

FEAR FOR PRICELESS MEDALS AS KING PRAISES VETERANS

Pictures: PA, SWNS, LORD ASHCROFT

Victoria Crosses won by our bravest fighters could now be lost to Australia

Risk of honours heading abroad due to closure of War Museum gallery

Last post...the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum. Below, Victoria Cross recipient George Maling. Right, VC



member of the Royal Army Medical Corps on the Western Front in 1915 to receive it. Lord Ashcroft planned to gift the medals to the nation but, after the IWM announced it was closing the wing, he ripped up a clause in his will leaving the collection to the public. The development comes days after a programme of events was announced to mark the 80th anniversary of VE Day on May 8 - the day when the Second World War ended in Europe - and Victory over Japan Day on August 15. A source close to the row said: "Understandably, Lord Ashcroft has been approached by interested parties all saying, 'please, bring the collection here'. "Although it would be an enormous shame, publicly displaying them, despite not being in the UK, is far more preferable than this extraordinary living history being kept under lock and key in a dark vault and out of sight. That was never the intention." Christopher Finney, 40, formerly of the Household Cavalry, is the youngest recipient of the VC, after being wounded rescuing comrades from US friendly fire in Iraq in 2003. Now chairman of the VC and GC Association, he said: "It would be a terrible shame if Lord Ashcroft's collection of Victoria Crosses and George Crosses were to be taken out of this country. "It means current and future generations would miss out on the opportunity to view the medals awarded to men and women who displayed the most extraordinary courage. I sincerely hope a resolution can be found." The gallery is set to close five days before the 81st anniversary of D-Day in which Lord Ashcroft's father Lieutenant Ashcroft waded ashore on Sword Beach with the South Lancashire Regiment. It is being closed to make way for displays exploring post-Second World War conflicts such as the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan, which are "less well represented", said

WAR medals awarded to British battlefield heroes could be permanently displayed - but in Australia.

The previously unthinkable move comes after the Imperial War Museum announced that it was closing the Lord Ashcroft Gallery, home to 230 Victoria Crosses and a smaller number of George Crosses from his personal collection, from June 1.

It means the priceless haul, the largest of gallantry medals awarded for feats of outstanding bravery, could be shipped 10,000 miles away and displayed for the first time overseas.

Lord Ashcroft, 79, said: "It is true I have had generous offers from other nations that have expressed an interest in displaying my VC and GC collection.

"However, it would be wrong of me to identify these countries while discussions are ongoing."

The decision to shut the IWM wing and remove the stunning collection from public display has sparked outrage. The Daily Express understands that Lord

By Giles Sheldrick Chief Reporter

Ashcroft, whose father Eric took part in the D-Day landings, has received offers from two Commonwealth nations with the King as head of state.

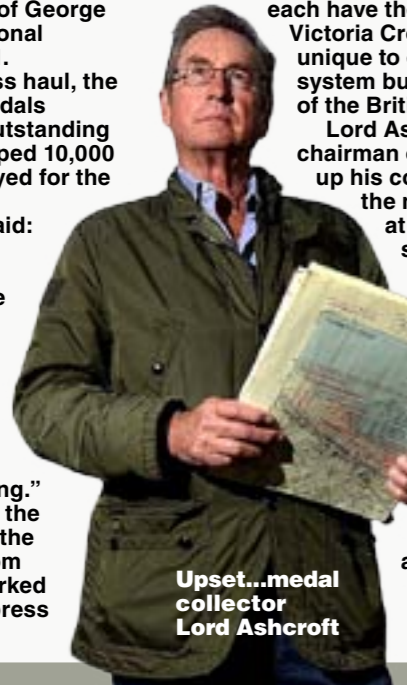
Australia, New Zealand and Canada each have their own version of the Victoria Cross. These awards are unique to each country's medals system but they are named in honour of the British VC.

Lord Ashcroft, the former deputy chairman of the Tory Party, has built up his collection for the benefit of the nation after buying medals at auctions or from private sellers since 1986.

The Lord Ashcroft Gallery was opened by the Princess Royal in 2010 after the entrepreneur and philanthropist made a £5million donation.

For 15 years it has housed his personal collection. He owns 240 VCs and 41 GCs but not all are on display as there is not enough space.

It includes a VC awarded to George Maling, the only



Upset...medal collector Lord Ashcroft



COMMENT

LORD ASHCROFT

Entrepreneur and Philanthropist

MY disappointment at learning about the planned closure of the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum has been tempered by the touching reaction to the imminent loss of my medal collection from public viewing.

I remain hugely disappointed at the decision of the IWM to shut the gallery, which displays the world's largest collection of Victoria Crosses, and that trustees did not have the courtesy of seeking a meeting with me to discuss it.

It was particularly galling learning about this through a third party.

However, not only have friends and strangers alike been incredibly supportive but I have received two offers from Commonwealth nations to display my VC and George Cross collection abroad.

Optimistic

Although this would present some logistical challenges, I am touched that the collection is in such demand even if the IWM has decided that it will close the gallery on June 1.

All the signs are that there will be a large number of visitors who intend to visit the gallery - free of charge - before it closes.

By visiting, they will be able to view well over 200 VCs on display and a smaller number of GCs. In particular, I hope that people will take in the importance of the medal group awarded to Captain Noel Chavasse VC & Bar, MC.

For this is one of only three VCs and Bars - the equivalent of two VCs - ever awarded since the decoration was created in 1856. It is also the only VC and Bar of the Great War.

So I am optimistic that, given time, this medal collection will go on public display again.

As Sir Winston Churchill, our great wartime Prime Minister, once said: "You never can tell whether bad luck may not after all turn out to be good luck."

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in that dreadful conflict. The Commonwealth's ability to bring together people from all over the world has stood the test of time and remains as ever-important today."

Plans have already been revealed to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe on May 8 and Victory over Japan on August 15.

Four days of events to mark VE Day 80 will kick off on Bank Holiday Monday, May 5, with a service at Westminster Abbey, a military procession and a flypast involving current and historic military aircraft.

Nearly 30,000 of the original poppies from the 2014 display at the Tower of London, which commemorated the centenary of the First World War, will also be displayed in a new installation within the walls of the landmark.

To mark VJ Day 80, a service will take place at the National Memorial



Message of unity... King Charles

Arboretum in Staffordshire on August 15, while the Royal British Legion will lead the nation in honouring and remembering those who fought and died during the bloody conflict.

Dr Tara Knights, RBL head of remembrance, said: "These are significant anniversaries.

"And we owe it to all those from the Second World War generation to thank them for their bravery and sacrifice in the defence of freedoms we still enjoy to this day."

TV presenter and EastEnders actor Ross Kemp, who helped

launch the countdown to the events, hailed it as a "last chance to thank surviving veterans".

King Charles was speaking before today's annual Commonwealth Day service when senior royals and politicians gather at Westminster Abbey in celebration of the Family of Nations.

In his message, Charles said: "Last October, leaders from across the Commonwealth came together in Samoa to reaffirm their 'belief in the value of the Commonwealth as a trusted forum where diverse voices of our member states, the large and the small, the young and

the old, come together as one family".

"These gatherings are important for helping all Commonwealth nations to tackle the challenges of the day, yet they also play another vital role.

Remarkable

"In these uncertain times, where it is all too easy to believe that our differences are problems instead of a source of strength and an opportunity for learning, the Commonwealth's remarkable collection of nations and peoples

'No more important task than to restore disrupted harmony of our entire planet'

come together in the spirit of support and, crucially, friendship."

In his message, delivered as head of the Commonwealth, he added: "Leaders recently reiterated the importance of collaboration for peace and human rights, as well as for the restoration of nature both on land and in the oceans.

"As we mark this Commonwealth Day together, there is no more important task than to restore the disrupted harmony of our entire planet.

"For the sake of our younger generations' threatened future, I can only hope that the

Commonwealth will continue its vital work to restore that harmony." The monarch traditionally gives an annual address each year to the family of 56 nations.

But last year Charles was forced to pre-record a video message after postponing his public-facing duties for around three months in the wake of his cancer diagnosis.

The Princess of Wales also missed last year's service as she was also being treated for cancer.

But she is expected to be among the congregation alongside the King, Queen, and Prince of Wales

Church service... Kate and William



today. Kate is making a gradual return to public duties after confirming she is in remission.

Buckingham Palace confirmed William, Kate, Charles and Camilla will be joined by the Princess Royal and the Duke of Gloucester for the service.

Singer-songwriter Joan Armatrading will perform

arrangement of her well-known hit Love And Affection for the 2,000-strong congregation.

The King will also launch the inaugural King's Baton Relay at Buckingham Palace, officially starting the countdown to the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games.

Charles and Camilla will also be guests of the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Baroness Scotland, at the annual Commonwealth Day reception tonight.

Playlist

They will hear a commemorative song by Andrew Lloyd Webber to mark the inaugural Commonwealth Peace Prize.

Commonwealth Day is also being marked by the release of a playlist Charles has compiled following a collaboration with Apple Music for his King's Music Room show.

Kylie Minogue, Bob Marley and Grace Jones are among artists who made it into Charles's top tracks from around the Commonwealth.

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