

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2026

Trooper Potts, VC -

Richard Bennett DL, Brig Tony Verey QVRM TD DL, Capt Andrew French

At the February meeting of Wargrave Local History Society three members of the Trooper Potts VC Memorial Trust, Richard Bennett, Brig Tony Verey, and Capt Andrew French, gave a presentation to explain why Fred Potts VC, from Reading, became known as 'The Hero with the Shovel' for his deeds on the battlefield of Gallipoli in August 1915. Richard is Chairman of the Trust, Tony had served in the Territorial Army locally, eventually becoming the most senior TA officer in the British Army, whilst Andrew was curator of the Berkshire Yeomanry Regimental Museum, having been a Squadron Sergeant Major in the Berkshire Yeomanry.

Although photography of the military was banned during the first world war on the Western Front, in the Mediterranean area this was still possible, which enabled the talk to be illustrated with pictures of the troops in that area, whilst extracts were also read from letters sent home by some of the Berkshire men - creating a more personal account of what the troops endured.

The speakers began by tracing the history of the Berkshire Yeomanry. Formed in 1794, its original purpose was to be a home defence cavalry regiment. The main qualification for men to join was that they had to turn up with their own horse. Around a century later, the Government decided that more troops were going to be needed, and these were drawn from the volunteer forces, such as the Berkshire Yeomanry. The first overseas posting for what then became known as the Berkshire Imperial Yeomanry was during the Boer War, where they fought against the Boer commandos - in all about 1000 local men being involved.



Berkshire Yeomanry cap badge

After the war, the troops returned to their civilian jobs, but also continued as volunteer soldiers. They were grouped into sections each of 4 men, each troop comprising 6 sections, and 4 troops made up a squadron. At that time, the Berkshire Imperial Yeomanry was made up of 4 squadrons, and also a machine gun section.

In 1914, the Berkshire's were mobilised in Reading for service in the First World War. They trained at first at Churn, on the Berkshire Downs, but later in Norfolk, where there were many training grounds. The east coast area of the country was also thought to be under threat from the German navy - towns such as Scarborough and Whitby being shelled for example. The training was for a force of mounted soldiers - sitting astride their horse, each man had ammunition carried on his chest, a sword hung down on the right hand side and a rifle on the left. The winter of 1914-15 was spent at Raynham Park, in Norfolk, but in April of 1915 went to Avonmouth, to embark onto HMT Menominee (a requisitioned vessel - His Majesty's Trawler) for the voyage to Egypt, where they landed at Alexandria.

The soldiers were issued with solar topees (helmets), and were stationed at barracks nearby. The men, however, found conditions difficult. Trooper Arthur Andrews wrote home to say that it was "getting terribly hot now", and they had "not been able to do drill for 3 days. If they strip right out, even then they sweat". They were also kept awake at night by the sound of the mosquitos. The men wished they could have the cooler weather

they knew in England. The temperature was recorded as 110°F in the shade, the sun was unbearable, and the soldiers thought they had lost pounds in weight.

Their duties at this stage were to guard important sites in the area, and also about 20 prisoners - mainly Germans. They also trained to become a 'dismounted' force - ie an infantry unit, getting used to working without their horses.

From another letter sent back to England came the news that they were in Egypt (though could not say where), but were going to go overseas - as infantry. This would mean having to carry a back pack weighing about 50 pounds - which would be "comfortable if properly adjusted". The plan was that they would sail from Alexandria on August 14th on the SS Lake Michigan, and then go up the Dardanelles, to open it to Allied shipping, and force the Turks to surrender. However, mines and similar hazards forced the navy to back away. They would then land at Helles and Anzac beaches, and hoped to capture the high ground and force their way up. Unfortunately, in the dark they mistook the correct landing place, and (as another letter home reported) "as the light increased, the Turks started to shell the ship, but in our regiment, no one was touched".



Map of the Dardanelles area

Having changed to another ship at Mudros - on the Aegean island of Lemnos - the troops then landed at Sulva Beach in Gallipoli, on the northern side of the Dardanelles on August 18th. The men started to dig themselves in on the shore, the only way for them to cool down being to throw themselves into the sea. The British forces comprised the Berkshire Yeomanry together with the Dorset's and the Buckinghamshire's, with 2 strong squadrons from each plus 6 machine guns - Major Gooch being in command of the Berkshires. To prepare the way, Royal Navy Dreadnoughts shelled the land ahead. That unfortunately set fire to the scrubland, which was the only cover the British troops had.



Map of Suvla Bay and the battle zones

The salt lake was dry at that time of year, and as the men crossed it, they came under shell fire. The first group considered themselves lucky, as they did not lose any men - but 12 were lost from the second. The first target was to capture Chocolate Hill - so called by the troops as it had no vegetation as cover, just bare dark brown earth. It was a steady uphill attack. For the Battle of Scimitar Hill, the Berkshire Yeomanry were the lead regiment. They moved onwards with bayonets ready, to cries of "Come on Berks" Another letter home recorded that they would never forget - as "brave fellows fell all around. Worst, nearly all my pals are gone". They were not able to hold their position, and had to move back to a support trench behind the front line. It was for his action during this battle that Fred Potts was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Frederick William Owen Potts (usually known as Fred), was born in Reading in 1892, where his family lived in Edgehill Street, in the Katesgrove area to the south of the town centre. He had joined the Berkshire Yeomanry. As part of the force engaged in the Gallipoli Campaign, he had been wounded in the thigh, whilst his friend Arthur Andrews had suffered a more serious injury to the hip. Despite his own injuries, Fred tried to drag Arthur back to safety. One difficulty was that for him to drag his colleague, Fred would have to break cover and be above ground level, and exposed to Turkish gunfire. They were also very thirsty, but had run out of water. Having dragged Arthur a short way, they found water bottles on colleagues "who would have no further use for them", and Fred also found a shovel. He decided to then use this to sit his friend Arthur on it, and using it like a sledge was able to bring him back to the relative safety of Chocolate Hill. Overall, though, a high price had been paid. Of the 12 officers and 360 men, 73 had been killed, or were missing presumed to have died, 110 were wounded, and 5 were taken prisoner by the Turks.



For his heroic action, Fred Potts was awarded the Victoria Cross, (*which he is seen wearing in the photograph above*) the citation reading "For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to a wounded colleague in the Gallipoli Peninsula. Although himself severely wounded in his 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 pm on 23rd August".

Not surprisingly, Fred Potts became known as "the hero with a shovel". In addition to his VC, men of the Berkshire Regiment gained two Military Crosses, three Distinguished Conduct Medals, as well as eight Mentioned in Despatches for their part in this operation.

Both Fred and Arthur returned to Britain, although as a result of his injury Arthur's leg was shortened, so he wore a built up boot to compensate for this, and went on to work on the Great Western Railway's signal boxes. Fred got married in Reading in December 1915. His injuries also meant he could not return to active military service, and set up a tailor's business in Reading. Fred Potts died in Reading in 1943, and Arthur Andrews in 1980.

Although much celebrated at the time, the story of the event that led the award of the Victoria Cross was largely forgotten, until a radio documentary was broadcast in 2009. This led to a reunion of members of the Potts and Andrews families, and to the formation of a committee to create a memorial to Fred Potts and record the names of other members of the Berkshire Yeomanry. Supported by both Fred Pugh, the Mayor of Reading, and Martin Salter, Reading's Member of Parliament, the Lord Lieutenant for Berkshire, Mrs Mary Bayliss agreed to be the patron of what became known as the Trooper Potts VC Charitable Trust. The aim was to create a suitable memorial in time for the centenary of Fred Potts' courageous act. Work started on the project in 2011, the Trust obtaining its charitable status in 2012. The Lord Lieutenant, however, suggested that the Trust should do 'more than just create a memorial', and so the Trust has also embarked on an outreach programme.

It was decided that the memorial should take the form of a sculpture that would represent the rescue by the 'hero with a shovel', and in due course Tom Murphy of Liverpool was selected as the sculptor to design this. Fundraising for the work, however was rather slow, with only £20,000 being donated in the first two years

The Trust then gained the help of Haslam's, the Reading estate agents, who were particularly good at fund raising, along with two further sponsors, Chris Tarrant, the tv presenter and Michael Naxton, curator of the Lord Ashcroft's Victoria Cross collection. Chris Tarrant was brought up in Reading - his father had been a Major in the Berkshire Regiment. Other funds came from Network Rail, in recognition of the disturbance and noise caused in the town by the work to extend Reading station. The memorial itself has figures that are larger than life-size, and it was decided it should not be 'up there', but at a level where people can see and touch it. The meeting was shown a video of the creation of the maquette by Tom Murphy, and then the casting of it in bronze by the Morris Singer foundry at Lasham, which took about six months. It stands on a Portland stone



plinth, the carving of the Victoria Cross and the Berkshire Regimental badge each taking the stonemason, Jonathan Rayfield, four days to carve. It was delivered to The Forbury on time, and unveiled by Chris Tarrant and the new Lord Lieutenant on 4th October 2015 - the centenary of the award of Fred Potts' VC, with descendants of both men amongst the 500 people - which included a representative of the Turkish Embassy - who attended the occasion. Alongside the sculpture is a bronze panel that lists the members of the Berkshire Yeomanry who lost their lives during wars of the 20th century.

The Trust's outreach programme has taken the story to many local schools, where pupils follow up a talk about it - maybe writing a report about Fred Pott's as could have been in a newspaper of the time, or a letter one of the Troopers might have sent home describing the conditions they faced, or representing the event as a drawing or a cartoon. Similar presentations are given to young people's organisations, usually ending with a 'shovel race' - a popular feature where they discover how hard it would have been - even on level ground! Since 2021, the Trust has also taken part in the Poppies to Paddington event, where poppies are taken to London to mark Remembrance Day.



Moris Ximenes

The presentation concluded by considering three of the Wargrave men who had been part of the Berkshire Yeomanry history. Moris Ximenes, who lived at Bear Place, had been one of a troop known as the Windsor Foresters, and then formed the Wargrave Rangers in March 1800. He provided £25,000 (a considerable sum then) to equip the troop. Their tasks were to support civilian authorities, such as quelling riots. Moris Ximenes handed over leadership of the Wargrave Rangers to William Soundy in 1809, and they became part of the Berkshire Yeomanry in 1819. Trooper Christopher Brown had lived in Wargrave High Street, and went with the Berkshire Yeomanry to Gallipoli, but was wounded by a shell whilst unloading stores there. He returned to England, but his injuries meant he was not considered well enough to return overseas, so served as a pay clerk at Yeomanry House in Reading. Trooper Frederick Bennett had lived at The Homestead, which stood at the bottom of Victoria Road. He had been

working in the accounts department of Huntley and Palmers before the war, when he also sent to Gallipoli, where he suffered a shotgun wound to the knee, and was evacuated back to Britain. A newspaper report showed that in one of the races at the 1912 Wargrave Regatta, Christopher Brown had beaten Frederick Bennett by 4 ft! Frederick also appears alongside Fred Potts in a photograph of a small group of Berkshire Yeomanry men. He recovered sufficiently from his knee injury to rejoin the Berkshire Yeomanry in Palestine, but when the military units were reorganised, he was transferred to the Staffordshire Yeomanry, and then demobilised in 1919.

For more information about the Trooper Potts VC Trust, visit www.pottsvctrust.org and for more information about the society, visit our website at <https://www.wargravehistory.org.uk>