regiment who was severely wounded and unable to move, although he could himself have returned to safety. Finally he fixed a shovel to the equipment of his wounded comrade and using this as a sledge, he dragged him back over 600 yards to our lines, though fired at by the Turks on the way. He reached our trenches at about 9.30 p.m. on the 23rd August”.

This was the second Victoria Cross to be awarded for gallantry on Hill 70. Captain (later Brigadier DSO MC) Percy Hansen of the 6th Battalion, The Lincolnshire Regiment was awarded the Victoria

Cross for his conspicuous gallantry in rescuing wounded men from the burning scrub on the 9th August, 1915.

Frederick was granted a few days leave by the medical authorities at Dartford so that he could visit his family. His unannounced arrival was a pleasant surprise for his mother, father and sister who were overjoyed at seeing him again. The news that he had been awarded Great Britain's highest military decoration quickly spread throughout Reading and Edgehill Street. Frederick was a quiet, unpretentious modest man by nature and accepted that the Victoria Cross thrust him into the public arena. He graciously acknowledged the congratulations from many people of his brave deed on the battlefield, and received over eighty letters, telegrams, messages from Reading civic authorities and officers and men of the Berkshire Yeomanry. The houses in Edgehill Street were decorated with flags and bunting, and being so proud of Frederick they dubbed him **'The Hero with the Shovel'**. Such news gave a boost to public morale and the opportunity for celebrations in a war whose prospects of victory, was far off.

Frederick was discharged from hospital in early October, but was classed as being unfit for front line duties. He was interviewed at his home by a reporter from The Berkshire Chronicle where he gave a more explicit account of his actions on Scimitar Hill which appeared in the newspaper on the 15th October, 1915 under the headline 'The Hero Interviewed – A Thrilling Narrative' as follows: "When we were charging up the hill I received a shrapnel bullet which went through my



thigh and completely knocked me off my feet and there where I fell, I had to lie. I had been there about half an hour when Andrews crawled up to me; he was badly wounded in the groin. We were in some sort of pathway between some shrubs and here we stayed all night. It was very cold and we kept warm by huddling close together. While Andrews and I were lying there a Bucks Hussar crawled towards us and Andrews moved along to make room for him. He was suffering from a bullet wound in the leg. The poor chap had not been there five minutes when another shell came over and smashed both his legs. He lingered

on till morning and then died.

"My wound was bleeding and every time Andrews moved his wound began to bleed – his was a great deal worse than mine. We were suffering terribly from thirst, but the next day was worse. It seemed as though we should go mad for want of a drink. We did not see any Turks, although bullets were dropping around us. When night came we decided if possible to make a move. We first

crawled from one body to another, getting water. How welcome it was. I recognised the bodies of several of my late comrades. Fighting was going on all around us. One bullet actually grazed my ear but somehow we managed it. We went about 200 yards and hid that night in some shrubs. Short as the distance seemed it took us three hours to cover. There we remained the whole night and the whole of the next day. Shells continually dropped near us. We waited till evening. Then about six o'clock the final journey commenced. We had not proceeded more than half a dozen yards before Andrews had to give up. I knew that if my comrade was left there it would have meant certain death.

“There were a number of shovels lying about. I fixed one to his equipment. Using this as a sledge I dragged him to our lines. The distance covered was three quarters of a mile. This took me about 3½ hours, till 9.30 and all the time we were in great danger of being killed. We were fired on several times by the enemy and we had some very narrow escapes. I had to stop about every six yards, so difficult was it to make progress and at frequent intervals I had to put Andrews’ disabled leg on top of the other one letting that rest on the ground. After a terrible journey we struck a British trench. I felt pretty well done up but Andrews was real bad when we reached the British lines. I think I am extra lucky to have come off so well”.

A concert was held in Frederick’s honour on the 10th November, arranged by the Berkshire Territorial Association where a small charge was made for admission, the profits of which were donated to the troops of the Berkshire Yeomanry. He visited his old school, where the children and staff greeted him with excited enthusiasm. The directors and employees at the Pulsometer Engineering Works gave him a similar welcome when he made a visit there. A month later on the 6th December, 1915 Frederick was presented with an illuminated address and casket by the Mayor of Reading in the Council Chamber in the presence of Alderman and Burgesses of the Borough. His family and invited friends watched the ceremony from the gallery.

Mr R.B. Poynter ARCA, designed and illuminated the two page address on vellum. He incorporated into the design on the address and casket gold shovels. After a speech given by the Town Clerk on behalf of the Corporation, Frederick replied expressing his grateful thanks and concluded “... I feel very proud that I am a citizen of Reading and that I joined the Berkshire Yeomanry” which was followed by cheers and applause. Following the presentation ceremony a concert was held at the Town Hall where during the interval Frederick was presented with a roll top desk, which was to be transported to his home and £25 of war bonds. Two days later on the 8th December, 1915, having been promoted to Lance-Corporal, Frederick Potts received his Victoria Cross from King George V at an investiture held at Buckingham Palace. A few days later on

Wednesday the 15th December, Frederick married Ruth Wellstead at St. Giles' Church. They both wanted a quiet wedding but news leaked out and hundreds turned up to witness the event. The reception was held at the Wellstead's family home before Frederick and Ruth left for a short honeymoon in Brighton. Residing at 4 College Road, Reading their marriage later produced two daughters.

The Pulsometer Engineering Company hosted a dinner for Frederick, Ruth, his mother and father a few days before Christmas 1915. He received from the directors a gold watch and chain with a fob in the shape of a shovel and the employees presented him with a electro-plated tea service, marble clock and an illuminated address. Frederick in reply to the speeches thanked everyone for their generosity, kind words and ended saying, "This is the most trying time of my life. It is one thing to lie wounded and another thing to stand up here and face the people belonging to the town in which I was brought up."

Although classed as unfit for military service due to his wound Frederick briefly remained in the Army until he was discharged prior to the end of the war. He did not return to his pre-war employment and instead entered the tailoring trade and became a master tailor with business premises in Alpine Street, Reading.

At King George V's invitation he attended an afternoon garden party at Buckingham Palace for Victoria Cross recipients and was presented to the King and Queen Mary in June 1920. On the 11th November, 1920 he formed part of the Victoria Cross recipient's honour guard for the burial of the Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey. Frederick was an active freemason having been initiated into the Aldermaston Lodge in 1924 and later became a Worshipful Master in 1935 and appointed Provincial Junior Grand Deacon for Berkshire. He was a member of the

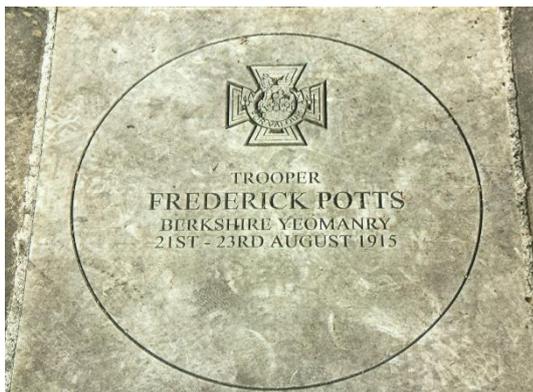


Royal British Legion and also participated in the secular affairs at St Giles' church. In November 1929 he attended the Victoria Cross Reunion Dinner held in the Royal Gallery in the House of Lords the same year in which he had been defeated as a candidate in the 1929 Reading local elections.

On the outbreak of the Second World War he was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Home Guard. During the early part of the war he worked for the military services. This combined with his Home Guard duties and local activities impinged on his health, which began to decline. On the

3rd November, 1943 Frederick Potts V.C., died aged 50 years at the Greenlands Nursing Home. His funeral service was held at St Bartholomew's Church. Among the mourners were representatives of the Berkshire Yeomanry, Home Guard, Freemasons, Borough and Local Council officials, family and many longstanding friends. Also present was Arthur Andrews who Frederick had rescued from the Suvla battlefield. At the conclusion of the service Frederick's coffin was taken to Reading crematorium for a short private family service before cremation. His ashes were scattered in the Garden of Remembrance. A bronze memorial plaque was later erected at the crematorium.

Trooper Arthur Andrews was one of five children, and later apprenticed to a local bicycle manufacturer. Being a keen horseman it may have influenced his decision to join the Berkshire Yeomanry. He spent two years recovering from his wound, a very serious groin injury. The surgeons wanted to amputate his leg but he asked if there was an alternative treatment. He retained the leg although one was shorter than the other and he had to wear a built up shoe heel to compensate in the height difference. He married in 1917 Kate Stowell and they had two children.



After the war he worked for the Great Western Railway as an instrument maker and moved in the 1930s to Caversham. He retired in 1955 and was described as a 'gentleman' enjoying gardening and fishing. His wife died in 1977 and Arthur moved to Teignmouth in Devon to live with his son. He died there in Teignmouth Hospital on the 9th September, 1980 aged 89 years. He had outlived Frederick nearly forty years.

Frederick Potts V.C., came briefly to the notice of the general public again in 1967 when the children's comic *The Victor* colourfully and graphically portrayed his heroic deed. Twenty-five years later a memorial tablet commemorating Frederick and the Berkshire Yeomanry was erected on the wall of the Keep near the entrance to Brock Barracks on Oxford Road, Reading.

A television documentary in 2010 produced by Graham McKechnie of the BBC and the military historian Jon Cooksey about the Gallipoli campaign brought Frederick Potts V.C. to the attention of interested parties in Reading. Martin Salter, one of the MP's for Reading was motivated to organise a visit for the descendants of Frederick Potts and Arthur Andrews, their families and friends to the Imperial War Museum. Frederick Potts and Percy Hansen's Victoria Cross medal groups, on loan to the Imperial War Museum are displayed in the Lord Ashcroft VC Gallery.

Their visit gave rise to the idea that a permanent memorial should be erected in Reading to commemorate the town's only Victoria Cross recipient. Supported by Reading's civic authorities The Trooper Potts VC Memorial Trust, which gained charitable status in 2012, was set up to seek sponsorship and raise funds for the project. The Hon. Mrs Bayliss CVO, JP, Chris Tarrant OBE, TV presenter and Michal Naxton, curator of the Lord Ashcroft VC Collection became patrons of the Trust. Various public events, donations from sponsors and the general public raised £150,000 to ensure that work on the project could begin.

The committee chose from a short-list of twenty-one sculptors, Tom Murphy of Liverpool to submit his ideas and make a model of the sculpture based on Frederick and his rescue of Trooper Andrews from the Suvla battlefield. Satisfied with his proposal, the sculptor submitted a life size clay maquette in late 2014 and the final design was accepted by the committee in March 2015 for the sculpture to be cast in bronze. The main feature of the sculpture depicts Frederick, with his thigh wound, dragging Arthur Andrews, with his groin wound, along the ground on a shovel. Mr Murphy commenting on his splendid sculpture said, "... the sculpture has a high degree of finish with details which will appeal to children, young people and the military historian. Items placed on the ground of the Gallipoli battlefield include Huntley-Palmer biscuits, a SMLE rifle, .303 bullets, Andrew's pipe, tobacco tin, a belt buckle and button from a Turkish uniform and buttons from a Berkshire Yeomanry uniform and a water bottle struck by a bullet."

The Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire and Chris Tarrant OBE unveiled the bronze memorial on the 4th October, 2015 in the presence of 350 invited guests including descendants of Frederick Potts, Arthur Andrews, representatives from the Turkish embassy, Mayors of Reading, Bracknell Forest, Windsor & Maidenhead, Abingdon, Military VIP's, Sponsors of the project, Patrons, the Band & Bugles of the Rifles and members of the public. The memorial is located on the pavement outside Forbury Park opposite Reading Crown Court and The Forbury Hotel. Erected directly behind the sculpture is the Memorial Roll of Honour, with bronze plaques inscribed with the names of 426



men of The Berkshire Yeomanry who lost their lives in the Boer War, First World War and the Second World War. Among those listed on the Roll of Honour is the father of the late actor, David Niven, Lieutenant William Edward Graham Niven. He was killed on Scimitar Hill during the attack and is buried in Greenhill Cemetery, Gallipoli. Erected on the fence railings adjacent to the Roll of

Honour are colourful information boards about the Gallipoli Campaign, Victoria Cross, The Berkshire Yeomanry, Scimitar Hill and Frederick Potts V.C.

On the 21st August, 2015, the centenary of the attack by the Berkshire Yeomanry on Scimitar Hill an inscribed VC memorial paving stone to Frederick was unveiled by his granddaughter Ann Ames. The paving stone has been placed at the foot of the 1914-1918/1939-1945 War Memorial outside the entrance to Forbury Gardens. Frederick was also commemorated in April of the previous year when a new road near Reading Railway Station was named Trooper Potts Way. Frederick was not forgotten by the History Department of Reading College when in 2013 they established the Trooper Potts Prize for history.

The Trooper Potts public house/restaurant was opened in March 2016 on the Basingstoke Road by the Greene King brewery company. Displayed inside are information and displays about Troopers Potts and Andrews. Another commemoration ceremony was held at Reading Crematorium on the 2nd November, 2016 where a Trooper Potts VC Memorial Board was unveiled in South Chapel. In attendance were Frederick's descendants, the Mayor of Reading, representatives from the Trooper Potts VC Memorial Trust and other invited guests.

Those associated with the commemoration of Trooper Potts V.C., and remembrance of the men of the Berkshire Yeomanry who fought in the major campaigns of the 20th century should be commended for their determination that these men are not forgotten. The magnificent bronze memorial to Frederick and Arthur and the Memorial Roll of Honour will always attract visitors who can read and learn about why they have been placed there. Frederick Potts V.C., a modest and congenial man would undoubtedly be proud of the way in which the townsfolk of Reading have commemorated and remembered the men of The Berkshire Yeomanry.

R.G. Coleman

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