

The St John Eye Hospital in Jerusalem

On November 13th this year here in Bromley Parish Church we will be holding the November Market with the aim of raising much-needed funds for the Order of St John Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem.

The exact date of the foundation of the Order is unknown but in about 600AD Pope Gregory the Great requested a hostel be made available for pilgrims visiting the Holy Places in Jerusalem. Ongoing persecution of the Christians by Moslems resulted about 200 years later in the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre along with its hospital and library, and thus the end of a place of shelter for pilgrims. Merchants from the Republic of Amalfi were allowed to purchase the site of the original hostel and build a new church and hospital for Christian pilgrims. The badge of the Republic of Amalfi was the eight pointed white cross and this was adopted by the Benedictine monks who served in the new hospital, thus the white cross on a black background has continued to this day as the emblem of the Order. The four points of the cross represent the Christian virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude, and the points the eight beatitudes.

Persecution of pilgrims travelling across land and by sea to the Holy Land continued, leading to the Pope calling for a Holy War and thus the first Crusade reached Jerusalem in 1099. Following the success of this and the care given to sick and exhausted knights, the hospital was endowed with more land and buildings which allowed the Warden, Blessed Gerard to reorganise the Brotherhood of the Hospital to form a new Order of Hospitallers. The acquisition of a nearby ancient monastery dedicated to St John the Baptist led to him becoming the Patron Saint of the Order.

Throughout the middle ages further growth of the Order occurred throughout Europe and in England, land in Clerkenwell was given to the Order to establish its headquarters (St John's Gate) and part of the original building is to be seen in the crypt of the Priory Church. The Order continued in England until 1540 when it was dissolved by order of Henry VIII. In the Holy Land the Hospitallers were driven out of Jerusalem to Acre where they remained until the fall of Acre in 1291. They set up their headquarters in Cyprus, then Rhodes and finally Malta from where they were expelled in 1798.

In the mid nineteenth century the Order was revived in England as a non-Catholic Order with HM The Queen as Sovereign Head. The three foundations of the Order were St John Ambulance Association (responsible for certificated training courses and production of textbooks), St John Ambulance Brigade (the uniformed personnel providing first aid at public events) these two amalgamated in 1968 to form St John Ambulance – and thirdly the founding of the St John Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem.



The present eye hospital opened in 1960 and is situated on Mount Scopus at 2000ft, close to the old city of Jerusalem. The 70-bedded hospital occupies a three acre site and in recent years the buildings have been extensively modernised, the most recent being a complete refurbishment of