



<b>Decision Maker:</b>	Cabinet Member for Business, Culture and Heritage
<b>Date:</b>	13 November 2017
<b>Classification:</b>	For General Release
<b>Title:</b>	Commemorative Green Plaque for the birthplace of Captain Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson V.C. at Orchard Court, Fitzhardinge Street (site of birthplace at 13 Lower Berkeley Street) Portman Square, W1.
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	Marylebone High Street
<b>Key Decision:</b>	No
<b>Financial Summary:</b>	The Green Plaque Scheme depends on sponsorship. Sponsorship has been secured for this plaque
<b>Report of:</b>	Richie Gibson, Head of City Promotions, Events and Filming

## 1. Executive Summary

Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson was born 18 February 1896 close to Portman Square in Westminster. In July 1917 aged 21 he was killed by a sniper after leading his men in the capture of a trench and two machine gun posts. For his bravery and gallantry under fire he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

## 2. Recommendations

That the nomination for a Westminster Commemorative Green Plaque for Captain Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson V.C. at Orchard Court, Fitzhardinge Street, W1, be approved, subject to sponsorship in full.

### **3. Reasons for decision**

This nomination forms part of a wider programme to mark the Centenary of the First World War. The proposed unveiling of this Green Plaque forms one of a series of events to commemorate the Battle of Passchendaele, a campaign that was to last over three months between July and November and cost the lives of 325,000 Allied and 260,000 German soldiers.

### **4. Policy Context**

The commemorative Green Plaques scheme complements a number of Council strategies: to improve the legibility and understanding of Westminster's heritage and social history; to provide information for Westminster's visitors; to provide imaginative and accessible educational tools to raise awareness and understanding of local areas, particularly for young people; to celebrate the richness and diversity of Westminster's former residents.

### **5. Background**

#### **5.1 The Early Years**

**5.1.1** Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson's father was Sir Thomas Colyer-Fergusson who was descended from William Fergusson, Queen Victoria's doctor. Sir Thomas purchased Ightham Mote, in the Kentish Weald in 1889 where he brought up his large family. The name Colyer was added by Sir Thomas in 1890 on succeeding to his grandmother's house, Wombwell Hall, Northfleet near Gravesend. The family already owned the Scottish seat of Spitalhaugh and rented a London house for the season.

**5.1.2** Sir Thomas Colyer-Fergusson married twice but all of his six children were by his first wife, Beatrice Stanley, daughter of Professor Friedrich Max Muller, the renowned philologist, Professor of Modern European languages at Oxford, Keeper of the Bodleian Library and Fellow of All Souls.

**5.1.3** Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson was the third son of Sir Thomas. The name Riversdale, which Thomas bore, is Irish and came through his maternal grandmother. He was baptised at St Nicholas church, Southfleet. Thomas was educated at Summer Fields, Oxford, and at Harrow and later Oriel College, Oxford. He had two older brothers, William Porteous, (Northamptonshire Regiment) and Max Christian Hamilton (R.A.S.C) both of whom survived the Great War. Max died on active duty in 1940.

**5.1.4** Young Thomas was born on the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1896 at No.13 Lower Berkeley Street, just off Portman Square. (Lower Berkeley Street was renamed Fitzhardinge Street, by an LCC Order of 28 October 1935, which became active

on 1 July 1936. No. 13 was demolished for the construction of Orchard Court, 1 - 9 Portman Square, around 1928).

## **5.2 The Great War-The third Battle of Ypres, Overview**

**5.2.1** On June 7<sup>th</sup> 1917 the British attacked and captured the Messines Ridge, a dominant feature that extended northwards to the German-held Passchendaele Ridge. On 31<sup>st</sup> July, the British attacked again and captured the Passchendaele Ridge after 16 weeks fighting. They floundered in mud and rain in an assault that earned General Haig the title "Butcher". British losses were over 300,000 and German losses, never published, were estimated to be between 65,000 and 260,000.

**5.2.2** The great tragedy for the British Army and the Imperial Forces of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, who suffered so many losses in the fight for the few miles from Ypres to the Passchendaele Ridge, is that only five months later almost all of the ground gained in the mud and horror of the battles for Passchendaele was recaptured by the German Army during its April offensive in 1918.

## **5.3 The Battle of Pilckem Ridge, Overview**

**5.3.1** Launched on the 31<sup>st</sup> July the opening attack and first phase of the Third Battle of Ypres is more commonly known as the Battle of Passchendaele. The British Fifth Army commanded by General Hubert Gough advanced in a north-easterly direction away from its positions near Ypres with the Passchendaele Ridge in its sights. The French First Army was on its left. The British Second Army, under General Herbert Plumer, was on its right, holding the ground won during the Battle of Messines a few weeks earlier. They attacked the German 4th Army which defended the Western Front from Lille, to the Ypres Salient in Belgium and on to the North Sea coast.

**5.3.2** Some ground (approximately two miles) including, Pilckem Ridge and areas either side, was gained on that first day, but that night rain began to fall. The ground all around the attackers quickly turned into a quagmire. Churned up by the artillery bombardment of the German Front Line and rear areas, the ground the British now had to advance across was badly damaged and filling up with rainwater which could not drain away through the heavy clay soil. Added to this, several small streams flowed through the area and their natural drainage channels had been destroyed. Due to persistent rain over the next few weeks the whole operation became literally bogged down in thick, sticky Flanders mud. Conditions were so bad that men and horses simply disappeared into the water-filled craters. The capture of the Passchendaele Ridge eventually took another 8 weeks to achieve.

## 5.4 Army Career

- 5.4.1 In September 1914 Colyer-Fergusson joined the Public Schools Battalion, and on 20th February 1915 he was granted a temporary commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Northamptonshire Regiment and in December a permanent one. He was wounded at Contalmaison in July 1916 during the First Battle of the Somme and was appointed Acting Captain in January 1917.
- 5.4.2 In the 3<sup>rd</sup> battle of the Ypres offensive in Belgium, the regiment was involved in the Battle of Pilckem Ridge on July 31st, 1917. The regiment captured Bellewaarde Lake, with the aid of trench mortars firing thermite bombs; Captain Colyer-Fergusson was tasked with capturing Bellewaarde Ridge.
- 5.4.3 Owing to difficulties of the ground and enemy wire he was unable to adhere to the original plan finding himself with only a sergeant and five men. He carried out an attack and succeeded in taking an enemy trench and disposing of the garrison. Faced with a heavy counter attack he resisted. During this attack, assisted only by his orderly, he captured an enemy machine gun and turned it on the enemy killing many and driving others into an adjoining British Unit. Later assisted only by his Sergeant he captured a second enemy gun and joined by other troops of his company was able to strengthen his position. He was killed by a sniper's bullet soon after that same day.

## 5.5 Extract from the London Gazette No. 30272 6th September, 1917

- 5.5.1 *"2nd Lt. (actg. Capt.) Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson, late North'n R. For most conspicuous bravery, skilful leading, and determination in attack. The tactical situation having developed contrary to expectation, it was not possible for his company to adhere to the original plan of deployment, and owing to the difficulties of the ground and to enemy wire, Capt. Colyer-Fergusson found himself with a Sergeant and five men only. He carried out the attack nevertheless, and succeeded in capturing the enemy trench and disposing of the garrison. His party was then threatened by a heavy counter-attack from the left front, but this attack he successfully resisted.*
- 5.5.2 *During this operation, assisted by his Orderly only, he attacked and captured an enemy machine gun and turned it on the assailants, many of whom were killed and a large number were driven into the hands of an adjoining British unit. Later, assisted only by his Sergeant, he again attacked and captured a second enemy machine gun, by which time he had been joined by other portions of his company, and was enabled to consolidate his position. The conduct of this officer throughout forms an amazing record of dash, gallantry and skill, for which no reward can be too great having regard to the importance of the position won. This gallant officer was shortly afterwards killed by a sniper".*

**5.5.3** Both the Sergeant and Orderly mentioned in the above citation were awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

## **5.6 Citations**

**5.6.1** His Commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Galbraith Buckle, wrote to the family after his death:

*“In this last attack I selected his company for the most difficult portion of trench within the battalion objective. He carried out his task most brilliantly. For the capture of a certain line of German trenches, his company had to follow our barrage through a very broken wood, which proved to be full of wire. He soon saw that it would be impossible to keep his whole company up with the barrage for the final assault, and if he failed to keep up with it he would probably fail to capture the trench, so he picked out ten or a dozen men and with them pushed on ahead, and without any further assistance captured his portion of the German trench. Almost as soon as he got in he perceived a company of Germans advancing against him in mass formation and a bare 100 yards away. He and his picked men knocked out 20 or 30 of them with rifle fire, and the remainder of them surrendered as the rest of his company came up. He came and reported to me in the same trench about half an hour later, when I got up to him. Five minutes later he was shot through the forehead by a German machine gun bullet. I think his death was more deeply felt in the regiment than any other I have known. To my mind he was the most promising officer under my command. I cannot hope ever to be able to replace him he, besides being a first rate officer, such a thorough sportsman and the cheeriest of companions.”*

**5.6.2** A staff officer from divisional headquarters writes:

*“I can, however, tell you that he behaved with quite exceptional gallantry on July 31st, and set an example which everybody in the division is proud of. But not only did he display exceptional gallantry, but also sound military knowledge and tactical insight far beyond his years, and in so doing enabled us to secure all objectives which would have cost many lives but for his prompt and gallant action.”*

**5.6.3** A brother officer writes:

*“There is, however a great comfort to me, and I know it will be to you, in the manner and circumstances of Riv’s death. He died in the best of spirits in the very moment of success, and a success which was rendered possible by his own brave action. No man could wish for a finer or more-manlier ending to this life. God grant, when my time comes, that I may meet it in like manner.”*

**5.6.4** “I saw his round mouth’s crimson”

*I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell,  
Like a sun, in his last deep hour;  
Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,  
Clouding, half gleam, half glower,  
And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.  
And in his eyes  
The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,  
In different skies*

Wilfred Owen 1917

## **5.7 Memorials**

### **5.7.1 Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson was buried in Menin Road South Military Cemetery, one mile east of Ypres Belgium. Plot 11.E.1.**

**5.7.2** There is a Memorial Plaque in St. Peters Parish Church, Ightham, near Sevenoaks, Kent and his original battlefield grave marker can be seen in the chapel of Ightham Mote, the 14<sup>th</sup> century manor house and family home. As well as being named on the village War Memorial at Ightham, he is also mentioned on a number of memorials in the Gravesend area where his family also lived.

## **5.8 The Victoria Cross**

**5.8.1** Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson was the eight hundredth and forty fourth recipient of the Victoria Cross, the highest and most prestigious award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces. It was presented posthumously by King George V at Buckingham Palace on the 20<sup>th</sup> October 1917. His Victoria Cross is usually displayed at the Museum of the Northamptonshire Regiment (48th & 58th Foot), Northampton, but in August 2016 it was on loan to the National Trust, and on display at Ightham Mote.

## **6. Financial Implications**

The cost of the plaque, its installation and Green Plaque Scheme administration costs will be borne by the sponsors, The Portman Estate. There is no cost to Westminster City Council.

## **7. Legal Implications**

The property, Orchard Court, is not listed, therefore a Listed Building Consent application is not required.

## **8. Consultation**

The Portman Estate supporter the nomination and Ward Members have been consulted with no objections being raised.

**If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers please contact: Lucy Hoyte, Principal Policy Officer**

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1**

Location plan of Orchard Court, showing site of No. 13 Lower Berkeley Street, W1, at 1:1250 scale

### **Appendix 2**

Photo Montage showing proposed location of the Captain Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson V.C. Green Plaque on the north elevation of Orchard Court.

### **Appendix 3**

Wording and layout of the Captain Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson V.C. Green Plaque.

For completion by the **Cabinet Member for Business, Culture and Heritage**

**Declaration of Interest**

I have <no interest to declare / to declare an interest> in respect of this report

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME: **Councillor Robert Davis MBE DL** \_\_\_\_\_

State nature of interest if any .....

.....  
*(N.B: If you have an interest you should seek advice as to whether it is appropriate to make a decision in relation to this matter)*

For the reasons set out above, I agree the recommendation(s) in the report entitled

**Commemorative Green Plaque for Thomas Riversdale Colyer-Fergusson V.C., Orchard Court, Portman Square, W1.**

Signed .....

Cabinet Member for Business, Culture and Heritage

Date .....

If you have any additional comment which you would want actioned in connection with your decision you should discuss this with the report author and then set out your comment below before the report and this pro-forma is returned to the Secretariat for processing.

Additional comment: .....  
.....  
.....

If you do not wish to approve the recommendations, or wish to make an alternative decision, it is important that you consult the report author, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Strategic Director Finance and Performance and, if there are resources implications, the Strategic Director of Resources (or their representatives) so that (1) you can be made aware of any further relevant considerations that you should take into account before making the decision and (2) your reasons for the decision can be properly identified and recorded, as required by law.

Note to Cabinet Member: Your decision will now be published and copied to the Members of the relevant Policy & Scrutiny Committee. If the decision falls within the criteria for call-in, it will not be implemented until five working days have elapsed from publication to allow the Policy and Scrutiny Committee to decide whether it wishes to call the matter in.

## Other Implications

### 1. Resources Implications

1.1 There are no resources implications arising from this report

### 2. Business Plan Implications

2.1 There are no Business Plan implications arising from this report

### 3. Risk Management Implications

3.1 There are no risk management implications arising from this report

### 4. Health and Wellbeing Impact Assessment including Health and Safety Implications

4.1 There are no health and safety and wellbeing issues arising from this report

### 5. Crime and Disorder Implications

5.1 There are no crime and disorder issues arising from this report

### 6. Impact on the Environment

6.1 There are no environmental issues arising from this report

### 7. Equalities Implications

7.1 There are no equality issues arising from this report

### 8. Staffing Implications

8.1 There are no staffing issues arising from this report

### 9. Human Rights Implications

9.1 There are no issues relating to responsibilities under the Human Rights Act 1998 arising from this report

### 10. Energy Measure Implications

10.1 There are no energy measure issues arising from this report

### 11. Communications Implications

11.1 Should this report be approved and an unveiling ceremony arranged the Council's press section will be informed

Note to report authors: If there are particularly significant implications in any of the above categories these should be moved to the main body of the report.