

THE ST. JOHN CROSS



The Origins of the Cross



Kneeling Hospitaller, from a late 13th century missal

The eight pointed cross, later known as the Maltese Cross, was worn on the black monastic habit of the Hospitaller Brothers as a symbol of Jesus' crucifixion. The first cross was made of white material, had long arms with slightly split ends. This was a common way of portraying the cross in the 12th and 13th centuries. The Hospitallers, a religious foundation which ran a Hospital in 11th century Jerusalem, had grown from a foundation of merchants from Amalfi. On the 11th century coins of Amalfi, there is a cross with split ends, but it is not known whether the Hospitallers later adapted their cross from that. Similar examples are to be seen in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, next door to the Hospital.

The Brothers, as younger sons of people with land in Western Europe, had military training. When states were set up in the Holy Land by First Crusaders, after 1099, it seemed natural for the Hospitallers to take up arms and help to defend them. To distinguish themselves they wore, over their armour, a long red tunic, or surcoat, which had a plain white cross on it. This was the coat-of-arms of the Hospitallers, of the Order of St. John. It was also on their banner. The eight-pointed cross was used for their church dress, and gradually came to be used as a badge.

The 'Maltese Cross'

The Knights of St. John moved their headquarters to Rhodes, from the Holy Land, and from there, to Malta. The eight-pointed cross, in the more familiar form we know today, was used by the Knights everywhere on their buildings and other possessions in Malta. Even after they left the island in 1798, the cross was still associated with the island, and today is often known as the Maltese Cross.

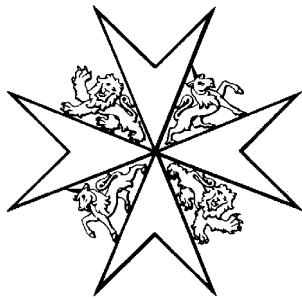
The Symbolism of the Eight Pointed Cross

For the Brothers, the different parts of the cross had meanings:

- Colour: white - purity
- 4 arms of the Cross – the 4 cardinal virtues
 - prudence - carefulness
 - justice – doing the right thing by people
 - temperance – moderate behaviour
 - fortitude – courage
- 8 points of the Cross – taken from the qualities described as Blessed by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount (the Beatitudes).

The Eight Pointed Cross and the British Order of St. John

British Order of St. John, founded in the 1830s, were inspired by the Hospitallers and used the same symbols.



From 1888 the Cross was embellished by the addition of lions and unicorns. These are the supporters of the Royal coat-of-arms, and their use was a special grant by Queen Victoria, who made the Order of St. John an Order of Chivalry that year.

The points were given secular meanings after the First World War, each associated with the qualities of a good First Aider:

- Observant ("that he may note the causes and signs of injury")
- Tactful ("that he may without thoughtless questions learn the symptoms and history of the case, and secure the confidence of the patients and bystanders")
- Resourceful ("That he may use to the best advantage whatever is at hand to prevent further damage, and to assist Nature's efforts to repair the mischief already done")
- Dextrous ("that he may handle a patient without causing unnecessary pain, and use appliances efficiently and neatly")
- Explicit ("that he may give clear instructions to the patient or the bystanders how best to assist him")
- Discriminating ("that he may decide which of several injuries presses most for treatment by himself, what can best be left for the patient or bystanders to do, and what should be left for the medical men")
- Persevering ("that he may continue his efforts, though not at first successful.")
- Sympathetic ("that he may give real comfort and encouragement to the suffering")

While the language is old fashioned to us today (not only is the first-aider assumed to be male, so are the "medical men"!), the introduction of these non-religious meanings emphasises how the organisation has adapted over time.

The eight pointed cross is still widely used today, helping to make the black and white uniform of St. John Ambulance volunteers so easily recognised by the public.

