



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

The Victoria Cross Gallery and the ‘Deeds of Valour’

by Irene Hancock

Prior to the institution of the Victoria Cross by Queen Victoria no recognised gallantry medal existed for heroic deeds. The Crimean War made such an award necessary, 111 men receiving the medal as a result of their actions during this war. The Victoria Cross was founded by Royal Warrant on 20 January 1856. It was originally intended to be awarded solely to members of the Royal Navy and British Army, who serving in the presence of the enemy had performed some act of valour or devotion to their country. Subsequently it was awarded to four civilians involved in the Indian Mutiny in 1857, further Royal Warrants extending the scope of the award, the overriding consideration for winning it, however, remaining conspicuous bravery. Queen Victoria chose the design for the decoration, a Maltese Cross ensigned with the Royal Crest and inscribed ‘For Valour’. The actual cross is made of bronze and is still cast from metal melted down from the cannons captured in 1857 at Sebastopol in the Crimean War.

After the Crimean War a Victorian artist, Louis William Desanges (1), painted a series of paintings depicting the gallant deeds by which the first recipients of the Victoria Cross had gained the honour and a further series of the heroes of the Indian Mutiny. For many years these were exhibited at the Crystal Palace, but eventually were put up for sale. Lord Wantage and his wife were unwilling that the pictures be dispersed and decided to purchase the whole collection at a cost of approximately £1,000. The collection included the portrait of Lord Wantage, when as a young Captain in the Scots Guards, at the Battle of the Alma, Crimea, he rallied a party of NCOs and men round the Colours and they held their ground against an overwhelming force. For this and another action at Inkerman he was awarded the Victoria Cross. Two other Berkshire men, Sir Charles Russell of the Grenadiers and Colonel Gerald Goodlake of the Coldstream, Crimean winners of the Victoria Cross, were also painted by Desanges and included in this collection.

At the monthly meeting of the Wantage Urban District Council held in the Town Hall on 11 June 1900 the Chairman, Mr. Ormond, asked to move a resolution as a matter of urgency. He announced that he had been authorised by Lord Wantage to state that his Lordship wished to present to the town his Victoria Cross pictures. These were to be placed under the custody, care and management of the Council. The Council had only one room of suitable size, the Corn Exchange, in which they could be hung. Considerable expenditure would be required to repair the room and he thought it desirable to ask Lord Wantage to receive a deputation from the Council to discuss the subject. He therefore moved:

"that the Right Hon. Lord Wantage, VC, KCB, having offered to present to the town of Wantage his Victoria Cross pictures to be under the care, custody and management of the Wantage Urban District Council it is unanimously resolved that his generous offer be accepted, and that his lordship be asked to receive the members of the Council as a deputation to personally thank his lordship for his liberal gift and to arrange for adapting

the large room in the Corn Exchange building for the reception and exhibition of the pictures."

Mr. Jackson seconded the resolution but was quick to remind council members that the matter could not be undertaken without additional money which would be a tax upon the finances of the Council. It was apparent the rates could not be charged with the expenditure of safeguarding these pictures. If they were to be placed in the Corn Exchange there must be a caretaker for such valuable pictures. They had to be properly taken care of, so that everyone would feel that they were properly safeguarded. He suggested that when the pictures were hung there should be an opening day and a small sum charged.

Mr. Candy endorsed the remarks of the Chairman and suggested that as the Corn Exchange was not now used for the purpose for which it was intended it should be called THE VICTORIA CROSS GALLERY.

The Town Property Committee were given the responsibility of ensuring that the Victoria Cross Gallery be in a suitable condition to house the paintings. An examination was made of the roof. The main timbers were found to be in good condition, but the glass centre required repair eg. putty and paint had deteriorated. It was considered essential that immediate approval be given for this repair at an estimated cost of £10-£12, to avoid damage to the internal decoration and the pictures. As the hall would be used by the community, the larger pictures to be hung at the platform end of the hall, would need protection when stages were being created. It was recommended that shutters be erected in front of these pictures. It was also decided to repair broken chairs and sell by auction the desks used for the Corn Exchange.

The transformation of the Corn Exchange into the newly named Victoria Cross Gallery was accomplished under the direction of the Victoria Cross Pictures Committee. The Committee reported in August 1900 that the paintings had arrived and were housed in the Corn Exchange. The Committee had a meeting with Lord Wantage who offered to defray the expense of restoring and hanging the pictures. As it was considered necessary to alter the system of lighting for the building, Lord Wantage offered to bring 'the electric current' to it. It was subsequently decided to continue employing gas as an illuminant but to use Sunlight burners with ventilating shafts. Lord Wantage also agreed to supply suitable stoves for warming the building. Messrs. Sugg & Co. were given the contract for improving the lighting and heating of the Hall. His Lordship also agreed to defray the cost of decorating the walls and ceiling and personally selected appropriate colours. Messrs. Stroud & Sons were employed to carry out the work.

In October 1900 the work in connection with the lighting had been completed and the work on the heating apparatus was progressing. The Committee were anxious to expedite the work to ensure the opening of the Gallery at the earliest possible time. The date for the public opening of the Gallery and the presentation of the pictures was selected as 15 November 1900. During October the Abingdon Herald reported that Lord Wantage was spending a considerable amount of money on the preparation of a spacious building in Wantage to be the home of 45 Desanges' pictures. In an interview Lord Wantage divulged that he would be making one addition to the collection, a picture of Lord Roberts' march to Kandahar. This picture was painted at the time from the descriptions given personally by Lord Roberts, Sir George White and other officers who took part in the march.

The presentation took the form of a Special Meeting of the Wantage Urban District Council in the Victoria Cross Gallery. Councillors present were Messrs. E.Ormond,

W.Jackson, C.R.Clement, J.Whiting, J.W.G.Candy, A.H.Wheeler, T.R.Parker, A.W.Collins, T.Clark, E.Unwin, A.J.Belcher, and J.N.Arbery.

Lord Wantage was accompanied by his fellow guardsman General Sir Frederick Stephenson, representing the Army and his friend Sir Williant Richmond RA representing Art, Lady Wantage, Evelyn Countess of Craven, the Earl and Countess of Albemarle, Mrs. A.K.Loyd and Mrs.Harry Lindsay. His Lordship's health had been failing for the past few years, it was a sad occasion, speakers and listeners realising it was a farewell memorial gift the citizens of the town were receiving. It was a public meeting and about 500 people were present. Lord Wantage formally presented the pictures by handing to the Chairman a framed illuminated catalogue of the pictures and stating "I present this list as representing the Victoria Cross pictures to the town of Wantage and place them under the care and management of the Wantage Urban District Council for the benefit of the town". The Chairman Mr.Ormond thanked Lord Wantage on behalf of the inhabitants.

The name of the Hall was changed from the Corn Exchange to the Victoria Cross Gallery. At a meeting on 3 December 1900 the Committee recommended that the name Corn Exchange be removed from the facia of the premises facing the Market Place and cutting and painting Victoria Cross Gallery at a cost of £3. They also agreed the following regulations to be painted on a Notice Board and fixed at the entrance to the Gallery.

REGULATIONS

Open daily (except Sundays) during May, June, July and August - from 11am. to 7.00pm. During the other months of the year from 11 am to sunset unless the gallery be let then only by permission of the person who has engaged it.

ADMISSION

Three pence each person except on Thursdays when it is open from 2 to 5pm. Children not admitted unless in the charge of an adult. Dogs and bicycles not admitted. Visitors are requested to ring the bell at the end of the passage.

Lord Wantage died on 10 June 1901. The following year Lady Wantage presented a bronze bust of her husband by Sir J.E.Boehm to the town, to be housed in the Victoria Cross Gallery. It was agreed that the bust be placed to the right of the picture representing his Lordship winning the Victoria Cross. The bust was fixed on a marble pedestal, Lady Wantage made arrangements for the following inscription to be added –

Robert James, Baron Wantage VC KCB, Donor of the Victoria Cross Pictures to the town of Wantage 1900. Sir J.E.Boehm BT RA Fecit 1869.

The pedestal was cemented on a foundation of brick work and a brass rail erected to protect it (the pedestal and the picture of Lord Wantage are in the Civic Hall, the bust is awaiting restoration).

What were the paintings being exhibited in Wantage? They were the majority of a series of paintings executed by Louis William Desanges illustrating the deeds which won the Victoria Cross for the early recipients. The 46 paintings presented to the town consisted of 20 based on acts of heroism in the Crimean War, 1854-56, 22 relating to further actions during the Indian Mutiny, 1857-59, (which included three civilians who received VCs for heroism and the Gough brothers). A further one of Colonel Arthur Moore VC and Lt. John Grant Malcolmson VC, who were awarded medals for action in The Battle of Kooshab, Persia 1857. Lord Raglan and the Battle of Inkermann and Lord Robert's march to Kandahar from Kabul, 1880. Major-General Robert Montresor Rogers, VC, Major

Edmund Lenon, VC and Private John McDougall, VC, for distinguished gallantry in the Chinese War, 1860.

Queen Victoria held the first investiture of VC's in Hyde Park in June 1857, 62 recipients were present. Officers and men together, shoulder to shoulder, were decorated by the Monarch, the Queen mounted on a charger and leaning from her saddle pinned the Cross on each of the soldier's and sailor's breasts. Robert Lindsay (Lord Wantage) was decorated at this time, as must have been a number of the men depicted in the Wantage pictures.

The artist obtained commissions to paint a portrait of men who had won a VC and having produced a likeness was also able to elicit details of the action for which the medal was awarded to enable him to depict the deed. An 'Address' by Louis W. Desanges on the cover of an early catalogue confirms this – "I am very sensible that, with a work of this magnitude, at which I am compelled to labour single-handed, there must be many short-comings; but as I have painted each scene from the description given to me by my gallant sitters themselves, assisted by their friends and companions-in-arms, eyewitnesses many of them of the several actions depicted, the pictures, whatever may be their demerit as pictures, have positive value attached to national records of events that must live forever in the history of our country's glories".

He further added "... pictures which have been designed and produced under sincere appreciation of the national value of the new Order which they are intended to illustrate and with a fervent admiration of the noble and heroic actions which that Order has rewarded ..."

It is reputed that Mr Desanges was working at Lockinge House when the project was discussed. He first painted Private Parkes VC and Corporal Shields VC, to represent the infantry and the cavalry of the Crimea - both these men had subsequently become Queen Victoria's park keepers! The financing of the series has not been established but as Robert Lindsay was an equerry to the Prince of Wales it has been suggested that some Royal patronage may have been obtained. The painting of Robert Lindsay was commenced at the Prince's home, the White Lodge, at Richmond.

A Durham County Paper, 12 May, 1859, published a tribute to the artist and added 'We understand it to be the intention of Mr Desanges to continue his series for each successive claimant of the Victoria Cross. His grouping and painting are said to be worthy of all admiration, and his likenesses of the gallant heroes inimitable'. He did not, however, continue with this proposed task.

The first series of paintings were exhibited in the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly in April 1859 and contained pictures of events which won a VC for the person depicted during the Crimean War. A year later this Victoria Cross Gallery was re-opened and 24 portraits based on the Indian Mutiny were added to the collection. The Prince of Wales visited the exhibition. Additions were made to the original collection and 50 paintings were exhibited at the Crystal Palace for a number of years. It was suggested in the press that England should have a National Gallery to permanently exhibit the paintings, in order that the collection be preserved intact and for the public benefit. An early catalogue sent to Lord Wantage when he purchased the collection lists 56 pictures which had been exhibited under the title of "Victoria Cross Gallery". This catalogue formed the basis of a new catalogue for the Wantage exhibition which was printed by Nichols & Son of the Market Place. This supply was exhausted in July 1902 and a further order for 1000 was given to

Mr. Nichols, the holder of the copyright, the cost £8.17.3 to include a half tone print of the bust of the late Lord Wantage.

The Town Property Committee inspected the pictures at this time and concluded that they had not received any damage since being under the care of the town with the exception of one or two canvasses being warped. It was decided to open the Gallery free to townspeople on Saturdays during June, July and August.

The paintings by Louis William Desanges were exhibited in Wantage from 1901 until 1941 and information obtained from the UDC minutes of the period indicates that they were managed with great care by subsequent members of the Council until the thirties and the depression, when councillors were unable to sanction finance for cleaning or restoration. In February 1921 the pictures were cleaned and the frames renovated. In September 1931 Mr Warland Andrew of Abingdon wrote to the Urban District Council commenting on their condition. It was resolved that a collecting box be placed in the Gallery for contributions towards the restoration of the pictures. When Mr K A Wilson asked for permission to reproduce picture No. 15, permission was granted, but he was informed of the fund for restoration and invited to send a contribution. At the beginning of 1932 three pictures were repaired.

It is recorded in the UDC minutes that a new caretaker was employed in July 1915, Mr. William Savory, at a wage of £1.00 a week with 'a house and gas free'. Bill Savory had previously served as a conductor with the Wantage Tram, having retired from that position.

The VC Gallery was used extensively by the Community during the years that the pictures were exhibited. To give a few examples: the National Schools used the room for drill; the Badminton Club hired the hall. In 1914 the RAMC set up a hospital in the building when soldiers were billeted in and around the town. During 1940 the Troops Welfare Committee met in the hall, also the Wantage Home Defence Social Club. At the beginning of the 39-45 War dances were held in the Gallery for local charities, a committee had been formed which recommended how the money from the dances should be allocated.

The minutes of the Urban District Council dated 5 August 1941 include a report from the Town Property Committee. It was disclosed that representatives of the Ministry of Food had inspected the VC Gallery with a view to the Gallery being used as a Cooking Depot in a possible emergency, to serve Wantage and a radius of 15 miles with cooked meals. Initially school meals would be provided, and distributed by the Ministry of Food to approved centres. It was recommended that no objection be raised to the VC Gallery being used for this purpose. The Ministry of Food were to be asked to assist the Council in obtaining alternative accommodation/ premises for concerts/dances etc.

The paintings could not remain in the Gallery. It was suggested that the larger VC pictures be stored in the upper room of the Town Hall and the smaller in the schools. This, however, proved impractical and arrangements were made to store the large pictures at the premises of Wantage Engineering Company and the smaller pictures in the Town Hall. The cost of removing, crating and storing the pictures would amount to approximately £40 and application was made to the Ministry of Food for the proposed expenditure to be approved. The Wantage Engineering Company were prepared to allow the pictures to be stored rent free. The Committee decided not to incur further expenditure in cleaning and varnishing the pictures. It was later reported that the pictures had been removed from the VC Gallery to the premises of the Wantage Engineering Company and the Town Hall.

The Cooking Depot opened in the Victoria Cross Gallery at the end of 1941. It was then estimated that when the scheme was fully operational approximately 3500 children attending elementary schools in North Berkshire could be provided with hot meals at lunch time each day at a cost of about 4d each. Meals would be distributed in mobile canteens packed in vacuum canisters and delivered to schools by 12.25pm daily. It was intended to serve the whole of North Berks and parts of Wilts and Oxon in the event of an emergency.

The paintings seem to have been completely forgotten by the Urban District Council during the 1939/45 war. Despite searching through contemporary minutes no reference has been found to their storage or a possible inspection.

The extremely large pictures (thought to be 14 in number) including the portrait of Robert Lindsay, Lord Wantage, remained with the Wantage Engineering Co during the duration of the War until about 1951. They were shown informally, while in store, to a local resident returning home from the forces who had been asked by the Company to make a flexible coupling for a war-time job. The paintings were housed in a lean-to structure with corrugated iron roof within the works, they were crated and covered, individual paintings were not visible, but water was leaking through the roof of the building. An employee of the Company was most concerned, as the paintings were obviously being affected by the unsuitable conditions in which they were kept and must have been deteriorating, but he intimated that no-one was interested!

The smaller pictures (approximately 32 in number) were during this time stored in the room behind the balcony of the Town Hall, and judging from recent information received on the surviving pictures this storage was reasonably adequate.

The UDC Minutes after the War contain many references to letters from the Chamber of Trade asking the Council to take immediate steps to obtain the release of the VC Gallery. Although sites for central kitchens in Wantage and Abingdon were purchased by the Berkshire Education Authority in 1948, building work was not due to start until the Autumn and suffered continual delay. The Gallery was finally derequisitioned in February, 1951.

The earliest date found when the pictures were mentioned in Town & Property Committee Minutes is 30 October 1950, when 'IT WAS RESOLVED that Mr Martin of Newbury Street be allowed to clean one of the pictures removed from the Victoria Cross Gallery which are now stored in the Town Hall'. Further in the Minutes of 27 November 1950 – 'It was reported that Mr Martin was cleaning one half of one of the pictures stored in the Town Hall and that as soon as the pictures which are stored in the Wantage Engineering Co Ltd are made available for inspection Mr Martin would arrange to ascertain their present condition. IT WAS RESOLVED that Messrs G E Payne & Sons be asked to remove the protective enclosure surrounding the pictures at the Engineering Works to enable Mr Martin to inspect them.'

At a meeting on the 22 June 1951 members of the Housing and Property Committee inspected the VC Gallery oil paintings. 'IT WAS RESOLVED that the Surveyor make arrangements for the paintings stored at the Town Hall to be placed in the VC Gallery and the Clerk communicate with the Curator of the Ashmolean Museum enquiring whether he would be prepared to advise the Council on their future use.'

The Minutes of 31 July 1951 revealed that the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum had been asked to inspect the Victoria Cross Gallery pictures. A report of this visit has not been found or details of any discussions emanating from this.

When the pictures were finally removed from the Engineering Company and placed in the VC Gallery it was found that some had suffered severely, frames were broken and paintings had to be spread out on the floor of the Gallery to dry.

Discussions on the paintings may have taken place outside the Committee meetings and not recorded, as in November 1951, it was minuted that a suggestion had been made that the various military museums may be interested in the preservation of the Gallery paintings and may accept the pictures for their museums. The person suggesting this was asked to make tentative enquiries of the various military museums.

The Clerk reported on the 28 January 1952 that this person 'had prepared a list of certain regiments that may be interested in the preservation of the Victoria Cross paintings and that he had written to two of the regiments concerned enquiring whether in the event of the Council deciding to dispose of the paintings they would accept the pictures associated with their regiments for exhibition in their military museums'. Letters were read from the Oxf and Bucks Light Infantry and the Cameronians thanking the Council for their enquiry and stating that in the event of the Council adopting this course they would be pleased to accept the paintings. IT WAS RESOLVED that a recommendation be made to the Finance & General Purposes Committee that a public meeting be held in the Victoria Cross Gallery some time in March next to discuss the future preservation of the paintings.

A local resident requested that a deputation be allowed to meet the Council concerning the VC pictures. This was refused, as a public meeting was to be held.

A public meeting was held in the VC Gallery on Monday 17 March 1952, the paintings were lined around the walls. Although the meeting had been called to discuss the future of the paintings, the Chairman of the Urban District Council informed those present that any decision or suggestion made by the meeting would not be binding on the Council! The Chairman explained that the Council hoped to put the Gallery into use shortly and to improve the pre-war facilities, to make it into a good dance and concert hall. The proposed scheme was to cost £7,200. (This estimate was reduced to £3,990 in April, tenders were invited in May). To restore the paintings would cost £2,000, the Council felt this money could be better spent.

During the meeting it was questioned whether the Council or the rate-payers had any right to dispose of the paintings which had been a gift to the town. The Town Clerk said he had no knowledge of a restrictive covenant on the disposing of the paintings.

Mrs John Betjeman read an appeal written by her husband, for the retention of the paintings. He said the Gallery would need 'little more decoration if the paintings were cleaned and repaired.'

A member of the Council put forward a suggestion that a small committee might be formed to select a few paintings worthy of retention and preservation, taking into consideration the cost of restoring them. He added that the Gallery was the only one in the world where the early deeds of valour earning VCs were recorded in paintings. The painting depicting Lord Wantage the donor would be retained.

It was reported in the North Berks Herald of 6 June 1952 that the sub-committee appointed to make recommendations as to preservation of the paintings had made an inspection and suggested that some should be retained and restored. The committee recommended that the military museums interested in the remaining pictures be approached enquiring as to whether they would accept them on permanent loan and to obtain estimates for restoration of the paintings to be retained. The paintings were numbered when on exhibition in the VC Gallery during the first half of this century, the sub-committee listed the following pictures to be retained.

LARGE Nos 17, 20 and 42. SMALL Nos 6, 7, 10, 18, 43, 'plus' 15, 19, 29 and 46.

Letters were forwarded to the appropriate military museums offering on permanent loan the paintings which the Council had decided not to retain. The Clerk to the Council reported to a meeting on 2 July 1952 that replies had been received from 'various' military museums thanking the Council for their generous action and accepting on permanent loan the Victoria Cross Gallery paintings. Five of the paintings had been collected.

On 1 September 1952 the Clerk reported that letters had been received from military museums applying for four of the Victoria Cross Gallery paintings provisionally earmarked by the Council for retention to be handed over to them on permanent loan. IT WAS RESOLVED that the Committee had no objection to the release of these four paintings on permanent loan. After inspection by all members of the Council paintings Nos 1, 23, 24 and 38 which in the opinion of a competent authority were beyond restoration were to be destroyed. IT WAS RESOLVED that the Clerk give particulars to the War Office of 10 paintings which had been refused by the appropriate military authorities with a view to these paintings being accepted by other military museums.

It has been difficult to trace the story of the decisions relating to the paintings from somewhat disjointed resolutions recorded in the UDC Minutes of the period. An endeavour has been made to extract relevant details rather than make assumptions, but it can only be assumed from recent research that finally the Council decided to dispose of all the paintings, despite the residents attending the public meeting being of the opinion that at least a few should be retained. It is apparent from the Minutes that the paintings were offered on permanent loan, but no evidence has been found of any conditions imposed on the recipients. On the contrary, it was recorded in the minutes of 2 July 1952 – 'A letter was read from the Coldstream Guards stating that they are prepared to accept the offer of painting No 14 provided they are in no way held responsible for its welfare. IT WAS RESOLVED that painting No 14 be offered on permanent loan to the Coldstream Guards on this understanding'.

At this meeting the Clerk was, however, 'directed to make enquiries from the Fire Brigade with a view to the large VC paintings, to be retained by the Council, being stored at their premises at Eagles Close, during the period the Gallery was to be restored.' This storage was agreed by the Chief Fire Officer of the Berks & Reading Fire Brigade, provided the fire authority was not held responsible during their storage period. Five large paintings were to be removed from the VC Gallery on 30 October 1952 and stored at Eagles Close. The Surveyor was instructed to take reasonable precautions to prevent the paintings being further damaged by dampness.

Subsequently all paintings listed for retention were distributed to military authorities. I have confirmation of their exact location. Number 42, the March of Major General Sir F Roberts, from Kabul to Kandahar, is held by the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham and is on display in the dining room of Roberts Hall.

The search for the paintings has not been straightforward, it is forty years since the paintings were dispersed and no evidence has been found of any follow-up action on the part of the UDC/Town Council, therefore in many instances the present military authorities are unaware of the circumstances in which they received the painting(s). The replies in response to my letters have been courteous and helpful and show interest in the project, but in some instances it still has to be proved that the painting held originated from the 'Wantage' collection. The majority are housed within military establishments. Five paintings have still to be found. Correspondence received indicates that a few of the paintings have been gifted by the Town Council during the 1970's, the circumstances in which this occurred have still to be investigated.

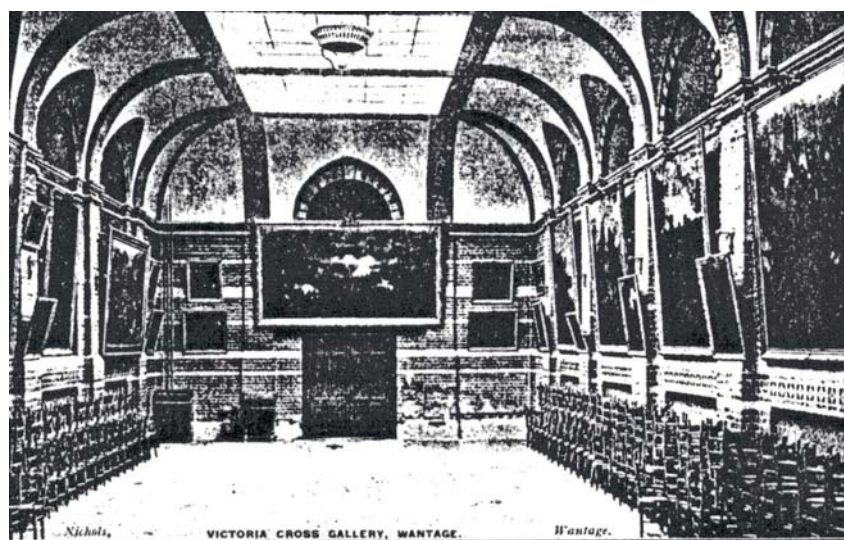
(1) Desanges, Louis William, born Bexley, Kent, 1822. Travelled in France and Italy, settled in London 1845. First paintings were historical but he turned to the more lucrative business of painting portraits of ladies and children. Painted contemporary military scenes which were shown in the Victoria Cross Exhibition.

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An early catalogue containing press reports.



Victoria Cross Gallery, Wantage



Bust of the late Lord Wantage, presented by Lady Wantage



Major-General Sir C. C. Teesdale winning the Victoria Cross.
At the Battle of Kars Major Teesdale, Royal Artillery, heroically led the Turks against the Russians, who had entered the Yusuf Tabia Redoubt in the darkness, also in saving, at great personal risk, the enemy's wounded from the fury of the Turks.—Crimean War, 29th September, 1855.

Picture No. VC23
Beyond restoration and to be
destroyed, 1952



Major-General R. M. Roger, and Major E. H. Lenon winning the Victoria Cross.
Lieutenant Rogers, 4th (Essex) Regiment, and Lieutenant Lenon, 67th (Hampshire) Regiment, were the first to enter the North Taku Fort. The Fort was captured by the British and French on August 16.—Chinese War, 1860.

Picture No. VC34
Still to be located, 1993

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