

Leonard Keyworth VC



Photograph of Leonard Keyworth in uniform, 1915. Document reference: MLL 9529.

Leonard James Keyworth was born on 12th August 1893, the only son of James Keyworth, a tailor who lived at 22 Coningsby Street in Lincoln. Leonard Keyworth was educated at Rosemary Lane Wesleyan School and then at the Municipal Technical School. Having completed his education, he briefly went into his father's tailoring business before finding employment in the offices of the engineering firm of William Foster & Company. However, he soon moved on to the Lincoln solicitors' firm of Burton, Scorers & White, where he was employed as a clerk.

Outside of work, Keyworth was a member of the congregation at the Silver Street Methodist Chapel and sang in the choir. He was also a keen sportsman and an accomplished cricket player and his prowess as a fast bowler may have helped the grenade throwing that would earn him the Victoria Cross.

Keyworth tried to enlist in the Lincolnshire Regiment at the outbreak of war in 1914, but was rejected. He was, however, determined to serve his country and subsequently joined the 24th London Regiment on 16th September 1914.

On the night of 25th May 1915 the men of the 24th London Regiment had made a successful assault on a German position near Givenchy in northern France and were endeavouring to follow it up with a grenade attack against fierce opposition. It was during this stage of the fighting that Leonard Keyworth won the Victoria Cross for throwing grenades into the enemy trenches while fully exposed to German fire.

Keyworth later described how half of his section was killed by enemy machine-gun fire before reaching the German line and how all the "bombers" (grenade-throwers) had been killed except him. Keyworth, however, managed to reach the enemy trenches and once there he stood on the parapet and began throwing grenades. When his supply of projectiles was exhausted, Keyworth was supplied with more by the men behind him who continually pleaded with him to take cover. For over an hour Keyworth remained on the parapet and threw approximately 150 grenades into the German positions. Although he was blinded with dirt by a near miss, he survived unscathed and, despite being under continuous fire, the captured trench was held throughout the night and the whole of the next day, until the 24th London Regiment was finally relieved by another unit.

After his exploits at Givenchy, Keyworth was granted a lengthy period of leave and on 12th July 1915 he was presented with the Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace. Keyworth's sister, Lily, travelled from Lincoln by train to attend the ceremony. Keyworth then returned to his home city, where he received a hero's welcome. The Silver Street Chapel provided him with a celebration tea and he addressed the assembled staff and pupils at the Technical School, allowing his medal to be passed around for inspection. The city honoured Keyworth officially at a ceremony at the Corn Exchange where he was presented with an illuminated scroll of honour and a purse of gold. He then made a brief speech to the huge crowd in which he emphasised the army's desperate need for more men and materials: "It is men, thoroughly equipped in every respect, that is the greatest need just now, and let us have plenty of them. With the men we want more munitions."

Over the next few weeks Keyworth took part in a campaign to attract more recruits to the colours, but he soon asked to be returned to his regiment. Tragically, he did not live to enjoy his new-found fame for long, as he received severe head wounds at Abbeville on 19th October 1915 and subsequently died of his injuries.

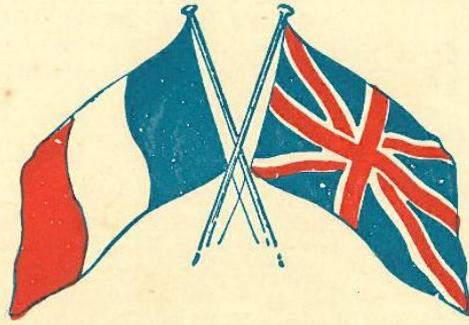
A few days after Keyworth's death, Lieutenant-Colonel John Eustace Jameson, wrote a letter to his mother in which he paid tribute to her son's heroism: "Your son, our comrade, was one of the highest examples of unselfishness and devotion to his comrades and to duty. His name will be enrolled among the bravest of the brave. After he had won the VC his one desire was to return to the front to help his comrades. Surely such a splendid and heroic death will help us to get recruits for the battalion of which he was an honoured member."

Leonard Keyworth was buried in Abbeville Communal Cemetery and his name is inscribed on the City of Lincoln War Memorial in St Benedict's Square. Keyworth is also commemorated in London, where both Keyworth Street in Southwark and Keyworth School in Kennington are named in his honour.

As an afterword to Leonard Keyworth's story, his name was inscribed on the war memorial in Silver Street Methodist Chapel. After the chapel closed in 1940 and the building was sold to the Co-operative Society, the memorial stone disappeared, but was found many years later in a garden in Cherry Willingham. The memorial was placed in storage while a search was undertaken for a suitable new home. Eventually it was decided to re-erect the memorial in All Saints' Church on Monks Road and the restored tablet was rededicated in a service held on 25th November 2007.



The memorial plaque from Silver Street Methodist Church in its new home in All Saints' Church. Leonard Keyworth's name is fourth from the top in the right-hand column.



The Great European War.
1915.



Lance-Corporal Leonard J. Keyworth, V.C.
22 Conningsby St., Lincoln.



Decorated by HIS MAJESTY KING GEORGE V. at Buckingham Palace,
on July 12th, 1915.

Cover of a commemorative card produced by Silver Street United Methodist Sunday School. Leonard Keyworth attended the Sunday School in his youth. Document reference: Meth/C/Lincoln, Silver Street/H/3/2.

THE OFFICIAL RECORD

Of the act of bravery, which earned this high honour, is described as follows :

GIVENCHY, May 25th, 1915.

“After the successful assault on the German position by the 24th Battalion London Regiment, efforts were made by that unit to follow their success by a bomb attack, during the progress of which 58 men out of a total of 75 became casualties. During this fierce encounter, Lance-Corporal Keyworth stood fully exposed for two hours on the top of the enemy's parapet, and threw about 150 bombs among the Germans who were only a few yards away.”

SPECIAL TEACHERS' MEETING

Held on Sunday, July 11th, 1915, when the following Resolution was unanimously passed.

“That this Meeting of Officers and Teachers of Silver Street United Methodist Sunday School records with great satisfaction and pride the knowledge that Lance-Corporal Leonard James Keyworth, 22 Conningsby Street, Lincoln, who was connected with this Sunday School from his infancy to the time of his enlistment in the London Territorials, for a signal act of great bravery and heroism, has been granted the distinguished decoration of the VICTORIA CROSS, and would offer to him their most hearty congratulations, recognising the protecting care of Divine Providence in sparing his life whilst performing so risky a part of his duty, and pray that he may live many years to wear his V.C. with honour to himself and credit to his country.”

Commemorative card produced by Silver Street United Methodist Sunday School. Document reference: Meth/C/Lincoln, Silver Street/H/3/2.