

## HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



### **CHARLES DAVIS LUCAS VC (1834-1914): First Recipient of the Victoria Cross**

Lucas was born on 19 February 1834 in Druminargal House, Poyntzpass, son of David and Elizabeth (Hill) Lucas. He enlisted in the navy at age 13 and by age 18 had seen active service in the Burma War of 1852-53, being awarded the India Medal. The incident for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross happened during the Crimea War which broke out in 1854. Although the main area of the war was the Crimean Peninsula, significant hostilities took place in other places, particularly in the Baltic Sea. Lucas was a mate on HMS Hecla, a wooden battleship, part of the fleet of warships dispatched to blockade the Russian Baltic Fleet and divert their resources away from the Crimea. On the evening of 21 June 1854 the Hecla, the Odin and the Valorous attacked the large fortress on Bomarsund in the Aland islands which guarded the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia. During the fierce action, which lasted most of the night, the Hecla closed on the fortress, within the range of the Russian guns. The citation of the award records that -

*..... at the height of the action a live shell landed on Hecla's upper deck, with its fuse still hissing. All hands were ordered to fling themselves flat on the deck, but Mr. Lucas with great presence of mind ran forward and hurled the shell into the sea, where it exploded with a tremendous roar before it hit the water. Thanks to Mr. Lucas's action no one was killed or seriously wounded.*

For his bravery Lucas was instantly promoted to Acting Lieutenant, at the time the only method of recognizing acts of bravery for those of his rank. Lucas' action, together with other individual acts of bravery, was widely reported and in December of that year it was proposed in Parliament "that an Order of Merit to persons serving in the army or navy for distinguished and prominent personal gallantry to which every grade should be admissible" should be created. This was supported by the government and on 26 June 1857, at the inaugural ceremony, the Victoria Cross was presented to Lieutenant Lucas by the Queen.

## HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

In his subsequent career Lucas' commands included HMS Liffey, HMS Edinburgh and HMS Calcutta. He was later promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral in command of HMS Indus before retiring from the service. In 1879 he married Frances Russell Hall, the daughter of Admiral WH Hall who had been the Captain of the Hecla in 1854. He settled in Great Culverden, Kent. He died in 1914 and is buried in Mereworth, near Maidstone, in Kent.

**Patrick Devlin**