The Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem:
The Badge of Serving Brother
by N.G. Gooding

It is not the purpose of this short article to look at the history of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in any great detail, nor to describe minutely all the currently issued insignia. Members who are interested in this second aspect will find considerable help in Society publication No. 4, *The Insignia and Medals of the Order of St. John* by our Vice-President C.W. Tozer, published in 1975, and also in various editions of the Statutes and Regulations of the Order. Instead, attention has been focused upon the badge which is likely to be most frequently encountered by members, that of the 5th class, Serving Brother and Serving Sister. Throughout its hundred year history this has undergone a number of slight numismatic changes which may be of interest to members when attempting to assign a date to any piece and, while retaining the form of embellished cross usually associated with the Order, has recently been completely redesigned. In describing these changes, sufficient history will be included to enable the reader to understand the development of the grade.

There is no difference between the insignia of a Serving Brother and a Serving Sister but the latter is always presented to the recipient hanging from a ribbon 1.25 inches wide formed into a bow while the male version hangs from a 1.5 inch wide straight ribbon. When worn in uniform or on a bar with other decorations and medals, however, there is provision for Sisters to use the 1.5 inch straight ribbon.

The Order of St. John traces its origin to a hospital established in Jerusalem by certain merchants of the city of Amalfi to serve those undertaking the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. With the coming of the Crusades and increasing conflict between Christian and Muslim, the role of the hospital gradually extended to include the protection of these pilgrims and, to enforce this protection, another class of military monk was added to the Brethren who cared for the sick. Many of the richer pilgrims and crusading knights were attracted to this brotherhood and, to provide for the upkeep of the hospitals and all the brethren, much property was given or bequeathed to the Order in Europe. Internally, the Order was governed by a Grand Master under whom were Bailiffs heading each of the language divisions or *langues* to which the knights belonged. There were eight of these: Italy, Spain, France, Auvergne, Provence, Portugal, England and Germany. Each Bailiff undertook the administration of some part of the affairs of the Order, such as the Chancery or Treasury.

The possessions of the Order in Europe were divided into areas known as Priories, each of which had a Prior in overall charge of it, and were further subdivided into Commanderies. The headquarters of the Order in England was
located at the Great Priory at Clerkenwell just outside the City of London. In the wake of religious reform the Order was abolished in England and Ireland by Henry VIII in 1540, its property sequestrated and membership of the Order forbidden within the realm. Under a Royal Charter of Mary the Order was restored in 1557 but its property was again sequestrated by Elizabeth in 1559, though membership was not forbidden and the Order itself was not proscribed. When the Prior of Scotland surrendered the property of the Order in that country to the Crown some five years later, the Order ceased to exist in the British Isles.

In 1831 an attempt was made to revive the Order in Britain and a Capitular Commission appointed a Prior who was supported by some knights who had already received that honour from continental priories. However, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, as the original Order was now called, had remained staunchly Roman Catholic in character while Britain had become a predominantly Protestant country, and any hope of revival was brought to an end in 1858 when a Lieutenant Master in Rome refused to recognise that the British Langue had been revived at all. From that time onwards, the Order of St. John considered itself a totally British institution and, with the granting of a Royal Charter in 1888, became an Order of British Chivalry under the Crown with the reigning monarch as Sovereign Head of the Order. Today, it is one of the five internationally recognised Orders of St. John, the others being the Johanniterorden of Germany, the Johanniterorden in Sverige, the Johanniterorden in Nederland and the parent Sovereign Military Order of Malta. There also exist a number of self-styled Orders of St. John. The authoritative work Orders of Knighthood, Awards and the Holy See edited by our member Peter Bander van Duren in 1985 contains a list of some 19 of these soi-disant Orders.

As reconstituted in 1831 and throughout most of the nineteenth century, the Order of St. John was essentially knightly and composed of the aristocratic and professional classes. There was no real provision for the admission of anyone under the rank of knight and even this was classified into the sub-grades of Justice and Grace. The former tended to be drawn from old armigerous military families and the latter from the new men of substance and rising fortune. A Members' Roll of 1868 does however show that provision had been made for the admission of Servants at Arms or Esquires and for the attachment of Ladies to the Order. The analogy, as would be expected at that time, is clearly with the Bath rather than with the British Empire.

If, however, the Order was to extend its charitable work in England (and it must be remembered that most Victorians were concerned with the 'deserving' poor only), there was a requirement for someone who could act in the role of Almoner, Hospital Visitor, assessor of need and checker-up on recipients of bounty. This person would be an employee of the Order and obviously stood in need of a job title. To serve this purpose, therefore, the ancient grade of Serving Brother was revived in 1867. The first holder was actually the caretaker at the Chancery of the Order, then in St. Martin's Place, London. He having died by
1870, first mention is found of his replacement, a Serving Sister. As the grade was restricted to employees of the Order, numbers naturally remained very small for most of the nineteenth century, the Roll of Members showing none in 1872, two in 1875, two in 1881, three in 1885 and four in 1892. In the 1890s, however, a radical change took place and, to understand the reason for this, some account must be taken of two foundations of the Order.

The first of these, the St. John Ambulance Association, was founded in 1877 with the object of spreading knowledge of first-aid by giving instruction in first treatment of injured persons and by locating useful ambulance material at strategic points. The first activity involved lectures, discussion, examination and the presentation of qualification certificates. The second involved the purchase and positioning of material. It follows quite obviously that a large number of people would have to give freely of their time in organising this activity, whether as instructors or in the raising of funds. Equally obviously, some method would eventually have to be found of recognising those who served the Association faithfully and gave freely of their time, without appointing large numbers as ladies or knights and thus lowering the status of the Order. At about the same time, therefore, as the title of Serving Brother had been re-invented, the new grade of Honorary Associate, which did not confer membership of the Order, had been introduced and continued throughout the century to be awarded to important organisers, lecturers and Chairpersons of local Associations, both male and female. Doctors figure prominently in the lists of this grade and it tended to be used as a ‘catch-all’ kind of reward, not even immune from government interference. When five members of the Army Nursing Service were gazetted the Royal Red Cross after the Boer War and it was found that all had already been awarded that decoration for earlier campaigns, the honour was swiftly cancelled and that of Honorary Associate of the Order of St. John substituted.

The second foundation of the Order was the St. John Ambulance Brigade, established in 1887. Whilst the object of the Association was primarily to teach, the object of the Brigade was clearly to practice what had been learned and it was therefore clear from the start that many more “ordinary” people would be involved in the ongoing activities of the Brigade and that some method would have to be found of recognising lengthy and meritorious service by men and women of widely differing social status. The first requirement was eventually satisfied in 1898 by the introduction of the Service Medal of the Order, given originally for 15 years efficient service in the Brigade, regardless of rank. The second problem was the more complex: the grade of Honorary Associate had been used to reward people who were of a certain social status - clearly ladies and gentlemen. Rewards in the Brigade would have to encompass not only the people of this class who held positions such as Superintendents of Corps and Divisions, but also those whose service might have been totally given in the rank of Private or Nursing Sister.
To meet this perceived future need, in 1892 a decision was taken to introduce the new grade of Honorary Serving Brother and the first appointment was made in December of that year. The grade of Honorary Serving Sister swiftly followed and the first appointment, of the Lady Superintendent of the first Nursing Division of the Metropolitan Corps, was made in 1893. Numbers grew slowly through the 1890s, appointments towards the turn of the century showing a different use of the grade of Serving Sister to reward services outside the Brigade or Association where no appropriate civil award was on offer. The Annual Report of Chapter General for 1898 shows the appointment of 11 Honorary Serving Sisters, nurses of the City of Dublin Nursing Institution, who were admitted to the Order for their services in fighting an outbreak of typhus on the remote Island of Inniskea. The same Report shows that four Honorary Serving Sisters were appointed for their services in nursing victims of the plague in India. In 1899 a further nine were appointed and in 1900 yet another nine, all for nursing plague victims in India. The Roll of Members for 1899 shows that membership of the two grades had grown to 46 Honorary Serving Brothers and 40 Honorary Serving Sisters. By 1908, these figures had risen to 133 and 97 and by the outbreak of war they stood at 331 and 131 respectively.

In 1926 the Order received a further Royal Charter in which its structure was re-organised, the prefix 'Honorary' dropped from the title of Serving Brother and Sister and the grade of Honorary Associate discontinued. Recipients of the last could remain in that grade for the time being or could opt to transfer to the new grade of Officer which, together with that of Commander, was introduced at this time. A further Charter in 1936 re-organised the Order to correspond with the five classes which had become the norm in the Royal Victorian Order and the Order of the British Empire and, at that time, Serving Brother and Sister became the 5th class of the Order. Today, the practice of appointing to the grade from both within and outside of St. John Ambulance continues, and there are many thousands of Serving Brothers and Sisters in the United Kingdom. Overseas, the work of the Order is continued by the Priory for South Africa, the Priory in New Zealand, the Priory in Australia and its Commandery in Western Australia, the Priory of Canada and the Commandery in Central Africa. The provision for the appointment of Associate Brothers and Sisters who are those of foreign nationality or of non-Christian religion remains. Appointments are made about four times each year and vary between 250 and 400 annually. All names are published in the London Gazette. Four investitures are held annually at the Grand Priory Church of St. John, Clerkenwell when recipients are presented with their insignia by the Lord Prior of the Order in the name of the Queen. Separate investitures are held in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and overseas.

THE INSIGNIA

Statute 42 of the Royal Charter of 1888 states *inter alia*:

* Serving Brothers and Sisters wear ... the badge on the arm, embroidered or stamped in silver, and in such manner as shall be defined by the Regulations or Bye-laws.*
Very few of these badges can ever have been made and its exact appearance will not be further dwelt upon. The badge with which most readers will be familiar is the one first issued to the new grade of Honorary Serving Brother and Sister after 1892 and illustrated in most of the standard textbooks on decorations and medals. Its basic design remained constant until 1984 and can be described as follows:

Shape: circular, of diameter 1.5 inches

Metal: Silver until 1949; base metal thereafter. According to Tozer, the reason for the change was to avoid the imposition of Purchase Tax.

Obverse: within the silver rim a black enamelled surface. Set thereon a raised eight pointed Maltese cross enamelled white and embellished between the arms in silver or base metal with lions and unicorns alternately.

Reverse: Plain. Many recipients engraved their names in this area.

Suspension: by a ring passing through a lug at the top of the piece.

Naming: issued unnamed, but it is believed that the first fourteen awarded may have been engraved especially on the reverse. See also Reverse above.

Ribbon: Black watered, 1.5 inches for Brothers 1.5 inches for Sisters.

Associate Brothers and Sisters have a white stripe down the centre of the ribbon.

Manufacturer: According to Tozer, this was, until 1895, Phillips, Bros. and Son. Carrington then took over until 1908 when the firm of H.T. Lamb and Co. with premises in St. John’s Square, was employed. It is not known when this company ceased to produce insignia, but a Service Medal dated 1936 in a Lamb case seems to indicate that they were contracted throughout the inter-war period. At some time, however, the contract was re-assigned to Spink and Son and they were certainly producing good quality badges at the end of the War. From 1965, the manufacturer has been Toye, Kenning and Spencer.

Throughout the history of the decoration, however, small alterations have taken place which, while not invalidating the description above, are noticeable, and will help to place any given piece in a rough timescale.

**Type 1.** (See figure 1 and 4 top) Almost certainly made by Phillips. The badge is quite thin and almost flat in appearance. The cross is well raised and the background is below the silver rim. The rim itself is a continuous strip of metal which encircles the piece and comes together at the top to form a small lug through which the circular suspension ring passes, though Serving Sister badges have been seen hanging from a small triangular suspender attached to the ribbon pin. Post-war Lamb issues appear to have been slightly more convex in design than the first.
**Type 2.** (See figure 2) Possibly a second Lamb batch. The badge is now noticeably convex in appearance and the silver rim forms a lug at the top which is much wider than before, in some cases almost 1 cm. The suspension ring on the Serving Brother is no longer circular but a flattened oval. This badge was in use during the late 1930s.

**Type 3.** (See figure 3) The so-called 'skeleton' wartime economy version. The embellished Cross is stamped out in plain silver and fastened within a silver circle of square section. There is no background or enamelling. This version was in use until 1949 and could later be exchanged for the normal pattern. A large number of recipients appear not to have taken advantage of this opportunity.

**Type 4.** (See figure 5 and 4 middle) The black enamelled background is now flush with the rim which is continuous. The suspension lug has been replaced by a small ring fixed at right angles to the piece through which passes the larger suspension ring. Many of these pieces are much more convex than the pre-war pattern and on some the embellished Cross stands quite proud of the black enamelled background. There are usually two small holes in the back of the piece. Variations of this design were in use from the 1950s until the early 1970s. Some later ones are of rather poor workmanship.

**Type 5.** (See figure 6 and 4 bottom) All detail of the Cross and its embellishments are now flush with the black enamelled surface of the piece. The Cross is outlined in white metal, but neither it nor the other detail stand proud of the background. This variation was issued from 1974 until 1984.
**Type 6.** (See figure 7) With the introduction of this type, radical changes took place, almost certainly due to the escalating cost of producing the traditional design, coupled with the increased number of admissions to the grade. The new badge is no longer circular but is a simple embellished Maltese Cross in white unpolished metal. The whole is made in one piece and appears to have been stamped out of a metal sheet. The obverse is convex and the reverse concave. There is a slight resemblance to the non-enamelled Officers’ Cross of the 1926-36 period. The whole appearance is very cheap and nasty and was apparently considered such by many of its recipients, though some attempt to improve its appearance was made by chrome or rhodium plating later issues. It was introduced in some overseas Priories in 1981 and became universal from the beginning of 1984.

**Type 7.** (See figure 8) The basic design of type 6 was retained, but the quality is far better and these badges have the appearance of being struck rather than stamped. They are flatter though thicker and have been nicely finished in rhodium plate. They bear some resemblance to the pre-1926 Honorary Associate’s Cross. It seems generally agreed that they are a considerable improvement on the previous version. They were introduced in 1991 and are on current issue.

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**Sources consulted:**


Roll of the Order, various dates.