

The “V.C.” Gallery

by Reg Wilkinson

A new era in the history of the Victoria Cross Gallery, Wantage began in February 1978 when the building's conversion into a shopping arcade was completed and it was opened to the public. The gallery stands on the south side of the Market Place next to the Bear Hotel. A public house called the Red Lion occupied the site for some two centuries until it changed hands in 1865. In the first half of the 19th century the Red Lion gained an unsavoury reputation which was enhanced by a murder that was committed on the premises in September 1833. According to an account set down in the Parish Register, a rough character named George King entered the public house and called for ale. The barmaid, Anne Pullen, was too busy to serve him immediately and because of this he threw his money on the floor. When the unlucky girl stooped to pick up the coins he severed her head from her body with a bean hook, and as a result was tried and hanged at Reading.

In 1865, the Wantage Corn Exchange Company purchased the inn and roofed the yard to make a covered corn market. The business of the market was always conducted on Wednesdays, so the hall was available to the rest of the community on other days of the week. By the early 1890s the Corn Exchange was falling into a state of disrepair and when the company decided to sell the building it was purchased by the Town Commissioners of Wantage for the benefit of the town. Lady Wantage supervised its renovation and Lord Wantage donated forty-four huge portraits of V.C. heroes to be hung in the main hall. After this the building was known officially as the Victoria Cross Gallery but most people generally referred to it simply as ‘the V.C.’. Part of the gallery-near the front entrance was converted into a fire station in 1910 and a succession of fire-engines and their crews were housed there until a bigger fire station was opened in Ormond Road in 1967.



Decorated for the Coronation of George V in 1911 (poc 001)

During the 1914-18 war, soldiers were billeted in the gallery and in the 1939-45 war the Berkshire County Council converted the main hall into a central kitchen for schools in the Wantage area. Because of this the portraits were removed and stored elsewhere to prevent damage by steam. When the conflict ended the "V.C." went back to serving the community once more. It was used for sales of work, exhibitions, dinners, dances and as a meeting place for various societies, and in 1963 part of the first floor at the front of the building was taken over as the Wantage Museum.

In the early 1970's the U.D.C. was presented with the problem of deciding whether to modernise the "V.C." or sell it for redevelopment. In the end the council took the latter course and the gallery closed down during the summer of 1974. The proceeds of the sale went towards building a Civic Hall in Portway which became the town's new social centre and also provided a home for Wantage Museum. At the time of the gallery's closure, only one V.C. portrait was housed within its walls. This picture depicted Lord Wantage in the act of winning his Victoria Cross at Alma during the Crimean War, and was handed over to King Alfred's School for safe keeping. The fate of the other portraits did not receive any great publicity until the summer of 1982, when a report was published in the local press giving details of a Town Council meeting in which a councillor had suggested that the paintings were still stored in secret tunnels under Wantage market place.

To many people the number, size and nature of the pictures ruled out the likelihood of storage in damp, murky tunnels. However, when local reporters investigated the story several individuals were found who were apparently willing to swear that they had been present when the portraits were actually stored in the tunnels.

Various versions of this story were published until 9th September 1982, when a letter from Mr Christopher Loyd appeared in the 'Wantage Herald'. Mr Loyd said that in about 1950 he was asked by Wantage U.D.C. to consider what should be done with the V.C. paintings. Many of them were in a tattered condition, and those which were beyond repair were destroyed. The portrait of Lord Wantage was kept in the gallery and he helped to find homes for the remaining paintings at the headquarters of the regiments with which they were associated.

The mystery of where the pictures were stored during the war was solved when the 'Herald' published another letter on 16th September 1982. This was from Mr H.E. Robinson, who was a member of the U.D.C. at the relevant time and was present when the portraits were removed from the gallery. He confirmed that they were taken down to prevent damage by steam and said that they were stored at the Wantage Engineering Works until after the war.

Incidentally, the developers made a reasonable job of converting the gallery without altering its external appearance too drastically. The upper stories now house offices, and the ground floor is occupied by a variety of businesses including a travel agency, a baker, a newsagent, a seed merchant, a dress shop, a second-hand book shop and a china and glass shop. Once more the building is servicing the community in a commercial capacity; fortunately this is somewhat different from its first commercial role - as the notorious Red Lion.

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