

Paignton Medal Winners

The George Medal

The George Medal was instituted on September 24, 1940, alongside the George Cross, to recognize acts of civilian gallantry in the face of enemy action and other acts of great bravery, not necessarily in a combat zone. The George Medal was specifically designed to be more widely distributed than the George Cross, which was reserved for acts of the highest heroism. While initially not intended for posthumous awards, the warrant was later amended to military personnel for actions not covered by purely military decorations.

On 7 June 1942, Torquay was attacked by four aircraft, causing no casualties. An air-raid on August Bank Holiday caused considerable damage and casualties, as did an early evening raid on 4 September



Two brave men, Mr Denton and Sgt. Richardson (of the Home Guard), received the George Medal for gallantry in fighting the fires following this attack.

The London Gazette was established in 1665, and still is the official public record of events. A Supplement to the London Gazette of Friday, 1st January 1943 records the actions of recipients of the George Medal, and the citation for Mr Denton and Sgt Richardson reads:

Awarded the George Medal:

John Willie Denton, Assistant Engineer and Manager, the Torquay and Paignton Gas Company

Frederick Charles Richardson, Assistant Electrician, the Torquay and Paignton Gas Company

During a daylight air raid a gas holder was attacked by enemy aircraft and fierce fires resulted. Taylor, Denton and Richardson climbed to the crown and, with total disregard of personal danger, worked hard to extinguish the flames before nightfall. Their clothes often caught fire and, while encircled in flames and at a height of some 120 feet, Denton and Richardson undoubtedly saved the life of a workman by pulling him back to safety as he was rolling off the edge of the crown. Denton fractured two ribs in this action but carried on with his duties.

Some weeks later another holder was bombed and subjected to severe cannon fire by enemy aircraft. The holder was burning fiercely on one half of its perimeter. Denton

and Richardson again set a magnificent example of courage, and devotion to duty and, as a result, the fires were extinguished, temporary repairs effected and the supply of gas in that area was uninterrupted.

Mr Taylor was in charge of the fire fighting arrangements on both occasions and his example was a great incentive and encouragement to the workers



The above picture shows Mr Denton and Sgt Richardson – we think they are the two gentlemen middle and right.



Since 1834, The Torquay and Paignton Gas Company was the historical provider of town gas in Torbay, with a gas works in Torquay, and later expanded to Paignton. The company initially operated from Torwood Gardens and Temperance Street in Torquay, then moved to Hollacombe in 1861. The gas works at Hollacombe, Paignton was a significant local feature, visible in aerial photographs and known for its wartime camouflage. The company

ceased town gas production in 1968, replaced by natural gas, and the site was later developed as a park.

The Victoria Cross

Our second medal is for bravery in the face of the enemy. It was first awarded in 1856 during the Crimean War and is named after Queen Victoria.

- The Victoria Cross (VC) is the highest military decoration awarded in the UK and the British Commonwealth.
- The VC is the most prestigious military award for acts of bravery in the presence of the enemy.
- It is awarded for conspicuous gallantry, daring or pre-eminent acts of valour, self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the face of the enemy.
- The award can be given to any member of the British Armed Forces, or to civilians acting under military instructions.
- The VC is a cross-shaped medal with a lion guarding the royal crown.
- It is inscribed with the words "For Valour".
- The VC can be awarded posthumously (after the recipient's death).
- To date, there have been 1,358 Victoria Cross awards to 1,355 individuals.



The Victoria Cross was awarded to Henry Thomas Sylvester, a Surgeon Major in the 23rd Regiment (Welch Regiment). The VC was won at Sebastopol, Crimea, on 8th September 1855 and posted in the London Gazette on 20th November 1857. Sylvester was born in Devizes, Wiltshire, on 16th April 1831 and he died in Paignton on 13th March 1920. He is buried in Paignton Cemetery (Grave 2614) and his VC is held by the Museum of Military Medicine, Mytchett. During his service in the Army, Surgeon Major Sylvester worked with Florence Nightingale.

During the campaign in the trenches of Sevastopol, Sylvester was mentioned in despatches, awarded the Crimean Medal with clasp, and was created a Knight of the Legion of Honour by the French for his actions in the war.

He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions during the assault on the Redan. During the assault, Lieutenant and Adjutant Dyneley was hit and badly wounded. He was lying in the open in front of the right flank of the attack. Sylvester volunteered to go out and try to help the Lieutenant, and ran out under heavy enemy fire. He managed to reach Dyneley and was supported in the effort by Robert Shields VC. Sadly, Dyneley was mortally wounded, but Sylvester still dressed his wounds in a dangerous and exposed position.

Sylvester was then posted to India at the time of the Indian Mutiny. He served in the Relief of Lucknow and was awarded the Indian Mutiny Medal with two clasps. He retired from service in the Army in 1861 as a Surgeon Major.

He retired to the South West of England, and stayed in the medical profession. He died on 13th March 1920 at his home, 8 Beach Road, Paignton after a short illness – aged 88 years.

Karen Chapman, May 2025

(Source: <https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/william-henry-thomas-sylvester-vc/>)