Honours: Knight of Saint John

The Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem

Sir Robert Baden-Powell
Knight of Grace of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem

The Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem. The Order of Saint John has its origins in the time of the Crusades, when poor pilgrims to the Holy Land were given help and assistance by the Hospitaller Knights and, when sick, cared for by the Knights and Brothers of the Hospital of Saint John. Hence, from its foundation in the late eleventh century, the Order had been dedicated to helping the Sick and Poor.

The Order was soon established across Europe with Knights, Brothers and Sisters grouped into Priories, Bailiwicks and Commanderies. The earliest British Knights, members of the Grand Priory of England, established their headquarters in Clerkenwell, London, in 1144 and the world headquarters of the Most Venerable Order are still based there in the ancient Priory buildings of Saint John's Gate.

The Protestant Reformation led to the confiscation of the Order's properties in Great Britain but the Catholic Priories continued to survive with their headquarters, the Grand Magistry, transferred from the island of Rhodes to that of Malta in 1530. The Knights of Malta continued to hold the island until it was captured by Napoleon in 1798, but they eventually established their headquarters in Rome, where the Grand Magistry of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta can still be found today.

In the late 1820's a group of English and Scottish gentleman, encouraged by some French knights of Malta, established an ecumenical Priory of the Order in England. This attracted the attention of the British Royal Family in the 1870s and, in 1888, following a petition from the then Prince of Wales, Queen Victoria granted it a Royal Charter as an Order of the British Crown. Since then the Most Venerable Order of Saint John has continued as a Royal Order of Chivalry with the Monarch as Sovereign Head and a junior member of the Royal Family as Grand Prior. In addition to the Grand Priory, there are Priories of Scotland, Wales, Australia and Canada, for South Africa, in New Zealand and the United States, and Commanderies in Northern Ireland (of Ards), and Western Australia.
THE MOST VENERABLE ORDER OF ST JOHN

Brief History

The Grand Priory in the British Realm of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem (generally known as The Order of St John) came into existence in 1831 as a result of initiatives taken by some French Knights of Malta, who intended to set up a non-Catholic priory in England, along the lines of the Bailiwick of Brandenburg and of a short-lived Russian Orthodox Grand Priory, which was in existence for a few years around 1800.

The French knights' activities were disowned by the Grand Magistry in Rome, but the English priory remained in being, attracted the support of the royal family, and in 1888 was incorporated by royal charter.

Its headquarters are in London, and its Sovereign Head is HM Queen Elizabeth II. It has six priories, two commanderies, and forty St John Councils throughout the English-speaking world; there is also a St John Society in the United States of America. It manages two foundations: the St John Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem, and St John Ambulance Service in about fifty countries throughout the Commonwealth. The latter provides ambulance units - there are c. 60,000 members of the Ambulance Brigade in England alone - and training in first aid. Through a joint committee with the Red Cross it is active on behalf of disabled servicemen.

Arms of the Order

The arms of the Order of St John are Gules a Cross Argent in the first quarter a representation of the Royal Crest of England. Granted in 1926, these arms are an augmented version of the arms of the medieval order Gules a Cross Argent. The insignia of the Order may be displayed in association with armorial bearings. Bailiffs, Knights, Dames and Chaplains, may display their shields on the badge of the Order, while others may show the badge suspended below the shield by an appropriate ribbon. The badge of the Order is shown above. It is a white cross of eight points (the Maltese cross), embellished in the four principal angles alternately with a lion passant guardant and a unicorn passant. Bailiffs and Dames Grand Cross may bear the arms of the Order as a chief of augmentation to their own arms and are entitled to supporters, though these are not hereditary.

The Membership

The six classes of the Order are:

1. Bailiff Grand Cross, Dame Grand Cross
2. Knight of Justice, Knight of Grace, Dame of Justice, Dame of Grace, Sub-Prelate, Chaplain
3. Commander Brother, Commander Sister
4. Officer Brother, Officer Sister, Sub-Chaplain
5. Serving Brother, Serving Sister
6. Esquire, Donat

The "proof" for the rank of Justice within the Second Class is either paternal nobility or the right to bear a properly recorded coat-of-arms. The only practical difference between the two ranks is that a Knight or Dame of Justice can nominate two personal esquires whereas the Knights or Dames of Grace can only nominate one such esquire.

Bailiffs and Knights of Justice and Grace receive the accolade but membership of the Order does not confer any rank, title or precedence. Post-nominal letters signifying membership should only be used for correspondence within the Order.

The Most Venerable Order is the only one of the Orders of St John which does not have a sectarian restriction on membership; it is open to any suitable candidate professing one of the major Christian denominations. British subjects, Dominion subjects, citizens of the Republics of Ireland and South Africa who are Christians become full members of the Order, non-Christians admitted to the Order and all other non-British or non-Dominion subjects are admitted as Associates. These were the same decorations as full members although until recently their ribbon was differenced by a central white stripe.

Promotions in the Order are made primarily on the basis of service, with the vast majority of the membership (other than in the United States) being admitted as serving-brother or sister. If a member has distinguished himself or herself towards the Order, promotion to the rank of officer brother or sister may follow after one year or to a higher rank when the nominee is appointed to an important executive responsibility, although in most cases it takes four to ten years. Promotion to the rank of commander may follow for an average of one third of the officers, and takes from four to ten years - recently the time between promotions has been extended. Particularly distinguished and prominent members, and those who have served the Order outstandingly for many years, may be promoted to knight or dame; however this honour is given to only five per cent of the membership (twenty per cent in the United States). Occasionally members are admitted in the higher grades, particularly following appointment to a high office from the Crown, such as Lords Lieutenant who become County Presidents and Lieutenant-Governors in Canada; however senior members of the armed forces and other public officials are normally admitted in a serving grade.
The Government of the Order
The Order is governed by the Grand Prior, who is appointed by the Sovereign Head after consultation with the Grand Prior's Advisory Council and holds office during the Sovereign’s pleasure or until his resignation. Under the Grand Prior are the Great Officers (the Lord Prior of St John, the Prelate, the Chancellor and the Bailiff of Egle), the Council and the Chapter General.

These Great Officers of the Order are:

*The Grand Prior*
  HRH The Duke of Gloucester GCVO

*The Lord Prior of St John*
  Rt Hon the Lord Vestey DL

*The Prelate*
  Rt Rev Michael Mann KCVO DD

*The Chancellor*
  Professor Anthony Mellows TD

*The Bailiff of Egle*
  Rt Hon the Lord Westbury MC DL

The Headquarters of the Order are situated at St John's Gate, Clerkenwell, London EC1M 4DA.

St John Ambulance
St John Ambulance is an amalgamation of the St John Ambulance Association and the St John Ambulance Brigade. The Association was formed in 1877 to provide training in first aid and home nursing not only to members of the Brigade but also the police, fire service, railways, industry and schools. In 1989, for example, 185,000 people were taught basic or advance first aid in Britain and hundreds of thousands more overseas, while 54,000 British school children earned certificates in basic first aid training.

The formal foundation of the St John Ambulance Brigade dates from 1887. It grew from an earlier voluntary ambulance service provided in the mining and pottery districts of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire. Today there are approximately 300,000 members worldwide, serving as volunteers and providing medical and emergency services at public occasions, sporting events and natural disasters and accidents. The recently formed junior cadet organization (the Badgers) is the fastest growing youth group in Great Britain. The Brigade is the largest volunteer ambulance organization in the world and, although it does receive government subsidies in some countries (Canada, for example, where it provides a nationwide ambulance service), it is still largely supported by private donations.
St John Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem

The Ophthalmic Hospital was founded in 1882 on a site provided by grant of the Turkish Sultan and within a decade it had become so well-established that patients came from across the Middle East. With the outbreak of the First World War the Turkish authorities closed the Hospital, confiscating all its equipment and supplies and then, in 1917, destroying it with explosives shortly before General Allenby captured the city. The Hospital moved twice over the following half-century, its present building being opened in 1960 thanks to the generosity of members of the Order and some of the leading oil companies.

The Hospital mainly serves the Palestinians living in the territories illegally occupied by Israeli forces and who are not entitled to receive Israeli free medical or hospital aid. With eighty beds it performs more than 50,000 out-patient procedures and nearly 6,000 major operations per annum (excluding much of the eye-lid surgery), as well as sending regular mobile clinics into the West Bank and Gaza Strip and engaging into important research work into diabetes related blindness. While the majority of operations are for trachoma and its side effects, recently a substantial number have been related to injuries incurred during the Intifada, often to small children and the elderly. The annual expenditure (1989) to run the Hospital comes to almost $3,500,000 (a fraction of what it would cost to run a comparable hospital in Britain or the US) and support of the Hospital is the principal charitable object of the American Society; however subsidies from the Jordanian Government and the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees (UNWRA) are essential.

Although the staff of the Hospital in Jerusalem are paid, it could not function without the dedication of both doctors and nurses; the Hospitaller, who is responsible for its administration and well-being, is one of the most important of the executive officers of the Order.

The commitments of the Hospital in Jerusalem are increasing annually, mainly due to greater demands on its services made by the unfortunate Palestinians. The difficulties which the staff of the Hospital encounter in carrying out their humanitarian responsibilities cannot be underestimated. The government of Israel has chosen to impose many bureaucratic regulations and financial charges and has imposed an import tax in excess of 100% on donated eyes for corneal grafts as well as other medical supplies, ambulances and motor vehicles (although these are all gifts to the Hospital). Despite the impediments imposed by the Israelis and the atmosphere of hatred which still pervades much of the area in which the Hospital operates, the Order is determined to maintain this essential service to the poor and sick of every religious denomination in the holiest city of Christendom.

The American Society of St John

At the end of 1990 the American Society had over 600 members, of whom 66 were knights (4 of Justice) and 56 were dames - the grade of serving brother and serving sister has not been introduced in the United States. The membership of the Order extends across the country and in informally divided into two groups, one based in New York and the other in San Francisco (investitures are held in both cities). Most of the members have some British connection and the vast majority are Episcopalians, although there are both Roman Catholic and Presbyterian members among the other Christian denominations represented. It has been the practice for all members of the American Society to be admitted as Associates, although the Statutes do permit British subjects joining in the United States to be admitted as full members. No direct
activities have yet been organized by the Society, whose principal object is to raise funds for the Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem and members meet in early November for their annual investiture. Membership is not merely a passive honour, however, but involves a direct personal commitment to the ideals represented by nine centuries of the Order's history and an obligation to support the Society's charitable endeavours. The Society is registered as a non-profit organization for Federal tax purposes.

The administrative offices of the Society are maintained at the Diocesan House of the Cathedral of St John the Divine, 1047 Amsterdam Avenue at 112th Street, New York, NY 10025.

In 1995 it was announced that HM The Queen, as Sovereign Head of the Order of St John, had given her approval for the American Society of St John to be elevated to the status of a Priory. This is the first time that a Priory has been created in a non-Commonwealth country and reflects the importance of the American members to the overall work of the Order.

**The Order of St John in Canada**

The Ambulance Brigade of the Order is of great importance in Canada. There are more than 11,000 uniformed Brigade volunteers and, in the Association, 12,000 non-uniformed volunteers and over 9,000 nationally certified instructors with almost 300 permanently salaried staff members. The Saint John Ambulance Association has been most effective, providing first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation training to more than 460,000 Canadians in one recent year alone.

The Commandery of Canada was established in 1934 and raised to a Priory in 1946; the Governor-General of Canada has always been the Prior of Canada (although this was not a statutory requirement). Once nomination to membership has been approved by Chapter-General and the Grand Prior, they receive the royal approval through the Governor-General acting in the name of the Queen of Canada; the Governor-General then informs Her Majesty that he has performed this act in her name. Announcements of admissions and promotions are made in the official government publication, the Canadian Gazette. Executive responsibility for the conduct of affairs of the Priory is delegated by the Prior to the Chancellor, or, on certain occasions, to one of the executive officers. The Priory has Councils in each of the Provinces, the Northwest Territories and the National Capital Region.

For additional information on the Order of St John in Canada visit the home page of [St John Ambulance](#), Nova Scotia.