



# St John

## HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### 27th Annual Seminar

Saturday 22 November 2025

East Hotel, Canberra

*Preserving and promoting the St John heritage*



~ THE ORDER OF ST JOHN ~  
THE PRIORY IN AUSTRALIA



# Seminar schedule

It would be appreciated if you would please resume your seat 5 minutes before each session.

0900 Welcome and introduction. **David Fahey, President**

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## **SESSION 1 CHAIR, FELIX HO**

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0910 KEYNOTE ADDRESS. St John Ambulance Cadets: Young people in service for faith and humanity—building stronger individuals, a resilient St John, and safer communities. *The Lord Prior, Mark Compton*

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0940 Presentation of the Oration Medal. *John Pearn*

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0945 Cadets who made good. *Ian Howie-Willis*

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1005 More than 500 years of forming Cadets. Establishing a character of service in St John recruits, 1496–2025. *Andreas Loewe*

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1025 KOTO (Knowledge of the Order) announcement, and presentation of the Sr Agnes Prize Certificate. *Felix Ho*

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### **10.30am Morning tea**

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## **SESSION 2 CO-CHAIRS, DAVID FAHEY & USHA MAKKENA**

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1100 The relevance of medieval women who served the Order. *Samritha Bharanidharan*

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1120 The history of the Ophthalmic Branch in St John Ambulance Victoria. *Daniel Won*

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1140 The Directors of Training of St John Ambulance Australia. *John Pearn & Ian Howie-Willis*

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1200 Glebe Cadets. The 'first' in Australia. *Matthew Glozier*

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1220 Book launch: 'The Premier Response: St John Ambulance in New South Wales 1881–2021. 140 years—the official anniversary history'. *Sean McGuinness, Chair, St John Ambulance NSW*

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### **12.30pm Lunch**

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**SESSION 3 CO-CHAIRS, SAMRITHA BHARANIDHARAN  
& ELIZABETH ELLIS**

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- 1310 The Cadet 'Code of Chivalry'. *David Fahey*
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- 1330 From Military to Paramilitary. The evolution of St John Ambulance Cadets in Australia. *Paul Copeland*
- 
- 1350 The history of St John Cadets in Western Australia. *David Bromell*
- 
- 1410 Holroyd Cadet Division: History and reflections. 58 years of transforming young lives in Western Sydney and beyond. *Anthony O'Reilly*
- 
- 1430 Cadet service in families. *Elizabeth Ellis*
- 
- 1450 Closing remarks and invitation to participate in the joint St John session at 1530.
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# Seminar abstracts

## SESSION 1 CHAIR FELIX HO

**0910** St John Ambulance Cadets: Young people in service for faith and humanity—building stronger individuals, a resilient St John, and safer communities. *The Lord Prior, Mark Compton*

This address traces the birth and global spread of the St John Ambulance Cadet movement. Originating in England in 1922 with the first Cadet Division in Hackney, Cadet divisions established three enduring principles: learning by doing, belonging to a uniformed division, and progressive achievement culminating in the Grand Prior's Award. The movement crossed the world early, with the inaugural overseas Cadet Division formed in Glebe, New South Wales, on 9 December 1925 under Superintendent, Mr George Goodrick. Glebe's strong adult-division culture, auxiliary support, and community engagement provided a template for subsequent Australian Cadet formations. Across the Commonwealth and beyond, Cadets have become integral to public-duty coverage, youth leadership, and health-career pipelines. Core contributions include: (1) individual development—first-aid competence, leadership, and pathways to health professions; (2) organisational vitality—renewal of volunteer ranks, operational depth, and cultural continuity; (3) societal impact—enhanced community safety, health literacy, and social capital. Distinguished alumni such as Marion Higgins (the first female Grand Prior's Badge recipient in the British Empire) and David Heard (world's longest-serving St John volunteer) illustrate the Cadet to lifelong service trajectory. To sustain this legacy, ten strategic priorities are proposed: safeguarding and inclusion; modernised clinical curricula (early management of cardiac arrest with public access defibrillators, management of opioid overdose, mental-health first aid and aged care skills); digital learning and simulation—including use of AI; career-bridge partnerships; revitalised international camps; community-impact projects; robust data collection; youth-friendly duty design; alumni networks; and heritage storytelling. By reaffirming *Pro Fide, Pro Utilitate Hominum*, the address calls on the St John community to invest in youth, ensuring Cadets remain a catalyst for safer, more compassionate societies.

**0940** Presentation of the Oration Medal. *John Pearn*

#### 0945 Cadets who made good. *Ian Howie-Willis*

In the century since the first St John Ambulance Cadet division formed in Australia, many thousands of young people have worn the Cadet uniform. Many young people have used the Cadet movement as a 'springboard' into careers in the health services professions, becoming medical practitioners, dentists, nurses, ambulance officers, physiotherapists, pharmacists, occupational therapists, optometrists, and health delivery administrators. As a result of this, it can be successfully asserted that the Cadet movement has contributed significantly to the development of Australia's health care system.

A significant proportion of the former Cadets continued with their St John Ambulance involvement as adults. The list of former Cadets who rose through the State, Territory and National St John organisations to become leaders in St John Ambulance Australia is long.

By briefly examining the professional profiles of a representative selection of the 'Cadets who made good', this paper will demonstrate that the Cadet movement has been a wise and profitable investment for St John. The paper will argue that the Cadet movement has been an important means for the organisation to invest in its own future while also providing a valuable service to Australian youth.

#### 1005 More than 500 years of forming Cadets. Establishing a character of service in St John recruits, 1496–2025. *Andreas Loewe*

This paper examines how the Order of St John has cultivated a 'habit' or character of service in young recruits across more than five centuries of institutional continuity. By analysing three key sources—Guillaume Caoursin's *Statutes of the Rhodian Military Knights* (1496), Fra Sabba da Castiglione's *Ricordi or Pieces of Advice for aspiring Knights of St John* (1565), and the *Juvenile Manual for St John Ambulance Brigade Cadets* (1929)—this paper traces both continuity in core values and adaptations that maintained relevance from crusader Jerusalem to contemporary Australia.

Five consistent themes emerge: (1) formation for service begins in youth; (2) service requires physical and moral discipline; (3) theological foundations adapt to changing contexts; (4) membership has evolved from exclusive to inclusive; and (5) tradition is deliberately cultivated to place recruits in a larger historical framework.

The Order's remarkable institutional continuity has been achieved not by rigid adherence to unchanging forms but by creatively adapting its core values to modern needs. This paper demonstrates how the explicitly faith-

based motivations of the Middle Ages have successfully been translated into universal humanitarian values without losing any of the moral and practical character formation of recruits that underpinned the formation of young Hospitaller knights.

Modern youth members, therefore, can rightly be said to stand in an unbroken tradition stretching back to the Middle Ages: with the cultivation of practical skills, moral discipline and dedication to others remaining consistent despite transformed outward forms of service.

**1025** KOTO (Knowledge of the Order) announcement, and presentation of the Sr Agnes Prize Certificate.

## **SESSION 2 CO-CHAIRS DAVID FAHEY & USHA MAKKENA**

**1100** The relevance of medieval women who served the Order.  
*Samritha Bharanidharan*

The ancient Order of St John is renowned for its military, health care and humanitarian roles. Examining the Order from its beginnings to the significant loss of Malta in 1798 reveals the crucial, often unacknowledged role women played in the Order's spiritual, charitable, and daily operations.

While the military branch of the Hospitallers were solely men, women served within the hospitals to care for pilgrims, the sick and the injured. This paper explores the historical records available for key figures to develop an imaginative reconstruction. This includes women such as Sister Agnes (Agnese of Alix) of the 11th century, and the Abbess of the Monastery of St Mary Magdalene, who ran a hospice for women in Jerusalem in 1099, across the road from the monks' hospice. The paper also explores the nuns at Antioch and subsequently Acre, who stayed behind during the sieges to assist the injured knights. It also explores the devotion of women such as Saint Ulbadesca of the 13th century. Their dedication for caring for the sick emphasises that the Order's strength lay not only in its military role, but in its humanitarian activities.

This legacy of the ancient Order deeply connects to St John Ambulance today, with many female members who follow the Venerable Order's mottoes of *Pro Fide, Pro Utilitate Hominum* carrying on their essential lifesaving work without fanfare, just like the women of the past, but whose efforts to fulfil the Order's mission should also be acknowledged and celebrated.

**1120** The history of the Ophthalmic Branch in St John Ambulance Victoria.  
*Daniel Won*

This presentation, co-authored by Aadi Malhotra, Ronald Yung, and the speaker, explores the history and legacy of the Ophthalmic Branch of St John Ambulance Victoria, and how it has connected local volunteer work in Victoria to a humanitarian global cause. The Branch was formed in the mid-20th century and focused on supporting the St John Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem through fundraising and community outreach. It was led by figures such as Mr Richard Bluck AM RFD KStJ, Lady Newman-Morris SSStJ, and Mrs Margaret Kentler DStJ, all of whom played a significant part in keeping this mission alive. Their work also led to the creation of the Eye Health badge for Cadets and Juniors, which still exists. We wish to highlight how the Ophthalmic Branch's past work represents more than a historic effort, but shows how global compassion can take root locally, and how its 'vision of service' still matters in the organisation today, especially to St John youth.

**1140** The Directors of Training of St John Ambulance Australia. *John Pearn & Ian Howie-Willis*

In the first 80 years of Australia's federated national St John organisation, 1941–2021, one of the key Priory Officers was always the Director of Training. Until the new Priory Constitution of 2019, the Priory always had a Director of Training. It was customarily held by a volunteer, a senior member of the medical profession. The Director held a key 'portfolio' position on the national Board of Directors. He was responsible for St John's public first aid training activity, the publication of the first aid manuals and generally for ensuring that St John's training activity was 'world best practice'. In addition, the Director presided over key training advisory forums such as the Medical Standards Committee.

The Director's position eventually became redundant because of federal legislation under which St John became a 'Registered Training Organisation' and had to comply with the provisions of the government's Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Instead of a voluntary part-time Director of Training, the Training Branch needed a full-time AQF compliance specialist.

The eleven successive Directors of Training were among the all-time most distinguished servants of the Order in Australia. This paper considers their collective achievement in helping raise the status of St John Ambulance Australia to the forefront of Australia's best-recognised and most-trusted national community sector organisations.

**1200** Glebe Cadets. The ‘first’ in Australia. *Matthew Glozier*

Cadet Divisions were a NSW ‘first’, initiated with the Glebe Cadet Division in 1925. This paper highlights that initial creation of a Cadet division in Glebe by exploring its background and context within the bigger story of St John Ambulance effort in NSW. Glebe was one of the first St John Association sub-Centres to come into existence in 1895. In 1897, Association volunteers were instructing new Detached Classes in Glebe to the Kauri Timber Co. employees. Soon after the turn of the century, NSW created formal Divisions within the St John Ambulance Brigade. The Glebe Branch of the Association was the first to augment its activity with the creation of two new Glebe Divisions registered with the Brigade as an Ambulance (Men’s) Division and a Nursing (Female) Division. This was achieved on 20 March 1903. Glebe Division offered the first Home Nursing class for men in April 1907. This paper examines the creation and growth of first aid training in Sydney and the development of a Brigade element, up to and beyond the mid-1920s.

**1220** Book launch: ‘The Premier Response: St John Ambulance in New South Wales 1881–2021. 140 years—the official anniversary history’. *Sean McGuinness, Chair, St John Ambulance (NSW)*

**SESSION THREE CO-CHAIRS SAMRITHA BHARANIDHARAN & ELIZABETH ELLIS**

**1310** The Cadet ‘Code of Chivalry’. *David Fahey*

The Cadet ‘Code of Chivalry’ is well known to anyone who has been a St John Cadet. It has been an important statement of values since the Cadet movement was established in the UK in 1922, and has had only minor alterations in wording since that time. There are obvious similarities between the Cadet ‘Code of Chivalry’ and the Scout ‘Scout Law’—this is not merely coincidental. The use of the word ‘chivalry’ needs special consideration.

**1330** From Military to Paramilitary. The evolution of St John Ambulance Cadets in Australia. *Paul Copeland*

The origins of cadet organisations in Australia are deeply rooted in the traditions of military youth training, discipline, and service. Over time, these structures gave rise to a unique form of para-military cadetship, embodied in the establishment and growth of St John Ambulance Cadets. This paper traces the historical transition from military to community service cadet

movements, examining how St John Ambulance Cadets emerged as a distinct organisation committed to both first aid and civic responsibility.

Through an exploration across the sub-national level, this paper will highlight how local conditions shaped cadet divisions across Australia, the different emphases on training, public duty, and youth development, and the ways in which cadets adapted to the changing needs of their communities. Special attention will be given to how cadets preserved a disciplined, uniformed, and service-oriented identity while fostering inclusivity, leadership, and practical skills in young Australians.

By amplifying the history of service unique to Australian states and territories, this presentation will complement the broad global context outlined by the keynote speaker. It will reinforce the continuity of cadet values—discipline, service, and readiness—while situating St John Ambulance Cadets as a paramilitary youth organisation that has made enduring contributions to the health, safety, and resilience of Australian communities.

### **1350** The history of St John Ambulance Cadets in Western Australia.

*David Bromell*

This paper reviews the rise of St John Ambulance Cadets in Western Australia from early beginnings during World War II and the growth and spread during the 1960s and 1970s. It recognises the challenges experienced due to the vast size and sparse population of the state and the proud moments up to the Administration Circular from the St John Western Australia CEO in 2013 advising that St John Western Australia would transition from the existing Cadet program to one based in schools, which brought to an end the Cadet contribution as we knew it. The paper concludes with a consideration of what has happened since and an introduction to the West Australian 'St John Academy'.

### **1410** Holroyd Cadet Division: History and reflections. 58 years of transforming young lives in Western Sydney and beyond.

*Anthony O'Reilly*

Holroyd Cadet Division in Sydney's Western Suburbs was created by combining the nearby Divisions of Merrylands (registered 1967) and Wentworthville (registered 1983) in 1994. This paper and presentation provide a historical record of the major milestones, people and accomplishments of the Division and members. Beyond the details which are included in tabular form, this paper aims to demonstrate that Holroyd Cadet Division and its originating

Divisions transformed the lives of many members and the communities to which they belong. Such transformation could be considered as typical for St John Cadets. However, it is not universal by location, time or group. Examples of member progress include career achievements both within St John and in their professions. Some of the factors that are proposed as contributing to such development are visionary and energetic leadership, participation in first aid competitions, age of leaders, wide range of Cadet activities, and size of Divisions.

This presentation covers key dates, milestone events, Divisional leaders and their St John progression, and a range of members' achievements that substantiate the transformation claim, as well as awards presented that show the outstanding status of the Division.

### **1430** Cadet service in families. *Elizabeth Ellis*

It is commonly observed that across many types of organisations, participation can tend to run in families. This paper focuses on factors which may influence volunteer participation in service organisations such as St John Ambulance and will have relevance for Cadet recruitment. During this paper, the history of one family will be presented as a case study.

There may be many reasons for this influence which can broadly be categorised in two ways as nature and nurture. It is possible that certain inherited personality traits, a person's 'nature', lend themselves to certain types of activities. Four of the five personality traits which are heritable which would influence voluntary service are: extraversion, openness/intellect, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. On the other hand, there are many more environmental conditions which would nurture or predispose a person to a particular choice of activities, including familiarity with an organisation, convenience, veneration of elders, and organisational recognition.

We do not know what percentage of St John volunteers have been influenced by the participation of family members, but we can explore how strong this phenomenon is. In addition, understanding the motivations for volunteering: altruism, ideological commitment to social action, and social interaction, and some of the perceived benefits such as self-development, psychological 'pleasure' from tending the sick or injured, an enhanced sense of self-worth, care about the larger community, can help determine the kinds of programs and experiences which may enhance recruitment and retention of younger members.

**1450** Closing remarks and invitation to participate in joint St John session at 1530.

**The official website of the St John Ambulance Historical Society of Australia**

**<https://history.stjohn.org.au>**

The Society's website is fast becoming a treasure trove of news, stories, biographies, histories and so much more. We are continuously adding to the wealth of information on the site. Make [history.stjohn.org.au](https://history.stjohn.org.au) your starting point in your studies of St John Ambulance and the Order of St John.

**Membership of the St John Ambulance Historical Society of Australia**

**<https://sjaa25.tidyhq.com/>**

Become a member or renew your annual membership to the Historical Society at the membership website—<https://sjaa25.tidyhq.com/>

The membership website also lists forthcoming Historical Society events, and provides an opportunity to donate to the Society.



**St John**

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