A Brief History of
The Order of St John
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Cover photo: St John’s Gate. Etching by William Monk
Inside cover illustration: map of the Mediterranean 1661
Introduction

This booklet is intended as a brief history and description of the Order of St John, for the general public and also for the Cadets of the St John Ambulance Brigade. A further resource list, and a syllabus for the Knowledge of the Order proficiency certificate is available from the Supplies Dept. The Library and Museum, the Order of St John, St John’s Gate, Clerkenwell, London EC1M 4DA (01-253 6644) is open Monday-Fridays 10 am-5 pm (Tuesdays and Fridays 10 am-6 pm) Saturday 10 am-4 pm. Tours of the historic buildings at 11 am and 2.30 pm on Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.
The Order of St John in the Holy Land 1099-1291

The Knights, soldiers and Christian men and women who made up the members of the First Crusade in 1099 had as their aim the restoration of the Holy Land to Christian rule. When they captured the Holy City of Jerusalem, they found there a hospice, close to the church of the Holy Sepulchre, run by a group of monastic brothers, under their leader, the Blessed Gerard. This was the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, which had been established, or re-established, by a group of merchants from Amalfi in the 11th century.

The Crusaders gave the hospital land and money and in 1113 the Pope recognised it as an independent religious Order of monks and nuns, who took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and whose special task was to care for the sick.
3. Alms-giving by the Brothers of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem. From Caoursin’s Statutes. St John the Almsgiver may have been the first patron saint of the Order, but soon St John the Baptist was established as the patron saint of the Hospital.

4. An angel, carved in stone, from the Chapel of the castle of Belvoir, which was given to the Knights in 1168, now in Israel.

When a brother was received into the Order, he was told the following: ‘... Though it be that you see us well clad and with fine chargers (horses), and all things for our comfort, you are warned that when you would eat, it will be necessary to fast, and when you would fast, it will be necessary to eat. And when you would sleep it would be necessary to watch, and when you would watch, it will be necessary to sleep, and you will be sent to places where you will not wish... And it will be necessary to abandon all your own desires to do those of another, and the other hardships that it will be necessary to endure in the Religion (the Order) are more than I can tell you.’

The second Master of the Hospital was Raymond du Puy, who instituted a Rule for the Order and a military role for the Hospitaller brothers, in response to the need to defend the states set up by the Crusaders. With the other military religious Orders, the Knights Templar and the Teutonic Knights, the Knights of St John became the principal defence of the Holy Land, employing mercenary soldiers and building and defending castles in strategic places. When the city of Jerusalem fell to the Saracens, the Order moved its headquarters and its hospital to Acre on the Mediterranean coast.
5. Krak des Chevaliers, one of the Order's 12th century castles in the Holy Land. Its name means 'Fortress of the Knights'. 19th century engraving.

6. The 13th century Hospitallers' Hall in Acre.

7. Raymond du Puy presenting the Order with a Rule for living a monastic life. From Caoursin's Statutes.
The Order in Europe 1100-1798

8. A Sister being received into the Order. From the Verdala Statutes.
10. St Jean (St John) de Luz, an Order church in the south of France. 19th century engraving. This church has a round nave. The Hospitallers and Templars often built such churches in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, perhaps because the Hospitallers' headquarters was close to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which has a round nave. The Templars' headquarters was close to the Dome of the Rock, a holy place for Muslims.

The work of the Order in the Holy Land inspired enthusiasm in Europe. Recruits were attracted, both men and women, and people gave lands and money generously to support the organisation, which grew into an international Order with property in town and country. The individual Hospitaller took vows of poverty, but his Order could be considered wealthy.
The Order's lands were grouped into commanderies. A commandery, or preceptory, included an estate of land with peasant tenants, a church, a hospice and a monor-house where the Knight Commander lived. There were hundreds of commanderies in Europe, grouped into 25 Priories, each under a Prior.

Every year it was the Prior's duty to send to the Order's headquarters (also called the Convent) in the Holy Land, and later in Rhodes and then in Malta, new Knights and fresh resources raised from the commanderies: armour, horses, clothing, food and drink, and large subsidies in money. The Order relied on these resources from Europe for its crusading warfare and its medical work. When the Pope gave the lands of the Knights Templar (a similar organisation, but without the duty to care for the sick) to the Order in 1312, these resources increased, but decreased with the religious Reformation in Europe in the 16th century.
For 700 years, in Europe, the Hospitallers who wore the eight-pointed cross, took a prominent part in church life: cared for pilgrims and for the sick, and served the state in many roles; as lawyers and diplomats; admirals and generals; artists, scholars and scientists.

The Order of St John in Rhodes 1309-1522

After the loss of Acre, the Knights stayed for a time on their estates in Cyprus. They captured the islands of the south-eastern Aegean Sea, infested with pirates, which were under the rule of the Byzantine Greek Empire and re-established their Convent in the City of Rhodes.

They developed Rhodes and its surrounding islands into a heavily fortified base for crusading warfare by sea, mostly against Egypt and Turkey. Trade flourished and settlers, craftsmen, soldiers and mariners from Western Europe were encouraged to live and work, together with the local Greek population, under the rule of the Order. The Knights built a
convent within the city of Rhodes, with a palace for the Master (in this period called the Grand Master); inns or auberges, as the communal houses for the Brothers of different nationalities; a church, and a great infirmary. Within the strongly fortified city walls, there were other hospices, also for the care of pilgrims, calling at Rhodes on their long voyage between Europe and the Holy Places of Palestine.
20. The Street of the Knights in Rhodes. The buildings are mostly the 'auberges' or inns of the different Tongues of the Order, where the younger Knights lived communally and the business of the Tongue was conducted.

21. Outside the walls of the City of Rhodes. The British Knights were responsible for the defence of this stretch of the fortifications.

22. The Great Ward of the Hospital of the Order in Rhodes, the second great Hospital they built in the city. To the left is a chapel. The hospital is now a museum.
As Turkish Imperial power grew in the Mediterranean, the Knights successfully defended Rhodes against many sea-borne attacks, in particular a siege in 1480. They were forced in 1522 to surrender the city and its islands, together with their castle on the Turkish coast at Bodrum, to the overwhelming strength of the Turks. Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent allowed the Grand Master and his Knights to return to Europe.

The Order in Malta 1530-1798

After losing Rhodes, the Knights were granted the Maltese islands by the Christian Emperor Charles V in 1530. The position of the islands was significant in the struggle for mastery of the Mediterranean between the Turks and Christendom.
26. 16th century map of Malta, showing the Grand Harbour and the main towns and villages, with the Order flag flying. On this map, the first ever printed of the islands, south is at the top. From Quintin's Description of the Island of Malta. 1536.

27. A scene from the Great Siege of Malta in 1565. Jean de la Valette is in the centre. From a series of engravings of the 1565 siege, from d'Alescio's frescoes in the Grand Master's Palace, Valletta. 17th century.

28. Jean de la Valette, Grand Master of the Order who, at the age of seventy, led the Knights and the Maltese people through the Great Siege. Portrait medal. 1565.

29. The new town of Valletta, named after Jean de la Valette, built by the Knights after the siege. From Verdala's Statutes. 1588.

In 1565, the Grand Master Jean de la Valette, with his Knights and the Maltese people heroically resisted and repulsed a great siege by the Turkish armada of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. This victory and the building and fortification of the city of Valletta brought the Order great renown.

While warfare with the Turks lasted, the Knights were seen as a spearhead for the defence of Christianity against Islam. They attacked the Barbary corsairs, pirates on the North African coast, and their advanced hospital and quarantine services in Malta were of international value at the centre of the Mediterranean sea-routes. Under the Grand masters, trade, farming and fishing flourished in Malta and new towns developed in the islands.
With the decline of the Turkish Empire in the 18th century, the crusading role of the Knights disappeared. Napoleon expelled the Knights from the island in 1798, and although the Maltese and the British drove out the French within two years, the Order of St John never returned to rule in Malta.
The Three Roles of the Order of St John

Religious

The Knights of St John built and maintained hundreds of churches: parish churches in town and country and chapels for commanderies and hospitals. At the centre of their Christian monastic lifestyle was their great Conventual Church of St John the Baptist, successively in Jerusalem, Acre, Rhodes and Malta. Their churches were mostly served by chaplains of the order, for the Knights themselves were rarely priests although they took the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and were expected to attend Divine Service six times a day.

33. A Knight in his black monastic habit, with the white eight-pointed cross of St John, with the city of Rhodes in the background. This and its companion painting of a young knight were commissioned by Alberto Aringhieri, who may be represented in the paintings, a Hospitaller from Siena in Italy, to decorate the Chapel of St John the Baptist in the Cathedral there. Painted by Pinturicchio c. 1500.

34. The Church of St John in Rhodes. The patron saint of the Order, St John the Baptist, is shown in above the Church. He is holding the 'Lamb of God' a symbol for Christ. From Caoursin’s Statutes.

35. During a period of truce, the Turks presented the order with a sacred relic – the baptising hand of St John. It was kept in the Church of St John in Rhodes and then taken to Malta, and, with other holy relics in the care of the Order, was visited by pilgrims. From Caoursin’s History of the Siege of Rhodes.

36. St John the Baptist shown in the Hospital of the Order in Malta. From the Verdala Statutes. 1588.

The hospitals of the Order, in the Holy Land, in Rhodes and in Malta, as well as in some towns and commanderies in Europe, were established for the care of pilgrims and the sick poor, the weary and exhausted, as well as the diseased and injured. In time, they were open to all sick people.

A Knight would always be in charge: at headquarters he was named the Hospitaller. Nursing the sick was a part of every Knight’s duties, and the nuns of the Order of St John also nursed. The skilled physicians and surgeons employed by the Order were usually laymen: Italians, Jews, Greeks and Maltese.
These pharmacy jars, used for storing medicines, herbs, spices and medical mixtures are in the Museum at St John's Gate. One shows an Order ship. They date from the late 16th and 17th centuries and were used in the Order's hospital or dispensary in Malta.

The medical work of the Order was marked by an excellent knowledge of drugs and herbal medicine, with an understanding of the importance of hygiene, tranquillity for patients and isolation for infectious cases. In Malta, the growth of the medical organisation was outstanding for wound surgery, treatment of fevers and the development of a quarantine system for shipping.
Soon after their foundation as a religious Order of Hospitallers, the followers of Gerard had taken up arms to defend the Christian states set up by the Crusaders in the Holy Land. From that time, until the loss of Malta in 1798, the Knights of St John were crusading warriors. In the Holy Land, they garrisoned castles and city fortifications and led troops of cavalry to defend the frontiers.

In Rhodes and Malta, they built and guarded systems of fortifications to protect their islands with their Christian populations. With a small fleet of fast galleys and larger boats, they harassed hostile shipping and raided the ports and provinces of the Muslim powers surrounding them.

The Knights were military and naval leaders and officers, a few hundred of them commanding much larger numbers of fighting men and sailors, who were laymen serving for pay.

44. A Turkish ship being attacked by Order galleys. 17th century drawing.
45. Galley of the Knights of Malta. 19th century lithograph.
47. Modern map showing some of the main Order estates in Britain in 1338, when a survey was made. R. C. Cole-Mackintosh.

48. Little Maplestead Church, Essex, built by the Hospitallers; it has a round nave. The Order of St John holds an Annual Service here.

49. Entrance to the Temple Church, London. The Templars' headquarters passed to the Hospitallers, who leased it out to the legal profession. The round-naved church still stands in the Inns of Court known as the Temple. Engraving, 1807.

The Order in Britain

Lands in England were first given to the Order in the early 12th century. During the next hundred years, the number of English Knights, chaplains and sergeants grew. Churches, hospices, lands and legacies of money were donated to the Hospitallers in the majority of the English and Welsh counties, and were organised into 36 commanderies.
One example is Quenington in Gloucestershire where the Order was given the lordship of the village and the manor: the Order rebuilt part of the church, appointed its priest and constructed a fine commandery house for the knight who was to manage the lands. The gatehouse, the dovecote, the millhouse, the brew-house and the fish-runs still survive, although the old manor house and the old barns have been demolished.

The Prior of the English and Welsh Knights had his headquarters in the great Priory of Clerkenwell, just north of the City of London. A Priory, with its headquarters at Torphichen in Midlothian in Scotland, was in being by 1153 and the Priory of Ireland, centred on Kilmainham near Dublin, was founded in 1174. The Scots and Irish Priories, both well endowed like the English Priory, were sometimes independent of and sometimes subordinate to Clerkenwell. Slebech in Pembrokeshire was the main commandery in South Wales.
The three Priories sent a steady flow of fighting knights — cavalry leaders like Prior Robert Hales and sea-captains like Prior William Weston, and supplies of money, armour, woollen cloth and other goods, to the Order’s headquarters and hospital in the Holy Land and then in Rhodes. Knights also served the English Crown in high office, such as Prior Redington as Admiral, and Prior Langstrother as Treasurer of the Realm.

The Priory of Clerkenwell

The Order first built here on land given by a Norman knight, Jordan de Briset in about 1140. In 1185, Roger des Moulines, the Master of the Hospital, visited England with the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Master of the Templars to ask King Henry II to lead a new Crusade to the Holy Land. The Patriarch consecrated the Priory church on 10th March 1185, and on the 18th, the King held a Great Council, with his chief barons and bishops in the great hall of the Priory. Important meetings were often held by the Crown in the Priory buildings.
Robert Hales, Prior of the Order 1371-1381, was Treasurer of England and responsible for gathering the Poll Tax that sparked off the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. The rebels under Wat Tyler burnt down the Priory buildings and beheaded Robert Hales. All that survives of the first Priory buildings is the crypt, which dates from the 1140s.

The career of Thomas Docwra, Grand Prior 1501-27, illustrates the life of an English Prior. He fought at the Siege of Rhodes of 1480, was Captain of the Order's castle of St Peter at Bodrum, was a distinguished Captain of the Order's galleys and was Prior of Ireland, Turcopolier and then Grand Prior. He missed by a few votes being elected Grand Master of the Order. He accompanied Henry VIII on his visit to meet the King of France at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 and was a Privy Councillor to Henry VII and Henry VIII. He enlarged and beautified the Priory of Clerkenwell, including the great south entrance, known as St John's Gate.
Knights from the three Priors served in Malta for a short period, but the Order in England and Ireland was suppressed by Henry VIII in 1540, after his dissolution of the monasteries, and later had a similar fate in Scotland. The Priory buildings at Clerkenwell and all the other Order properties were taken into Crown hands.

Queen Mary I restored the Order, but it fell into abeyance again under Queen Elizabeth I. The Priory buildings had many uses over the following centuries. William Shakespeare, Dr Johnson, Edward Cave, David Garrick are all associated with ‘St John’s, Clerkenwell’.

The Knights in Malta continued to use the title of Prior of England. After the loss of Malta, the Pope established the headquarters of the Order in Rome. The Sovereign Military Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta is the direct descendant of the Knights Hospitallers and is an Order of the Roman Catholic Church; a religious, humanitarian organisation, undertaking many projects for the relief of human suffering throughout the world.
In the early 19th century, a group of French Knights of the Order decided that the English branch should be revived. The members of this revived organisation, which was eventually not accepted by the Grand Master of that time, looked for a useful role to play in the tradition of the Hospitallers. They sent observers to the conferences in Switzerland that set up the Geneva Conventions on the humane care of battlefield casualties, which resulted in the formation of the International Red Cross. Realising that there was no similar system for the treatment of accident victims in civilian life and for those at work in heavy industry, they founded the St John Ambulance Association in 1877. Its role was to train the public at work and at home in First Aid and ambulance transport. This answered such a need, that 10 years later the St John Ambulance Brigade was formed, as a uniformed body of trained volunteers to provide First Aid cover for the public.

In 1882, the members founded the St John Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem. In recognition of its hospitaller work, HM Queen Victoria made the British Order of St John a Royal Order of Chivalry, in 1888, with the monarch as its Sovereign Head and a member of the Royal Family as the Grand Prior.
The Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem (The Order of St John)

The Order of St John is a working charity, the parent body of St John Ambulance and the St John Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem. Membership of the Order of St John is an honour granted under the Crown, in recognition of service to the Order’s ideals.

Priories and Commanderies of the Most Venerable Order have developed in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many other countries. In most of these St John Ambulance is also established as an important charity.

The Johanniterorden was established in Germany in 1852 and has branches in the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and other European countries. With the Most Venerable Order, these form the Alliance Orders of St John.

All these organisations, with the Sovereign Military Order, are concerned with hospital work, ambulance and First Aid services, by land, sea and air, in peace and war. The recognised Orders of St John work together 'in the service of mankind'.

The Badge and the Coat-of-Arms of the Order

The coat-of-arms of the medieval Order of St John and of the Sovereign and Military Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, is a plain white cross on a red background. The Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem has this as its coat-of-arms, with the honourable addition, granted by King George V in 1926, of the Royal crest in the first quarter.

The Eight-Pointed Cross: the Order’s religious symbol, worn by all knights, their cross of profession. It was later used as a badge to identify possessions of the Order as well. Besides being a general symbol of the crucifixion of Christ, it was white to represent purity. The four arms symbolised four virtues: Prudence (carefulness and forethought), Justice (fairness), Temperance (moderation in all things), Fortitude (courage and endurance). The eight points represent The Beatitudes, the spiritual qualities blessed by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. The modern badge of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem includes lions and unicorns, the supporters of the Royal coat-of-arms, between the angles of the cross, granted by British Crown to show that it is a Royal Order.

For a St John member, the cross can symbolise the qualities needed to be a good First Aider, observation, tact, resource, dexterity, explicitness, discernment, perseverance and sympathy. The cross is known as the Maltese cross because it became associated with the island of Malta during the period of the Knights’ rule.

Pro Fide - For the Faith

Pro Utilitate Hominum - In the Service of Mankind

These are the mottos of the Order, in Latin, a common language in medieval Europe and particularly in the Church.
The St John Ambulance Association was founded in 1877 to provide instruction on First Aid and ambulance transport, to the public at home and at work. Within six months over 1,000 people had received a First Aid certificate. In the first year, classes were set up for women, railwaymen, the police and the fire brigade, and the first industrial Centre was established at Tibshelf Colliery in Derbyshire.

By October 1878, the first ambulance textbook had been published, and soon afterwards ambulance equipment, like First Aid hampers and wheeled litters, was available from the new Stores Depot at St John's Gate.

The Association is the leading organisation in First Aid training, working closely with government departments and local authorities. From 1983-85, nearly 200,000 people, trained by St John, achieved the new First Aid at Work qualification, required by the Health and Safety regulations.

The St John Ambulance Brigade


67. Tibshelf Colliery St John Ambulance Association members c. 1878.

68. The Brigade's first public duty at Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations in London 1887.
The Association’s success was so outstanding, that ten years later, in 1887, the St John Ambulance Brigade was formed as an organisation of trained volunteers to provide a service in First Aid and ambulance transport at public events. Groups of First Aiders holding the Association’s certificate began to group together as Ambulance Corps, including an Invalid Transport Corps based at St John’s Gate. These Corps formed the basis of the Brigade. The first Division was formed at St John’s Gate and within ten years, five Brigade districts had been set up, and a uniform and drill adopted.

One of the roles of the Brigade was to provide trained personnel as a reserve to the Armed Forces Medical Services in time of war, which they first did in 1899, at the time of the South African War. During the First (1914-1918) and Second (1939-45) World Wars, St John joined with the British Red Cross Society, under a Joint Committee, to provide Voluntary Aid Detachment personnel (VADs), to staff hospitals for casualties, and make available all kinds of other auxiliary medical services to the public in time of war, as well as humanitarian services for prisoners-of-war.
St John members received, as they do now, regular instruction and examinations in First Aid and Nursing subjects. To stimulate interest and meetings amongst members, competitions and camps were introduced, which help to maintain standards. The first great public duty of the Brigade was to provide First Aid cover for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebrations in 1887. Since then, Brigade members have been giving service to the public 'wherever crowds gather'.

**ST JOHN AMBULANCE TODAY**

The St John Ambulance Association and Brigade were merged in 1971, to co-ordinate the two roles of training and voluntary service more effectively. St John Ambulance comprises the St John Ambulance Association and the St John Ambulance Brigade, and includes:

**St John Ambulance Cadets**

Formed in 1922, the Ambulance and Nursing Cadets are aged between 10 and 16, and, as well as training in First Aid and nursing techniques, learn a wide range of skills, through courses aimed at helping the development of young people. Their voluntary work includes welfare work in the community, as well as helping to provide first aid cover at public events.
St John Badgers

Formed in 1987, to mark the Centenary of the St John Ambulance Brigade, the Badgers are a new junior organisation for boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 10. Badgers have training in basic first-aid and nursing and their programme includes many fun activities.

St John Aeromedical

Trained St John members, in conjunction with the Automobile Association, provide a skilled medical attendant service for those injured or taken ill abroad, ensuring a safe return home.

St John Air Wing

The volunteer pilots of the Air Wing fly human organs needed for transplant operations, together with the specialist surgeons, to where they are needed.

St John Ambulance Schools Project

To help with First Aid training in schools, St John has started the Three Cross Award, an emergency first aid scheme specially designed for children, and taught in schools.

St John Overseas

As well as the many St John Ambulance Divisions around the world, St John runs Primary Health Care programmes in many Third World countries.
Joint Committee of the Order of St John and the British Red Cross Society

Financed by funds collected during two World Wars, assists Ex-Service disabled personnel and their dependants. Services include Homes and Settlements. Also provides the Hospital Library Services and Hospital Welfare Officers for British Military Hospitals at home and overseas.

The St John Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem

The Order had chosen to care for eye disease, prevalent in the Middle East, and in 1882 the hospital opened in a house on the road to Bethlehem. This hospital, to which new buildings were added, survived two world wars. During the 1914-18 war it was used by the Turks as an ammunition dump and blown up. Although damage was severe, rebuilding started immediately so that patients were again being treated in 1918. The hospital was extended and developed in the 1920s and 1930s and remained open throughout the Second World War (1939-45). In the post-war period it was forced to move to Watson and Strathearn Houses in the Old City.

In 1960 a new hospital in the Sheikh Jarrah district of Jerusalem was opened – a re-affirmation of the Order's commitment to maintaining and expanding its service to the sick and the poor, by treating larger numbers of patients more efficiently and initiating preventive treatment to try and lessen the number affected by blindness. The St John Ophthalmic Hospital has a training school for post-graduate doctors and for Arab nurses, and a Research Institute. It continues its 'Outstretch' programme of visiting villages to train villagers in primary health care.

In an average year, the Hospital carries out 5,000 eye operations and 45,000 out-patients are treated. The hospital is almost entirely supported by donations and further help is always needed.

At the request of the Grand Priory and with the personal support of HRH the Prince of Wales (later HM King Edward VII), who was then the Grand Prior, the Sultan, head of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, who held Jerusalem at that time, authorised the establishment of a hospital and ophthalmic dispensary there.
The Order of St John
Priory House, St John’s Lane
London EC1M 4DA

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