The earliest Brigade Nursing uniform was first worn officially on 10th May 1893 by members of the nursing Division of Metropolitan Corps at the opening of the Imperial Institute by H.M. Queen Victoria. It was designed by two founder members, Mrs Calvin Lines and Mrs Blye Bourke, and continued to be worn up to the First World War.

The indoor uniform consisted of a black dress, covered by a large white apron. The dress had a stiff white collar and cuffs and a slight fullness at the top of the sleeves. A badge was sewn to the right sleeve, probably the eight-pointed cross surrounded by the words “St John Ambulance Brigade”. The apron was belted and had two large pockets at the front and cross over straps at the back. Sometimes a small open wallet (a reticule) is shown suspended from the belt which probably contained scissors, pencil and thermometer. Often a strip of material hangs beside it with safety pins attached and a round St John badge at the bottom. A small white frilled cap was worn on the back of the head and tied under the chin with a large bow.

For outdoor wear a long black cloak with a small attached cape covered this uniform. There were slits for arm-holes and an SJAB badge was sewn to the
right side. The bonnet was worn on the back of the head and tied under the chin with ribbons. It was made of black straw, with a rim covered in black velvet and a white pleated frill around the front.

The earliest (1895) dress regulations did not list different variations or markings for different ranks for women (in contrast to the variations for men of different ranks). This changed in 1911 when different styles of indoor dress were introduced for the different ranks of Lady Superintendent in Chief, Nursing Officers and Nursing Sisters. The Lady Superintendent in Chief wore a dress of fine black material. A black and white striped ‘washing’ dress for Officers and a grey ‘washing’ dress in cotton for members were introduced which were far better suited to the practicalities of hospital nursing than the old heavy black wool dress. The dress was the same style as the black one, with a full ‘housemaid’s skirt’ but had three tucks each about an inch deep round the skirt just above the hem. Whenever grey dresses were worn photographs indicate that the “bib’ of the apron came right up to the collar. A new lightweight straw hat was introduced in 1913 and an overcoat which could be worn instead of the cloak in 1914. By 1915 a new winter felt hat was also introduced.

The new roles taken on by women during the First World War further changed their uniform. Midway through the war new dress regulations introduced, for specific roles, a jacket, skirt, blouse, tie, jersey and motor cap.

After the First World War the hemline rose in accordance with contemporary fashions. There was
also a growing move towards practicality, although always tempered with conservatism. Overalls were allowed for camps and emergency ambulance duties. However, hard starched collars and cuffs were still in use, despite repeated request for the introduction of soft ones.

The black cloak, bonnet and dress were completely phased out in the early 1920s. Shoulder straps already worn on the coat and jacket made their first appearance on the cotton washing dress: rank markings were all the more important as ranks for women Officers proliferated. A black and white checked dress with TN on the shoulder straps was also introduced to distinguish trained nurses serving with the Brigade. In about 1936 the eight-pointed cross was added to the nursing members’ apron bibs.

By 1939 all ranks were wearing a black serge two piece suits with white shirt and black crêpe de chine tie for their outdoor uniform. They were distinguished by the trimmings and styles of their black felt hats, which had different striped cockades for the higher ranks and a silk ribbon band with different patterns of black and white stripes for the lower ranks. Indoor dress also had different hats, with Officers wearing Sister Dora Caps with goffered frills and strings, and Ambulance Sisters wearing a handkerchief hats.

The Second World War brought a few changes; clothes rationing meant the SJA were forced briefly to copy the British Red Cross Society’s much more practical short sleeved dress and strapless apron. A battledress top, military in style, was introduced for work such as welfare Officers and civilian relief Officers, and trousers could be worn where necessity demanded it.
After the war uniform reverted to pre-war styles and a “butterfly” cap was introduced, with look as a whole still very feminine. The uniform was modified slightly in 1960 with the introduction of the strapless apron. The next major change took place in 1968 with the introduction of a new, shorter dress made of grey man-made fabric (Cepea), designed with the help of questionnaires completed by Officers and Members of Nursing divisions. The apron was finally dropped except for dirty work where a halter neck apron could be worn. An ‘American’ type indoor cap was worn by all ranks, with the Officers’ distinguished by a narrow black binding on the edge. Outdoor uniform included a shower-proof Terylene/cotton coat and a tri-cornered hat.

More changes were made in 1985, with the aim of making the uniform simpler and cheaper. Mixing and matching of uniform items was permitted, so long as all members on a duty were dressed alike. There were fewer trimmings: badges were to be of cloth rather than of metal and were simplified – the St John badge on the shoulder became the single eight pointed cross, the lion and unicorn removed. The grey nursing dress was given a new open collar and was to be worn with sleeves rolled up and protected by elbow ‘frillies’. Special Duty uniform included a ‘storm cap’ and skirt or trousers with a black v-neck sweater, white shirt (or T-shirt in hot weather) and bow tie, or a crew neck collar won without a tie. There was also a black body warmer and anorak.

The grey dress was finally phased out in 1992. For the first time the duty uniform for all members was the white shirt, black skirt and jacket which had been introduced back in the First World War, but which had been restricted (apart from formal use) for use by Officers or for administrative tasks. A black tight knit v-neck NATO style sweater could be worn instead of the jacket. There was a bow tie at the neck. Trousers could also be worn, although not gloves.
In 2006 the operational duty-wear is either the white shirt and black tie (a clip on tie rather than the 1980s and 1990s bow tie) with a black (NATO style) sweater or fleece jacket, worn with trousers, or a green two-piece suit in a polyester/cotton mix with reflective strips at ankles and wrists. Other uniform items include high visibility jackets, and black sweatshirts worn for training events.

For formal events there is the tailored jacket with matching skirt made from polyester/wool fabric, with a St John Ambulance breast badge, shoulder epaulettes and buttons. Trousers and the NATO tight knit style sweater may also be worn. A white cotton Kameez and black cotton Hijab have also been developed.