What is this project about?

This project aims to increase public awareness of South Asian soldiers of the British Indian Army who won the Victoria Cross during World War One.

Thanks to the support from Heritage Lottery Fund for allowing the project to able to stage a free public exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. The images and artefacts have been kindly loaned from National Army Museum in London and Imperial War Museum.

This leaflet is designed to accompany the exhibition and some of its text and details can also be found on exhibition panels and labels.

Please note that information in the booklet and on the exhibition boards might be different. The information on soldiers, in this booklet, has been provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The original documents regarding the Indian Army were destroyed.
How do the Victoria Cross and the Indian Order of Merit compare to each other?

The Victoria Cross is Britain's highest award for military gallantry for soldiers (or civilians under military command) “in the face of the enemy” and was instituted by Queen Victoria in 1856 during the Crimean War against Russia. Only 1,358 medals have ever been awarded to 1,355 individual recipients. According to tradition the medals are forged from melted down iron from captured Russian cannons. Until 1911 Victoria Cross was only open to British Soldiers (and some other soldiers from the British Empire) but in that year it became possible for South Asian soldiers of the British Indian Army to win it for the first time. Until then the equivalent was the Indian Order of Merit (the medal was introduced by the East India Company in 1837 as ‘the Order of Merit’, taken over by the Crown in 1858 and renamed the ‘Indian Order of Merit’ in 1902).

How did the British Indian Army develop between 1858 and 1914?

During the 18th and 19th centuries the British East Indian Company came to dominate South Asia (what is now modern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), ruling two thirds directly and one third through client princes.

In 1857 a major revolt by South Asian soldiers employed by the Company was crushed ruthlessly by the British (it is traditionally known as the Indian Mutiny in Britain). The Company’s lands were transferred to the Crown and Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India in 1877. A new British Indian Army was formed, carefully recruited from South Asian peoples the British regarded as most warlike with numbers balanced so that no one religion dominated.

Soldiers mostly came from rural areas and most could not read and write. In return for regular pay and pension they kept peace on the borders of the unruly North West Frontier Province. The British Indian Army numbered some around 195,000 in 1914.
Where was the British Indian Army deployed during the First World War (1914-1918)?

In August 1914 the First World War was triggered by the German invasion of neutral Belgium. The small British expeditionary force of professional soldiers was outnumbered and the British Indian Army was rushed to the Western Front in order to help stem the rapid German advance. By the time the stalemate of trench warfare set in, in December 1914, around a third of British troops on the front line were South Asians.

The British Indian Army served on the Western Front until October 1915 (although some cavalry remained for the rest of the war). An important source of information about the emotions, attitudes and experiences of these soldiers are the letters they sent which were censured by the British. By 1918 the army had swelled to around 1.5 million men. As well as Europe, they were deployed in other campaigns theatres around the world including Gallipoli (Turkey), Mesopotamia (Iraq) and East Africa.

In total, eleven South Asian soldiers were awarded the Victoria Cross including two Gurkhas.
The 129th Baluchis faced the advancing Germans in the village of Hollebeke in Belgium under terrible conditions; waterlogged trenches, insufficient hand grenades and barbed wire, and gaps in the line due to a shortage of soldiers. In fact, the 129th Baluchis were out numbered five to one. The Germans attacked on 30 October, and many Indian soldiers were killed or wounded. Khudadad Khan’s machine gun crew, along with one other, carried on fighting until they were overrun by Germans and everyone was bayoneted or shot. Khan was the only survivor. He pretended to be dead and then managed to crawl back to his regiment under the cover of darkness.

His citation reads:
On 31st October, 1914, at Hollebeke, Belgium, the British Officer in charge of the detachment having been wounded, and the other gun put out of action by a shell, Sepoy Khudadad, though himself wounded, remained working his gun until all the other five men of the gun detachment had been killed.

The bravery of Khan and his fellow Baluchis gave the Allies enough time for British and Indian reinforcements to arrive and stop the German army from reaching the vital ports. He was treated for his wounds at a hospital in Brighton and was later decorated with the Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace.

Khudadad Khan continued to serve in the Indian Army, and he died in Pakistan in 1971. Some of his descendants now live in Leeds.
Darwan Singh Negi

Name: Darwan Singh Negi
DOB: 4th March 1883
Place of Birth: Karbartir Village, India
Date of Action: Night of 23rd to 24th November 1914
Place of Action: Festubert, France
Rank: Naik
Regiment: 1st Battalion, 39th Garhwal Rifles

Darwan Singh Negi was born on 4 March 1883 in Karbartir Village, India. He was a Naik (equivalent of a Corporal) who served with the 1st Battalion of 39th Garhwal Rifles during the First World War.

On the night of 23 to 24 November 1914, his regiment was trying to retake the British trenches near Festubert from the enemy.

Despite being wounded twice in the head and the arm and coming under intense rifle fire and bomb explosions, Darwan Singh Negi was one of the first to push through the trenches to clear them of German soldiers. Singh Negi was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions.

His citation reads:
For great gallantry on the night of the 23rd–24th November, near Festubert, France, when the regiment was engaged in retaking and clearing the enemy out of our trenches, and, although wounded in two places in the head, and also in the arm, being one of the first to push round each successive traverse, in the face of severe fire from bombs and rifles at the closest range.

He later retired from the army with the rank of Subedar, (equivalent of Captain). Singh Negi died in India in 1950. The regimental museum of the Garhwal Rifles in Lansdowne, Uttarakhand is named in his honour.

Darwan Singh Negi (Hindi)

नाम: दरवान सिंह नेगी
जन्म: 4 मार्च 1883
जन्म स्थान: भारत के करबर्तर गांव
युद्ध का तारीख: 23-24 नवंबर 1914 की रात
युद्ध का स्थान: फेस्टुबर्ट के निकट, प्रांत
रैंक: नायक
रेजिमेंट: 1ली बटाल्यन, 39वीं गढ़वाल राइफल्स

दरवान सिंह नेगी का जन्म 4 मार्च 1883 को भारत के करबर्तर गांव में हुआ था। प्रथम विश्व युद्ध के दौरान उन्होंने भारतीय सेना में काम किया। उन्होंने 1ली बटाल्यन, 39वीं गढ़वाल राइफल्स की न्योते सेवा की।

23-24 नवंबर की रात, प्रांत के फेस्टुबर्ट के निकट दुसरी युद्ध के दौरान उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। दो बार चार और बांह में घायल और दुश्मनों की भारी गोली-बारी और बमों के धमाके के बीच होने के बावजूद, दरवान सिंह नेगी उन प्रभावी दीर्घ सूत्रों में थे, जिनसे उन्होंने जंग दीर्घसों से मुक्त कराया। दरवान सिंह नेगी को उनकी अनुयायी वीरता के लिए विक्टोरिया क्रoss से सम्मानित किया गया, उनकी प्रशस्ति में लिखा है:

23-24 नवंबर की रात, प्रांत के फेस्टुबर्ट के निकट दुसरी युद्ध के दौरान उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे। उन्होंने अपनी शक्तियाँ को वापस लेने का प्रयास करते रहे थे।
Gabar Singh Negi was born on 21 April 1895 in Chambra, Uttarakhand in Northern India. He was a Rifleman with the 2nd Battalion of the 39th Garhwal Rifles during the First World War.

He was twenty one years old when he was part of the attacking force at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, France, in March 1915. Indian soldiers made up half of the attacking force and it was the first major action where the Indian Corps fought as a single unit. Despite heavy causalities they managed to take a key enemy position, and it was his bravery during this battle that led Gabar Sing Negi to be awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously. His citation reads as follows:

"For most conspicuous bravery on 10th March, 1915, at Neuve Chapelle. During an attack on the German position, Rifleman Gabar Singh Negi was one of a bayonet party with bombs who entered their main trench, and was the first man to go round each traverse, driving back the enemy until they were eventually forced to surrender. He was killed during this engagement."

Gabar Sing Negi is commemorated on the Neuve Chapelle Memorial. The Indian Memorial at Neuve Chapelle commemorates over 4,700 Indian soldiers and labourers who lost their lives on the Western Front but whose last resting place is not known.

In his home town of Chamba every year he is remembered by The Gabar Singh Negi Fair which is held on 20 or 21 April, (depending on the Hindu calendar).

In 1971 the Garwhal Regiment built a memorial to him in Chamba where people pay their respects to his bravery. The area around the memorial comes alive with stalls during the fair.

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**Name:** Gabar Sing Negi (also known as Gobar Singh Negi)

**DOB:** 21st April 1895

**Place of Birth:** Chambra, Uttarakhand

**Date of Action:** 10th March 1915

**Place of Action:** Neuve Chapelle, France

**Rank:** Rifleman

**Regiment:** 2nd Battalion, 39th Garhwal Rifles

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नाम: गबर सिंह नेगी (गोबर सिंह नेगी के नाम से भी प्रकाशित)

जन्म की तारीख: 21 अप्रैल 1895

जन्म का स्थान: चम्ब्या, उत्तराखंड

युद्ध की तारीख: 10 मार्च 1915

युद्ध का स्थान: नेव चापेल, प्रांश

रैंक: राइफलमैन

रेजिमेंट: 39 वीं गढ़वाल राइफल्स

**Image courtesy of Commonwealth War Graves Commission**
Mir Dast was born on 3 December 1874 in Maidan Valley, Tirah, in the North West Frontier (now Pakistan). He joined the British Indian Army in 1894 and served in the North West Frontier and Waziristan before the First World War. He arrived in France in March 1915 as part of a large contingent of Indian soldiers to fill the gaps left by the many soldiers who had already been injured or killed. He was a Jemadar (equivalent to a lieutenant) attached to the 57th Wilde's Rifles, 7th Brigade of the Lahore Division, when he was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery on 26 April, in the Second Battle of Ypres.

His Lahore Division were ordered to launch a counter attack with the French against the Germans on 26 April, and despite severe allied losses, Mir Dast and some others managed to get close to the German trenches. The Germans then released chlorine gas, and many soldiers retreated in confusion. Mir Dast was among a small number of British and Indian troops who stayed and held their position until nightfall when they were ordered to withdraw.

His citation explains further:
For most conspicuous bravery and great ability at Ypres on 26th April 1915, when he led his platoon with great gallantry during the attack, and afterwards collected various parties of the regiment (when no British Officers were left) and kept them under his command until the retirement was ordered. Jemadar Mir Dast subsequently on this day displayed remarkable courage in helping to carry eight British and Indian Officers into safety, whilst exposed to very heavy fire.

Mir Dast himself was wounded and sent for treatment to the Brighton Pavilion, which had become a hospital. George V presented him with his Victoria Cross in the grounds of the pavilion. He died in 1945 in Peshawar.
Chatta Singh was born in 1886 in Uttar Pradesh, India, and was a Sepoy (infantry private) in the 9th Bhopal Infantry of the Indian Army during the First World War.

Singh was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions on 13 January 1916 during the Battle of the Wadi, in Mesopotamia (now Iraq). He left cover to rescue his Commanding Officer who was wounded and lying in the open. He treated his wounds and stayed with him for five hours until it was safe to move, all the time under intense fire.

His citation explains further:

For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty in leaving cover to assist his Commanding Officer who was lying wounded and helpless in the open. Sepoy Chatta Singh bound up the Officer's wound and then dug cover for him with his entrenching tool being exposed all the time to very heavy rifle fire. For five hours until nightfall he remained beside the wounded Officer, shielding him with his own body on the exposed side. He then, under cover of darkness, went back for assistance and brought the Officer into safety.

Chatta Singh later achieved the rank of Havildar, (equivalent to a Sergeant). He died in 1961 in Tilsara, Kanpur, India.

Name: Chatta Singh
DOB: 1886
Place of Birth: Cawnpore, Uttar Pradesh, India
Date of Action: 13th January 1916
Place of Action: The Tigris Front, Mesopotamia (now Iraq)
Rank: Sepoy
Regiment: 9th Bhopal Infantry, Indian Army

चत्ता सिंह का जन्म 1886 में भारत के उत्तर प्रदेश में हुआ था और वह प्रथम विश्वयुद्ध के दौरान भारतीय थल सेना की 9वीं भोपाल इनफांट्री में सिपाही थे।

चत्ता सिंह को 13 जनवरी 1916 को मेसोपोटामिया (आज के इराक) में बाद की लड़ाई में दिखिए गए उनकी अदृश्य वीरता के लिए विक्रम श्रीरंजन को उन्हें समर्पित किया गया। वह अपने कमांडिंग ऑफिसर को बचाने के लिए, जो खुले में चावल पड़े थे, कब्र से बाहर निकल गए। उन्होंने उनके घाव का उपचार किया और पांच घंटे तक, जब तक कि उनके लिए चलता सुरक्षित न हो गया, उनके साथ रहे और इस दौरान जर्मनी राइफल-बारी होती होती रही। उनकी प्रशस्ति में आई विवरण है:

खुले में चावल पड़े अपने अस्थायी कमांडिंग ऑफिसर को बचाने के लिए कब्र छोड़ कर बाहर आने के अदृश्य वीरता और कृत्य के प्रति समर्पण के लिए। सिपाही चत्ता सिंह ने ऑफिसर के पास पुटिया बारी और फिर उनकी सुरक्षा के लिए अपने बाहर खड़े वोंदेरों से उनके लिए सुरक्षित गड्ढे खोदा और इस संपर्क कार्य के दौरान राल्फस के हो सकते हैं। भारी गोली-बारी के बीच जानलेवा अमृत का समाप्त करते रहे। रात गई तक, घंटे पड़े वह अपने चावल अधिकारी के पास बैठे रहे और उन्हें हिस्से की ओर से उन्हें अपने चार्टर की आड़ देकर बचाते रहे। फिर, रात के अंधेरे के आवरण में वह बापू जआरा मद्दत लेकर आए और अपने ऑफिसर को सुरक्षित ले गए।

चत्ता सिंह ने बाद में हूलवादर (सार्जेंट पद के समकक्ष) का ओहदा हासिल किया। उनकी मृत्यु 1961 में भारत में कानपुर के तिलसरा में हुई।
Shahamad Khan was a Punjabi Muslim who was born on 1 July 1879, in Rawalpindi (now part of Pakistan). He served as a Naik, (the equivalent to a corporal) in the 89th Punjabis (now 1st Battalion the Baloch Regiment, Pakistan Army), of the British Indian Army during the First World War.

Khan was awarded the Victoria Cross for most conspicuous bravery in Mesopotamia (now present day Iraq) on 12 to 13 April 1916. He was in charge of a machine gun covering a gap in the line very close to the enemy's trench.

His citation explains further:

He was in charge of a machine gun section in an exposed position, in front of and covering a gap in our new line, within 150 yards of the enemy's entrenched position. For three hours he held the gap under heavy fire while it was being made secure. When his gun was knocked out by hostile fire he and his two bellhellers held their ground with rifles till ordered to withdraw. Finally, he himself returned and removed all remaining arms and equipment except two shovels. But for his great gallantry and determination our line must have been penetrated by the enemy.

He later achieved the rank of Subedar (equivalent of a Captain). Shahamad Khan died in 1947 in his ancestral village of Takhti, Pakistan.
Gobind Singh was born in Damoi Village, Rajasthan, India on 7 December 1887. He was a Lance-Daffadar (the equivalent of a corporal) in the 28th Light Calvalry attached to the 2nd Lancers (Gardner's Horse) during the First World War.

Lance Daffadar Gobind Singh was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions at the Battle of Cambrai on 1 December 1917. It was in the midst of this battle that his regiment was surrounded by the enemy. It was imperative that a message be sent to the brigade headquarters to give their position. Despite the risks of carrying a message over open ground under constant fire he volunteered three times.

His citation explains further:
For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty in thrice volunteering to carry messages between the regiment and Brigade Head quarters, a distance of 1.5 miles over open ground which was under the observation and heavy fire of the enemy. He succeeded each time in delivering his message, although on each occasion his horse was shot and he was compelled to finish his journey on foot.

Gobind Singh survived the war. He died in 1942.
Badlu Singh was a Hindu Jat, born on 13 January 1876 in Dhakla, in the Punjab, India. He was a Risaldar in the 14th Murray’s Jat Lancers, attached to the 29th Lancers of the Indian Army, who were sent first to France before being withdrawn to fight in Palestine.

Risaldar Badlu Singh was awarded his Victoria Cross posthumously for most conspicuous bravery and self sacrifice on the banks of the River Jordan in Palestine on 23 September 1918.

His citation describes:

On the morning of the 23 September 1918, his squadron charged a strong enemy position on the west bank of the river Jordan, between the river and Kh. es Samariyeh village. On nearing the position, Risaldar Badlu Singh realised that the squadron was suffering casualties from a small hill on the left front occupied by machine guns and 200 infantry. Without the slightest hesitation he collected six other ranks and with the greatest dash and total disregard for danger, charged and captured the position, thereby saving very heavy casualties to the squadron. He was mortally wounded on the very top of the hill when capturing one of the machine guns single handed, but all the machine guns and infantry had surrendered to him before he died. His valour and initiative were of the highest order.

Badlu Singh was cremated where he fell, but his name is inscribed on the Heliopolis Memorial at Heliopolis War Cemetery in Cairo. His Victoria Cross is part of the Lord Ashcroft collection at the Imperial War Museum.
Lala was born on 20 April 1876 in Himachal Pradesh, India, and served as a Lance Naik (equivalent of a Lance Corporal) in the 41st Dogras, Indian Army, during the First World War.

Lala was awarded the Victoria Cross for most conspicuous bravery on 21 January 1916 during the First Battle of Hanna in Mesopotamia, (present-day Iraq).

His citation reads:
Finding a British officer of another regiment lying close to the enemy, he dragged him into a temporary shelter, which he himself had made, and in which he had already bandaged four wounded men. After bandaging his wounds he heard calls from the Adjutant of his own regiment who was lying in the open severely wounded. The enemy were not more than one hundred yards distant, and it seemed certain death to go out in that direction, but Lance Naik Lala insisted on going out to his adjutant, and offered to crawl back with him on his back at once. When this was not permitted, he stripped off his own clothing to keep the wounded officer warmer, and stayed with him till just before dark, when he returned to the shelter. After dark he carried the first wounded officer back to the main trenches, and then, returning with a stretcher, carried back his Adjutant.

He set a magnificent example of courage and devotion to his officers. Lala died in India of polio in 1927 and his last words were said to be: “We fought true.”

Karanbahadur Rana was born on 21 December 1898 in Mangalthan Gulmi, Nepal. He was a Rifleman in the 3rd Gurkha Rifles. He was just 19 years old when he was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions in El Kelfr, Egypt on 10 April 1918.

His citation explains further:
For most conspicuous bravery, resource in action under adverse conditions, and utter contempt for danger. During an attack he, with a few other men, succeeded under intense fire in creeping forward with a Lewis gun in order to engage an enemy machine gun which had caused severe casualties to officers and other ranks who had attempted to put it out of action. No.1 of the Lewis gun opened fire, and was shot immediately. Without a moment's hesitation Rifleman Karanbahadur Rana pushed the dead man off the gun, and in spite of bombs thrown at him and heavy fire from both flanks, he opened fire and knocked out the machine gun crew; then, switching his fire on to the enemy bombers and riflemen in front of him, he silenced their fire. He kept his gun in action and showed the greatest coolness in removing defects which on two occasions prevented the gun from firing. During the remainder of the day he did magnificent work, and when a withdrawal was ordered he assisted with covering fire until the enemy were close on him. He displayed throughout a very high standard of valour and devotion to duty. Rana survived the war. He died in Litung, Nepal in 1973 at the age of 74.
Kulbir Thapa was born on 15 December 1889 in Palpa, Nepal. He was a 26 year old Rifleman in the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Gurkha Rifles of the Indian Army when he became the first Nepalese recipient of the Victoria Cross.

Kulbir Thapa was at Fauquissart, France on 25 April 1915 in a diversionary attack at the start of the Battle of Loos. He was in one of the leading companies attacking the German positions, and it was the first time he had been under fire. He found himself alone and wounded over the German lines when he carried out the heroic deeds which led to his award.

His citation reads:
For most conspicuous bravery during operations against the German trenches south of Fauquissart: When himself wounded on September 25, 1915, he found a badly wounded soldier of the 2nd Battalion, the Leicestershire Regiment behind the first line German trench and although urged by the British soldier to save himself he remained with him all day and night. In the early morning of September 26, in misty weather, he brought him out through the German wire and, leaving him in a place of comparative safety, returned and brought in two wounded Gurkhas one after the other. He then went back in broad daylight for the British soldier and brought him in also, carrying him most of the way, and being at most points under the enemy's fire.

He was personally awarded his Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace, and is still remembered by the Royal Leicestershire Regiment at their regimental museum.

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- Foreign and Commonwealth Office
  (www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-office)

Credit: © IWM (detail of VC 709)