

# Charles Davis Lucas VC.

By Griffith Wylie

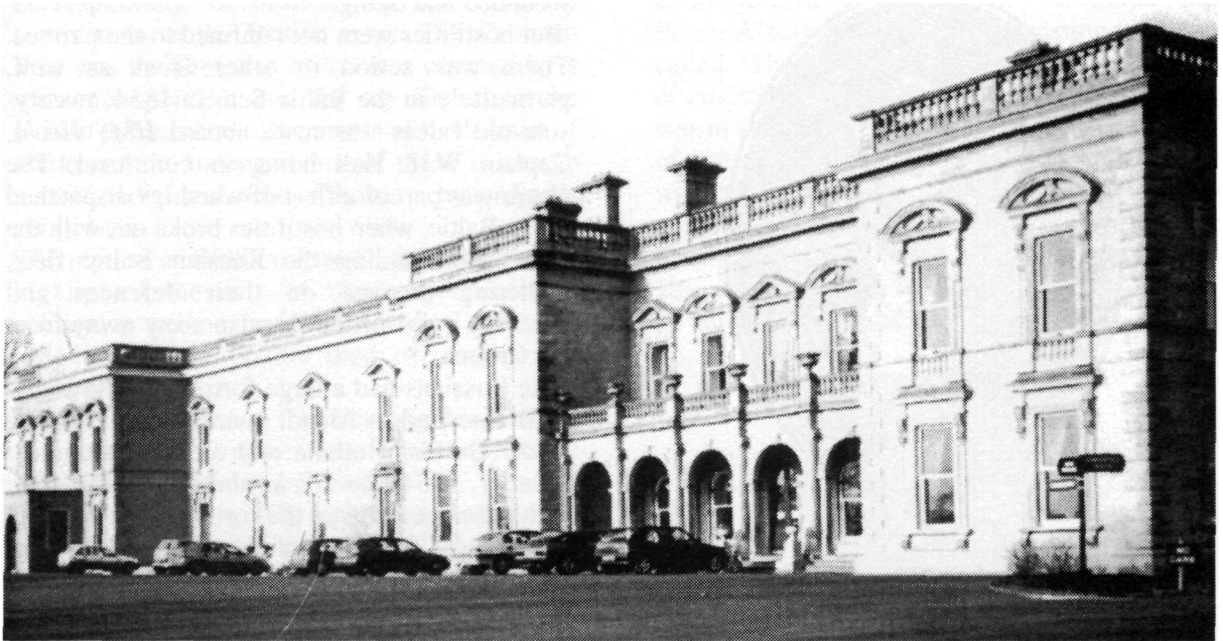
Winners of the Victoria Cross are universally held in the highest esteem, as the award is reserved for only those who display extraordinary courage in time of war. Our district is justifiably proud of having produced a winner of the Victoria Cross, for Charles Davis Lucas VC was born at Druminargal House, Poyntzpass in 1834. In 1855, when a midshipman in the Royal Navy, Lucas became, not just a winner of the Victoria Cross, but the *very first* winner of this most prestigious award. *'Burke's Peerage'* states that the Lucas family, who settled at Castleshane, Co. Monaghan, were descended from one Thomas Lucas of Saxham, Suffolk. Thomas Lucas was secretary to Jasper Tudor, Henry VIII's solicitor. The Lucas family had a strong tradition of military service and Thomas Lucas's grandson, Henry, a cornet in Cromwell's cavalry, settled at Castleshane around 1650 in the aftermath of the

Cromwellian war. Henry married Mary Poyntz, daughter of Sir Charles Poyntz of Acton and their daughter, Lucy, in due course, married Charles Poyntz, her first cousin, Charles being the son of Mary Poyntz's brother, Sir Toby Poyntz. This firmly established the connection with the Acton area.

A son of Henry Lucas and Mary Poyntz was Lieutenant William Lucas. William resided at Dromantine Manor House in the second half of the seventeenth century, the Magennis's having been dispossessed for their part in the 1641 rebellion and war. According to Rev McGahan's *'History of Dromantine'*, the lands, which had previously been owned by Art Magennis, were acquired by Sir Hans Hamilton of Hamilton's Bawn in 1662. William Lucas was an active and successful *'tory hunter'* who was much involved in the hunt for *'tories'* or outlaws who made life difficult for the rich landowners



*Druminargal House*



*Dromantine House*

throughout Ulster. While he claimed credit for the plot that led to the betrayal and death of the famous highwayman, Redmond O'Hanlon, in April 1681, his claim to the credit was disputed by his brother-in-law Charles Poyntz. Charles Poyntz, in a letter to Sir William Fowler, of May 1681, outlines how it was he, and not William Lucas, who had enlisted Art O'Hanlon to betray Redmond. The Rev McGahan states that William Lucas, "*had obtained his tenancy from Sir Hans Hamilton and remained on until after 1681... probably vacating the Manor after the accession of James II*". At that point, the Magennis family was reinstated. However, they finally lost their lands in 1737 when, because of mismanagement and accumulated debt, they were forced to sell Dromantine.

The estate was then bought for £11,450, by Joseph Innes, a prosperous Scottish merchant who had settled in Belfast.

A branch of the Lucas family was established at Druminargal House, Poyntzpass by the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Druminargal House had been the home of Francis Dobbs who was agent for the Stewart family and it seems likely that, after Dobbs's departure, the Lucas family of Druminargal acted as agents for

Alexander Thomas Stewart of Acton House, to whom they were related.

In August 1797 a member of the family, Captain William Lucas of Druminargal, died in Belfast of wounds he received in a duel with a Colonel Robert Sparrow of Tandragee who was an officer in the Essex Fencibles. Colonel Sparrow apparently stood trial for murder. He was found guilty and sentenced to death but was later reprieved and pardoned. However, he did not escape unscathed. An item in '*The Belfast Newsletter*' of Friday April 25, 1800 reads; "*Died, in England Col. Sparrow of the Essex Fencibles, of a wound he received in a duel between him and Captain Lucas, brother of the late Captain Lucas, Clair Castle, Co. Armagh.*" Whether this wound was inflicted in the original duel with William Lucas or in a second encounter, with a second Captain Lucas avenging his '*late*' brother, is not clear but the latter seems the more likely.

Alexander Thomas Stewart became involved with the United Irishmen and was arrested early in 1798. Following his death in 1801, the Acton estate passed to a Newry merchant named Hanna, but the Lucas family remained in Druminargal, probably as tenants and held



Alexander Stewart

considerable land in the townlands of Monclone, Ballnagreagh and Ballyreagh.

Charles Davis Lucas was born at Druminargal House on February 19, 1834. He was the son of Davis Lucas and Elizabeth Hill the daughter of Captain Thomas Hill. Elizabeth Hill died on 10th January 1837 and is buried in Acton Parish churchyard. Unlike many of the Lucas family, he chose the navy, rather than the army as a career. Perhaps his maternal grandfather influenced him in this decision for he enlisted when he was just 13. He was already a veteran by the age of eighteen, having seen active service during the Burma War of 1852-53. He served as mate aboard the frigate 'Fox' during hostilities at Rangoon, Pegu and Dalla and was awarded the Indian Service Medal for his efforts.

In 1854 war broke out between allies Britain and France on the one hand and Russia. Known as the Crimean War because most of the significant action took place in the Crimea Peninsula on the northern shores of the Black Sea, it was ostensibly fought to stop Russia's expansionist ambitions in Turkey.

The famous incidents of the war, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', the battles of Inkerman, Sebastopol and Balaclava took place there and it was there that 'The Lady with the Lamp', Florence Nightingale, ministered to the

wounded and dying.

But hostilities were not confined to the Crimea. There was action in other areas as well, particularly in the Baltic Sea. In 1854, twenty-year-old Lucas was mate aboard *HMS Hecla*, Captain W.H. Hall being in command. The *Hecla* was part of a fleet of warships dispatched to the Baltic, when hostilities broke out with the aim of blockading the Russian Baltic fleet, inflicting damage on their defences and diverting some of the Russian army away from the Crimea.

The Russians had a large fortress on the island of Bomarsund in Aland, guarding the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia and on the evening of June 21, 1854, the *Hecla* along with the *Odin* and *Valorous* attacked the fortress. The Russian fortress was defended by more than eighty guns and a fierce encounter ensued which lasted most of the night.

The *Hecla* was a wooden paddle-ship built in 1839 and in the early hours of June 24, in order to get within range of the fortress, Captain Hall edged his ship in closer. As a result the *Hecla* came within range of the Russian guns. Several shells fell just short and several more overshot but one, with its fuse hissing loudly, landed on the deck of the ship. Everyone immediately ran or threw himself flat for, if the shell exploded, it would mean instant death. Everyone, that is, except Charles Lucas. With great coolness he lifted the heavy shell, carried it to the side of the ship and threw it into the sea. It exploded before it hit the water causing some minor injuries and damage to the ship but Lucas's prompt action had undoubtedly saved many lives. He was immediately rewarded for his bravery by being promoted to the rank of Acting Lieutenant. In his report of the incident, Captain Hall praised Lucas's courage saying that he acted "with great coolness and presence of mind" and that his action had "saved dozens of lives, if not the entire ship's company".

There was at that time no other recognition for acts of bravery by personnel of Lucas's rank other than the promotion he was immediately given. While their French allies had the "Legion of Honour" and other European armies had similar honours, which could be awarded to all ranks for outstanding bravery, there was no

corresponding decoration for the ordinary servicemen in the British army. The Crimean War was the first war which was covered by a war correspondent and for the first time the British public were made aware of the horrors of battle and the incompetence of those in charge and of individual acts of bravery by ordinary servicemen.

The reports of William Russell for 'The Times' highlighted the acts of bravery of ordinary soldiers as well as the fact that while 3,400 were killed in action, 20,000 died of cholera and typhoid fever.

There is a strong case for believing that Charles Davis Lucas's act of heroism led directly to the creation of the Victoria Cross.

The incident was widely reported and recounted and discussed throughout the land and it was certain that his action was greatly admired by Queen Victoria herself. In December of 1854 ex-navy Captain Thomas Scobell MP proposed in the House of Commons, "*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.



Queen Victoria

The idea was taken up by The Secretary of State for War, the Duke of Newcastle and enthusiastically supported by the Queen and Prince Albert. That a new award was to be created was announced on January 29, 1855. However it took some time to finalise the details such as the name, the form, the material etc. That the new award should be in the shape of a

cross seemed to be generally favoured and Prince Albert is credited with insisting that it be called 'The Victoria Cross'. There was much discussion as to the metal from which the cross was to be made. It was decided that a base metal of little value in itself would be used and this was appropriately bronze from two Russian cannon captured in the Crimea. The Queen herself was responsible for the inscription "*For Valour*". Recipients of the cross were to receive an annual pension of £10.



Victoria Cross

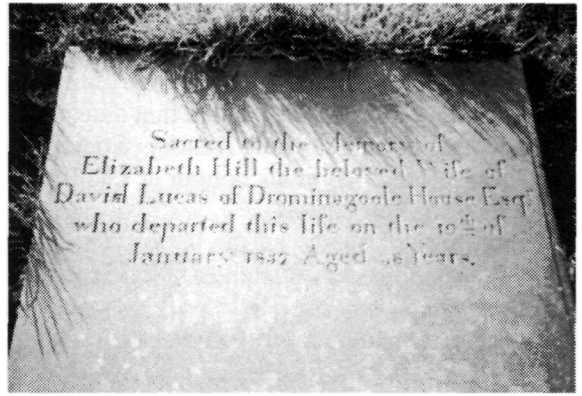
Because of various delays, it was not until June 26, 1857 that the Victoria Cross was presented for the first time. There was much debate and argument as to whether the award should be confined to only those who had served in the Crimea peninsula but Queen Victoria was adamant that the award should be retrospective and that the navy be included. The list of those who were to receive the award was not published until three days before the presentation ceremony. On June 26, 1857 in Hyde Park, Queen Victoria presented the new Victoria Cross to 62 members of the army and navy and since the awards were presented in chronological order, Lucas was the first recipient, his action being the first to merit the honour.

Thereafter Charles Davis Lucas rose steadily through the ranks. In 1862 he became Commander, and in 1867 he was promoted to Captain at the age of 33. He served on, or

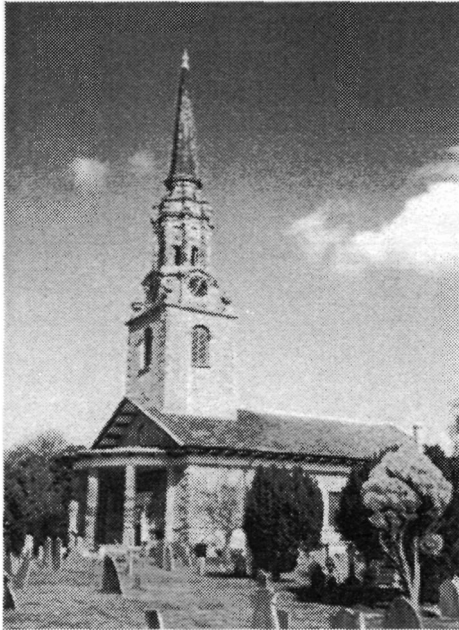


*Charles Davis Lucas*

commanded various ships, including, *HMS Liffey*, *HMS Edinburgh* and *HMS Calcutta*. Commodore rank soon followed and he achieved the rank of Rear Admiral in command of *HMS Indus* before retiring from the service. In 1879 Lucas married Miss Frances Russell Hall the daughter of Admiral W.H. Hall, who had been captain of the *Hecla* in 1854. The couple settled at Great Culverden, Kent and had three daughters. Lucas served as a Justice of the Peace for the county of Kent for many years and died in 1914 at the age of eighty, a few days before the outbreak of World War I. He was buried in Mereworth (*Merryworth*) near Maidstone, Kent.



*Charles Davis Lucas's Mother's grave  
Acton Parish Church, Poyntzpass*



*Lucas Grave  
St. Lawrence's Church, Mereworth, Kent*

His Victoria Cross is in the National Maritime Museum, London although some authorities claim that it is a replica. If this is so, the whereabouts of Lucas's original cross is unknown.

The Lucas family remained in Druminargal up till around 1880. They were very popular with the locals but were not regarded as being good farmers. Eventually arrears with their rent is said to have led to their removal from Druminargal. They were replaced by a Mr. Loftie and later by the Gracey family. One

interesting 'legend' regarding the Lucas family is that when they left Druminargal, the crows left too.

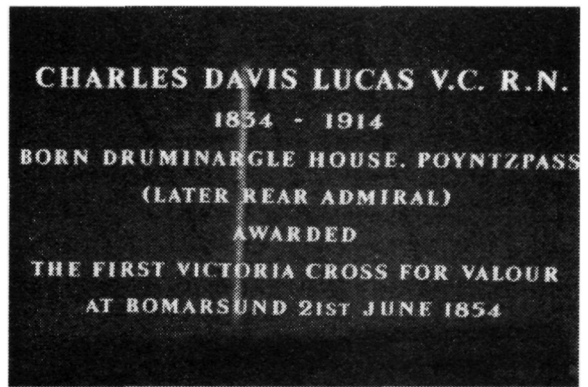
**Charles Davis Lucas Family Tree**

Thomas Lucas of Saxham	m	Elizabeth Kemys
(died 1531)		
	I	
Henry Lucas	m	Mary Grene
	I	
Francis Lucas of Castleshane	m	Mary Poyntz
(died 1657)		
	I	
Francis Lucas	m	Mary ____
(1646- 1705)		
	I	
Edward Lucas	m	Elizabeth Smyth
	I	
Francis Lucas	m	Mary Savage
(died 1758) (died 1772)		
	I	
Edward Lucas	m	Elizabeth Davis
(died 1796)		
	I	
Davis Lucas (of Druminargal)	m	Elizabeth Hill
(1802 – 1886) (died 1837)		
	I	
<b>Charles Davis Lucas V.C.</b>	m	Frances Russell Hall
(1834 – 1914)		

While many were aware of the fact that a winner of the Victoria Cross was born locally,

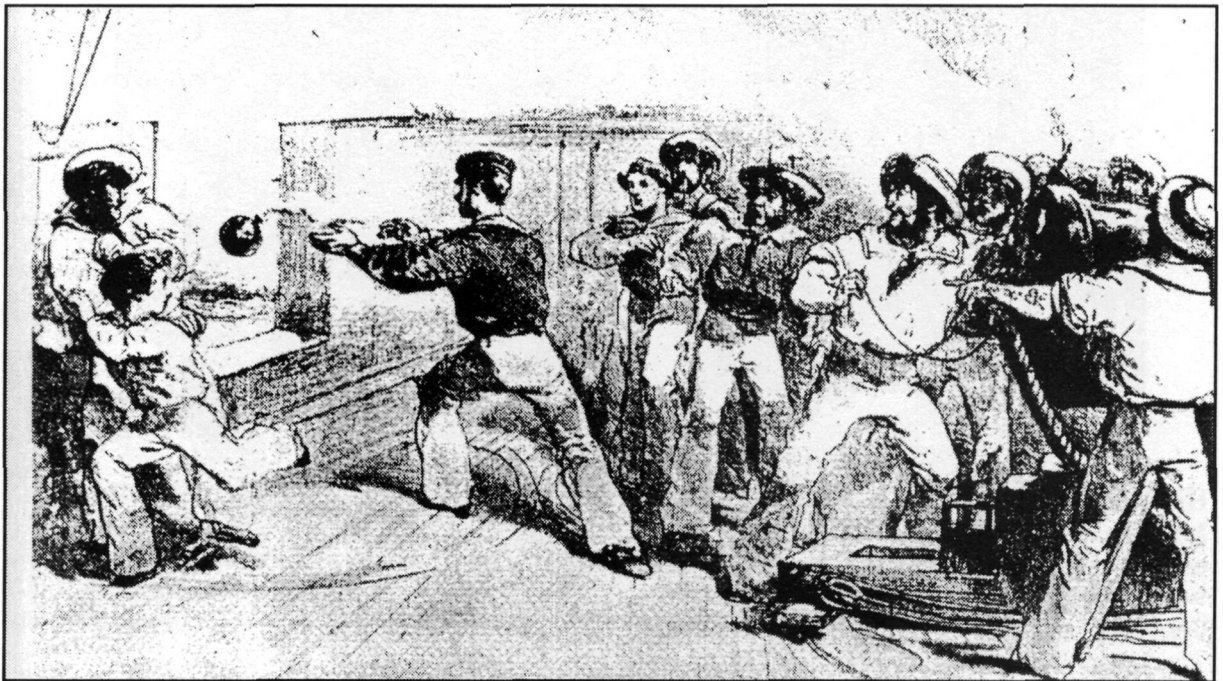
there was nothing in the vicinity to commemorate this great local hero. This omission was rectified in 1998 on European Heritage Day, September 12. On that date, at the instigation of the Local History Society, a plaque was unveiled in his honour at The British Legion Hall, Poyntzpass.

The number of names on the list of winners of the Victoria Cross now stands at 1,354 ~ but number one on the list will always be Druminargal-born, Charles Davis Lucas.



*Memorial Plaque on British Legion Hall,  
Poyntzpass*

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A contemporary illustration showing Charles Davis Lucas throwing a live shell off the deck of HMS *Helga*. He was subsequently awarded the first-ever VC for this action.