

William Henry Thomas Sylvester V C

Born 16th April 1831 Devizes, Wilts; baptised 17th May 1831 at church of St John the Baptist.

1841 census : as a pupil (called Henry) at school in Northleach, aged 9, with brothers Paul 12 and John 11, under the care of Richard Wood schoolmaster

1851

1857 'Illustrated London News' of November 28th reported the Victoria Cross medal awarded to William Henry Sylvester

1861

1871 census : Henry Thomas Sylvester, general practitioner SRCS.Ed-LSA, aged 39, unmarried, resident in 'New' hospital, Swansea, with matron Elizabeth Frances McKay etc

1881 census : Henry Thomas Sylvester, Doctor of Medicine Aberdeen LRCS LD LSA LON, 59, with wife Martha E, born Lichfield, and daughter Alice Maud, 4, plus 2 servants, living at 7 Bessborough Gdns., Westminster

1891 census : Same address.

Henry Sylvester, 59, general practitioner surgeon, with Martha, 43, and one servant.

1901 census : Henry Thomas Sylvester, 69, Doctor of Medicine retired from practice, with wife Martha, 56, living at 66 Stockwell Park Rd, Lambeth, with daughter Alice M, single, 24, a foreign correspondent clerk

1911

13th March 1920 Death of Henry Sylvester in Totnes, Devon

Father : Charles Sylvester

1822 Pigot's directory for Swansea shows Charles Sylvester, surgeon, at Wind St.

1841 census : Charles Sylvester, aged 40, Doctor of Medicine, born Swansea, living at 3 Prospect Place, Swansea, with his wife Elizabeth, 40, and children Elizabeth, 20, Mary and Charles, 15, Emma, 13, Mercy? 12 and Henry 10 (?listed twice in this census)

1851 census : Charles Sylvester aged 54 at High St Cowbridge, with wife Elizabeth born Middlesex, 53, daughter Mary, 22, b Devizes and 2 servants

1861 census : Charles, 64, M?KCRL practising, with wife Elizabeth and daughters Emma, 33 and Mercy, 32, and 2 servants, at 17 Kensington Place, Walcot, Bath

1871 census : Charles Sylvester, physician not practising, living at 2 Widcombe Villas, Bath, with wife Elizabeth and daughters Emma, 48, and Mercy, 42, both born Devizes.

1881 census : Charles Sylvester, 84, retired physician college of ? London, with wife Elizabeth and daughter Mercy G, 53. Their address was 12 Widcombe Crescent, Bath

1891 census : Charles Sylvester, 94, widower, retired physician surgeon, with daughters Emma Dorothy, 63, b Devizes, Mercy Georgina, 62, b Devizes, and son Charles James, 67, retired deputy surgeon general, b Swansea, plus 3 servants – living at 12 Widcombe Crescent, Lyncombe Hill, Bath

Brother : Charles James Sylvester

1881 census : Charles Sylvester, 57, doctor Indian retired deputy surgeon Bombay Army with wife Ann Isabelle, born Aberdeen, and daughters Elizabeth, 28 and Ann Isabelle, 26, both born Bombay

Mary Josephine, 21, b Aberdeen

Katherine Emma, 18, b Bombay - all living at 1 Bernard Villas, Norwood, Croydon

1891 census : see above in Bath, for his father

1901 census : Charles Sylvester, 77, with wife Anna, 79, b Aberdeen, and daughters Mary J and Katherine – living at 99 Central Hill, Upper Norwood, Croydon

1911 census : Charles James Sylvester, widower, 87, doctor of medicine JMS, born Swansea, deputy ?Pengam General reduced with daughters Mary Josephine, 57, b Aberdeen, and Katherine Emma, 48, b Malligaum, Bombay – living at ?99 ?Newbold Hill, Norwood.

The Cowbridge Grammar School V.C.

Jeff Alden with M.A.K. Duggan.

It was Iolo Davies who first noticed that an Old Bovian had (in the mid-nineteenth-century) been awarded the Victoria Cross. He alludes to the award thus (1):

“Under the heading of Distinctions gained elsewhere there are two entries only. Here it seems particularly unfortunate that this Survey rigidly avoided using the names of pupils, for one of these two distinguished Old Boys should by rights have a specially honoured place in the School’s history. I refer . . . to the other, who, on some farther field, had won the Victoria Cross.”

The Survey in question was conducted by one Mr. Bompas for the Schools Inquiry Commission, which published its *Report* in 1870; its contents were collected in 1864, in the matter of Cowbridge School by correspondence with the Headmaster, the Revd. Thomas Williams.

Iolo Davies had no clue to the identity of the recipient, and did not, indeed, know that the class-lists for the relevant years had survived at all, because he had been denied access to the Cowbridge School Archive at Jesus College, Oxford, when researching the School’s history. As he makes clear in his account of the events that led to its being transferred to the control of the newly established Glamorgan County Council, the College had become extremely bitter over the attacks on its probity that were made in several quarters in Wales at that time, and the bitterness endured.

In public meetings and in government correspondence, Jesus College was repeatedly accused of neglect and indifference in its management of the School, often in the wider context of a supposed lack of interest in Welsh education in general (although this was hardly its primary concern anyway). Far more seriously, there were libellous suggestions that the College was misappropriating to its own use revenue from the estate of Sir Leoline Jenkins which should have been apportioned to the School’s maintenance. These prolonged assaults – by civil servants, by members of the Corporation and other residents of the Borough, and even by the Headmaster, the Reverend Morris Price Williams (whom it nonetheless later admitted to a Fellowship *ex officio*) – left the College with an unpleasant taste to its subsequent relations with Cowbridge. Mud sticks; and there are still a few – usually local historians nowadays – who insist that it behaved high-handedly at best, or at worst chose to swindle the School and cheat the Borough, and set aside Sir Leoline’s wishes by depriving local boys of the educational resources which he had endowed for their benefit.

Reflecting on all this, one may be the less surprised at the attitude which persisted in Jesus College until the nineteen-fifties, at least. Oxford colleges are (or were until recently, anyway) slow to change, and there was an enduring reluctance to re-open the subject of Cowbridge Grammar School, with which the College's formal links were by then very few. Its Archive was closed to strangers, and even to Iolo Davies, despite his being a former Scholar and President of Junior Common Room, his personal friendship with the Bursar (a Governor of the School), and his expressly stated view that the College's wholly undeserved treatment was the result of prejudice, and ignorance of, or disregard for, the facts.

Some years ago, one of us (M.A.K.D.) attempted to determine the identity of the heroic Old Bovian, by examining the biographies of recipients of the Victoria Cross in the records of the Imperial War Museum, together with secondary sources in the literature. There was no relevant information to be found, and the identification of the most likely candidate, on the basis of exclusion alone, was tentative (and, in the event, incorrect).

These matters would have remained save for two fortuitous discoveries made by the late Jeff Alden while he was surveying miscellaneous records in the hope of finding material related to Cowbridge. In 2004 he examined a copy of *The Bridgend Chronicle* dated December 12th 1857, and found there a report of how the Victoria Cross had been awarded to "Asst. Surgeon W.H.T. Sylvester, the son of Dr. Sylvester, of Cowbridge", for gallantry he had displayed while attached to The Royal Welch Fusiliers, in action at Sebastopol. Jeff Alden already knew, from the detailed and comprehensive survey of property ownership in Cowbridge which had been undertaken by members of the Cowbridge Local History Society under his direction, that a Dr. Charles Sylvester, of a medical family well-known in Wiltshire, had lived in Woodstock House early in the nineteenth century (2). It was therefore clear that W.H.T. Sylvester V.C. had been brought up in Cowbridge. This information was not included in the biographical details recorded in his file at the Imperial War Museum or in published works on recipients of the decoration (3).

Sylvester was born in 1831 in Devizes but graduated M.B. from Marischal College, Aberdeen in 1853, proceeding M.D. in 1855. He was also licensed by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1853, and by the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London in 1869, gaining the additional designatory letters L.R.C.S. Ed., L.S.A. (4). He must have intended joining the Army from the outset, and by 1855 he was an Assistant Surgeon, a rank equivalent to that of a subaltern, attached to the 23rd Regiment of Foot, The Royal Welch Fusiliers, during the Crimean War. On September 8th, during the prolonged action at Sebastopol, he went to the aid of the Adjutant, one Lt. Dyneley, who was mortally wounded, and administered such treatment as he was able, including the application of dressings, while constantly exposed to heavy gunfire ahead of the line. For this action he was in due course cited to receive the Victoria Cross. It is pleasing to be able to note that the Cowbridge surgeon was assisted in this courageous and selfless act by a Cardiffian, Corporal Robert Shields, who was also awarded the decoration. Ten days later Sylvester was mentioned in dispatches for his continued bravery in treating men in the front line while under fire.

He (and Shields) received the Victoria Cross from the Queen at the first such investiture, which took place in Hyde Park in June 1857, although notice of the award did not appear in the *London Gazette* (the official government newspaper) until the following November. Among the large crowd of spectators gathered in the Park, no doubt, were Dr. and Mrs. Charles Sylvester, of Cowbridge. Their son had continued to serve in the Crimea, working as a surgeon in the military hospital at Scutari alongside Florence Nightingale. After the Campaign, Sylvester was awarded both the Crimea Medal with the Sebastopol clasp and its Turkish equivalent, while the French conferred on him the Order of the Legion of Honour (5th Class). He remained in the Army, with the rank of Surgeon Major, and saw service during the Indian Mutiny (for which he received another campaign medal).

It appears very likely that he had decided to pursue a military career, and he would probably have ended his days as a distinguished senior medical officer, but in India he “contracted a disease which affected his spine and left him with a permanent curvature” (5). He was therefore retired as medically unfit, and returned to Wales to take up a post as House Surgeon at Swansea Hospital. While this title meant a great deal more at the time than it did a century later - he would have been in charge of the admission of all patients requiring non-elective surgery, and responsible for operating on them - it was probably a considerable drop in status for him, and it is pleasant to note that in compensation he met his future wife, Miss Martha Watson, there; he conformed to the pattern traditionally ascribed to young doctors, for she was a nurse. Doubtless she was much impressed by the highly qualified and experienced surgeon, with his dedication, his affecting stoop, his history of heroic gallantry in the field, his knowledge of far-away places, and his personal acquaintance with the practices of no less a figure than the mother of her own profession.

Dr. Sylvester moved to Westminster some years before his marriage in 1874, where he practised from rooms in his home (near Vauxhall Bridge), as was customary, while acting also as Chief Medical Officer to the Millbank Penitentiary nearby (it stood where the Tate Gallery stands today). The family was completed by the addition of two daughters. He eventually retired to Paignton, and his body is buried there; his medals and decorations, including the Victoria Cross, are displayed at the Royal Army Medical Corps Museum, Aldershot.

Jeff Alden made his second discovery while inspecting papers relating to Cowbridge School retained at Jesus College, Oxford, in 2005. By then, almost fifty years after Iolo Davies published *A Certaine Schoole* and over a hundred years after the conclusion of the acrimonious debates about the School's future, the College had ceased to be defensive and was happy to afford him access to the Archive. There he found a class-list of 1848 and noticed that it included one “Sylvester” (identified, as was customary, by surname only). Given that a surgeon of that uncommon name who had been brought up in Cowbridge (and was not known to have been educated elsewhere) was awarded the Victoria Cross, that he would have been seventeen in 1848, and that an unnamed Old Bovian was reported in 1864 to have received the decoration, there could be no doubt that W.H.T. Sylvester was the Old Bovian in question.

This information was published only in the Local History Society's *Newsletter* (6) and it does not seem to have reached the wider world (or possibly the wider world was not much concerned, given that Sylvester had won his Victoria Cross in a war long beyond recall and that his school no longer existed as such). The facts that he lived in Cowbridge and was educated at Cowbridge School have now been inserted in his files at the Imperial War Museum and the Royal Army Medical Corps Museum at Aldershot, not merely for the benefit of future researchers but as a service to his memory. It would be no more than his due if he were to be commemorated in the town by a plaque affixed to Woodstock House, and, too, by some suitable memorial in the Comprehensive School, which for the past few decades has conspicuously continued to honour the Old Boys of the Grammar School who fell in the wars of the last century. It goes without saying that we cannot "remember" W.H.T. Sylvester, while the cultural gap between his world and ours is inconceivably vast, but by such actions, it may be, we "earn the forgiveness of dust".

Notes and References

1. Iolo Davies: *A Certain Schoole*, p.123; Cowbridge: D. Brown and Sons, 1967.
2. According to Jeff Alden, Dr. Charles Sylvester was included in a directory as a medical practitioner in Cowbridge in 1848, while in the census of 1851 (by which time his son was at university) he and his wife and daughter were listed as resident in Woodstock House (*Newsletter of the Cowbridge Local History Society* 54, p.5, April 2004). Dr. Sylvester was the co-author of a report to the Corporation on the causes of "Cowbridge fever" (probably epidemic typhoid) in 1853 (L. Hopkin-James: *Old Cowbridge*, p.74; Cardiff: Educational Publishing Co., 1922).
3. "Town/Country Connections" are included for each recipient of the Victoria Cross in *The Register of the Victoria Cross* (which is not, despite its title, an official publication). Under this heading, "Devizes, Wiltshire" (the place of his birth) and "Paignton, Devon" (the place of his death) are the only details recorded for W.H.T. Sylvester (*The Register of the Victoria Cross (Revised and Enlarged Edition)*, p.307, No. 1199; Cheltenham: This England Books, 1988). Similarly, there is no information about his hometown or early education in *V.C's. of Wales and Welsh Regiments*, which would obviously have mentioned these Glamorgan connections had they been known (W. Alister Williams: *V.C's. of Wales and Welsh Regiments*, pp.23-24; Wrexham: Bridge Books, 1984).

An inspection of such facts about Sylvester as *were* known would reveal only a member of an English medical family who had qualified in medicine in Scotland, and it would thus be natural to think of him as being attached as surgeon to a Welsh regiment purely by chance. It was because of this that I [M.A.K.D.] excluded him in favour of apparently likelier candidates when first attempting to identify the Old Bovian recipient of the Victoria Cross.

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8.1.15

Dear Betty,

Thanks for sending the interesting article by M.A.K.Duggan. I know the name but have never met him. As you say, the article is not satisfactory, being disorganised and repetitious. The research and conclusion seem alright, however.

I take issue with a few points.

p.2 Dr Charles Sylvester practised in Cowbridge in the mid-19th century (the 1840s and 1850s), not the early 19th century.

p.8 It is difficult to be certain exactly when the old grammar school building was demolished - probably in 1847. The inscription on the Victorian building says that it was built in 1847, but it is apparent that it was not completed until May 1852 (Iolo Davies, A Certaine Schoole, pp.74-5.

p.8 My understanding is that Jesus College did not relinquish control of the school to the Glamorgan County Council until 1919. Duggan implies that this happened soon after the Welsh Intermediate Education Act of 1889, under which the "county schools" were founded.

I enjoyed reading your contributions to the latest Newsletter. The thesis by Stacie Millman is specially interesting.

With all good wishes for the New Year.

Sincerely,

Brian

of 83 High St.
'WOODSTOCK HOUSE' in the 1850s



12. Rear Admiral Henry Raby, VC., c.1900.
13. Lieutenant Charles Lumley, c.1850.
14. Surgeon William Sylvester, VC., c.1871.
15. Dr. William Sylvester, VC., c.1900.

from:

THE VCS OF WALES AND THE
WELSH REGIMENTS.

by

W. ALISTER WILLIAMS

Pub. 1984

163pp (Army Illustrations)

ASSISTANT SURGEON WILLIAM SYLVESTER

23rd Regiment of Foot

Full Name: William Henry Thomas Sylvester.

Place of Birth: Long Street, Devizes, Wiltshire.

Date of Birth: 19th April, 1831.

Father: Charles Sylvester.

Mother: Elizabeth Sylvester.

Father's Occupation: Surgeon.

Education: Marischal University, Aberdeen (MB, 1853, and MD, 1855),
Edinburgh University (LRCS, 1853, and LSA, 1869).

Service Record: Appointed Assistant Surgeon (Staff), 3rd March, 1854;
Assistant Surgeon, 23rd Regiment of Foot, Royal Welch Fusiliers, 22nd
September, 1854; served Crimean Campaign (siege of Sebastopol); served
Indian Mutiny 1857-8 (Relief of Lucknow); Surgeon (Staff), 10th July,
1860; retired from the army, 15th November, 1861 (due to a spinal disease
which he had contracted whilst in India. This resulted in a stooped back
for the remainder of his life).

Rewards, Decorations and Medals: Victoria Cross (for action at the Redan,
Sebastopol, 8th September, 1855); Crimea Medal (clasp for Sebastopol);
Indian Mutiny Medal (clasps for Relief of Lucknow and Lucknow); M. in D.
(Crimea); Turkish Crimea Medal; Legion of Honour (5th Class).

Post-Service Employment: After leaving the army, Dr. Sylvester was appointed
House Surgeon at Swansea Hospital, Glamorgan. He later served as Chief
Medical Officer to Millbank Prison in London and had a private practice in
Westminster at 7, Bessborough Gardens.

Married: Martha Elizabeth Watson, 7th May, 1874 (she had been a nurse at
Swansea Hospital). At the time of his marriage he resided at 66, Bessborough
Street, Westminster, London.

Children: Two daughters.

Died: 13th March, 1920, at his home 8, Beach Road, Paignton, Devon.

Buried: Paignton Cemetery, 18th March, 1920. Grave No. 2614.

Memorials: Paignton Cemetery, Devon.

Location of VC: RAMC Museum, Aldershot.

Citation for VC: L.G. 20th November, 1857.

"For going out on 8th September, 1855, under a heavy fire in front of the
fifth parallel Right Attack, to a spot near the Redan, where Lieutenant
and Adjutant Dyneley was lying mortally wounded and for dressing his

wounds in that dangerous and exposed situation. N.B. This officer was
mentioned in General Simpson's despatch of 18th September, 1855, for
going to the front under heavy fire to assist the wounded."

Decorated with the VC by H.M. Queen Victoria at the first VC investiture
held in Hyde Park, London, on 26th June, 1857.

N.B. Sylvester worked with Florence Nightingale at Scutari Hospital during
the Crimean War. See also Corporal Robert Shields, VC.