

Receivers-General of the Australian Priory and Commandery

Mark Compton AM, KStJ

Professor Mark Compton is the Chancellor of St John Ambulance Australia. He joined the Glebe Cadet Division the day after his 13th birthday in 1974 and has remained an active and efficient Brigade and Event Health Services Branch member for the 40 years since then. He climbed steadily through the divisional, regional and state Brigade hierarchies before serving on the National headquarters staff. Meanwhile, he also worked for some years as the salaried Training Manager for St John in New South Wales. He was appointed Chair of the St John Council for NSW in 1998 which he held for five years. In 2005 he became the Priory Receiver-General, which he relinquished in June 2013 succeeding Dr Neil Conn as Chancellor, the Priory's eighth. Professor Compton is unique among the Chancellors in being a member of a four-generation St John family and the only Chancellor to hold the Grand Prior's Award. Professor Compton originally trained in pharmacology but his career has been in senior management in health care organisations and hospitals. He is currently the CEO of St Luke's Care. He is also an Adjunct Professor in Management at the Macquarie University. A Knight of the Order, he is a Life Member of this Historical Society, an honour granted him for his generosity in funding the Society's annual 'Knowledge of the Order' prizes for Cadets.



The position of Receiver-General is one of eight national 'Priory Officer' appointments in St John Ambulance Australia. Such appointments are formally made by the Prior of the Order of St John, who is customarily the Governor-General of Australia and who as Prior acts on behalf of the Grand Prior, the Duke of Gloucester, and ultimately on behalf of the Sovereign Head, the Queen. Priory Officers are generally appointed for a triennium with the possibility of extensions of service for up to three triennia.

Each of the eight Priory Officers performs particular key functions in the life and work of the Australian Priory. These are:

1. the Chancellor is the deputy of the Prior and performs all duties and tasks as may be delegated from the Prior from time to time. In practical terms, this means the overall administration of the Priory in Australia including chairing the Board of Directors of St John Ambulance Australia
2. the Receiver-General is the principal financial adviser to the Priory and is head of Treasury. The Receiver-General is responsible to the Prior for the financial affairs of the Priory. He/she also manages the national finances of the incorporated manifestation of the Priory, being St John Ambulance Australia
3. the Director of Training directs the teaching work of the Order (with advice from the Medical Advisory Panel and other expert input) through the Training Branch
4. the Chief Commissioner is the most senior uniformed officer of the Event Health Services Branch
5. the Hospitaller represents the Ophthalmic Branch
6. the Community Care Chair represents the Community Care Branch
7. the Librarian advises on and is the custodian of the Priory's history and heritage
8. the Director of Ceremonies superintends the Priory's ceremonial life.

The first six of these Priory Officers are members of the Board of Directors. The last two, the Librarian and Director of Ceremonies, do not sit on the Board, which convenes quarterly; however, with the Chancellor, the Priory Secretary, the two Sub-Prelates and the Hospitaller, they form the Office of the Priory. The Office of the Priory convenes annually and maintains an overview of the Priory's spiritual and cultural life.

We can appreciate that both the Priory and St John Ambulance Australia, being dynamic, inseparably intertwined parts of the same whole, are continually evolving. Seven decades after the Priory was established as the national federal organisation for the Order of St John in Australia they have grown in influence and authority in ways that would have delighted the Priory's founding fathers and mothers in

the early 1940s. As one envious CEO of another major Australian charitable institution has remarked, St John Ambulance Australia is 'a blue-chip charity'. This reflects the effort at all levels of the organisation, from the Board of Directors and the Priory Officers right down to the grass-roots level. And this must never be taken for granted as levels of scrutiny are ever increasing. Our brand and our reputation, next to our wonderful people, remain our greatest assets.

One aspect of our evolution into a major national charitable institution has been the development of the Receiver-General's position. This has grown from being a simple treasurer's job in 1941–42, when total Priory income amounted to just £418, until the point 70 years later when revenues exceeded \$8 million. Even allowing for inflation, there has been an enormous growth in revenue. Such growth, together with the commensurate increase in the complexity of the Priory's finances, has imposed a progressively heavier burden of work and responsibility on successive Receivers-General. Shepherding Priory revenues in recent decades has demanded a high level of financial and managerial expertise, especially during the global financial crises that we have confronted. Not surprisingly, the later Receivers-General have all come from a business management background.

The chief responsibilities and attendant duties of the Receivers-General are set out in Section 14(1) of the Priory's constitution, the Rules of St John Ambulance Australia. In brief, the Rules reduce to five functions, specifying that the Receiver-General shall be:

- a. the principal financial adviser to the Priory and head of its treasury
- b. assisted and advised by the Risk and Compliance Committee and Budget Subcommittee of the Board of Directors
- c. responsible to the Prior for the Priory's financial affairs
- d. empowered to investigate and advise the Prior and Chancellor on any matter relevant to the Priory's financial affairs
- e. responsible for keeping books of account and producing annual statements of income and expenditure and balance sheets that will be reported to the Priory Chapter.

Despite the increasing burden of its workload, the position of Receiver-General has been one of the most stable of all the Priory Officer appointments. Only seven people have filled the portfolio in the 73 years since the first effective national federal organisation for St John, the Commandery of the Commonwealth of Australia (exclusive of Western Australia), was established in 1941. The seven Receivers-General to date have been as follows:

1. Dr (later Sir) John Newman Morris, 1941–1957
2. Major-General Sir Samuel Roy Burston, 1957–1960
3. Commander (later Sir) Neville Drake Pixley, 1961–1985
4. Mr William P Harrington, 1985–1995
5. Mr John L Messenger, 1996–2005
6. Professor Mark R Compton, 2005–2013.
7. Mr Glen Brewer, from 2013.

The average period of office for the Receiver-Generals has been 12 years; however, there has been considerable variation around that mean, largely skewed by one incumbent. The longest serving incumbent was Sir Neville Pixley (24 years); the shortest period of office was that of Sir Roy Burston, who died in office after only three years. He took up the position on the death of the previous incumbent, Sir John Newman-Morris. Newman-Morris and Burston have been the only two of the seven Receivers-General to have died in office.

As well as the seven Receivers-General, two other people have served extended periods as Assistant or Deputy Receiver-General. Mr Gordon Lethbridge King (1904–1981), a descendant of the third Governor of New South Wales, Philip Gidley King) was Assistant Receiver-General for nine years (1969–1978) during Pixley's incumbency; Sir Harold Aston (1923–2005), the director of the textile manufacturers Bonds Coats Patons Ltd, was Deputy Receiver-General for eight years (1987–1995) during Harrington's incumbency. As King would have been 74 in 1978 and Aston 72 in 1995, they were perhaps deemed too old to take over as Receiver-General when the position became vacant. Apart from King and Aston, only one other person has been Assistant Receiver-General. This was Bill

Harrington, who held the Assistant's position for seven years (1978–1985) as understudy to Sir Neville Pixley and then became the only Assistant who moved up to fill the Receiver-General's portfolio.

In mentioning Sir Neville Pixley, I should point out that his incumbency of eight triennia, 24 years, as Receiver-General is a record that seems unlikely to be surpassed. The reason for that is the policy of the Board of Directors, which is now to allow Priory Officers to serve for a maximum of three triennia only. 'Sir Nev', as he was affectionately known, was a great servant of the Priory. It was therefore no surprise when he was appointed Priory Vice-Chancellor, a position he held concurrently with that of Receiver-General during his last eight years as a Priory Officer. During this period he was also promoted within the Order to Bailiff Grand Cross (GCStJ), becoming only the third Australian in 100 years to be elevated to Grade I membership of the Order.

Turning now to the other five Receivers-General up to May 2013, I will briefly outline their careers, doing so in the order in which they held office.

Sir John Newman-Morris KStJ (1879–1957)

After completing his medical degree at the University of Melbourne, John Newman Morris worked as a general practitioner before specialising in surgery. He also became heavily involved in medical politics as a member of the British Medical Association, the forerunner of the Australian Medical Association, of which he was president of the Victorian branch for some years during the 1930s. In addition he joined many charitable and philanthropic organisations. At one time, during the 1940s, he was an office-bearer in no fewer than 30 charitable organisations, of many of which he was president. Perhaps his most significant appointment was as Chairman of Australian Red Cross, a position he held from 1944 until his death in 1957. Another of his key appointments was that of inaugural Treasurer of the Australian Commandery of the Order of St John in 1941; he then continued on as Treasurer when the Commandery was upgraded to Priory status in 1946. His title changed to Receiver-General in 1954, and so it has remained ever since. He held it until his death and his incumbency of 16 years is the second longest.



Major General Sir Samuel Roy Burston KStJ (1888–1960)

'Ginger' Burston (as his friends called him) also graduated in medicine from the University of Melbourne, before settling in Adelaide, where he specialised as a physician and spent the rest of his professional career. He was also a citizen soldier, having joined the part-time Army Medical Corps before World War I. He served with distinction in World War I then continued in the part-time Army between the two World Wars. At the beginning of World War II in 1939 he was chosen to lead the Army Medical Service to the Middle East. On returning to Australia in early 1942 after the outbreak of the Pacific War, he commanded the Service for the rest of the war. In 1946 he was appointed the inaugural Chief Commissioner of the St John Ambulance Brigade when the Priory formed, having earlier been Commissioner in South Australia. He held the position until 1957, when he succeeded Newman-Morris as Receiver-General. He remained Receiver-General for the next three years, until his death in 1960.



Sir Neville Drake Pixley GCStJ (1905–1993)

As seen, 'Sir Nev' holds the record for time spent as Receiver-General, an extraordinary 24 years. It was during the later years of his incumbency that Priory revenues began growing rapidly. He was well-equipped to handle this because he had spent his civilian life in business management, mainly as a senior executive of major shipping lines. He was also a long-serving member of the Naval Reserve, which he eventually commanded. At the outbreak of World War II he joined the full-time Navy and subsequently served on



numerous ships. For the last year of the war he commanded the corvette HMAS *Bundaberg* in active service in New Guinea waters. Promoted to Commander in 1945, he continued his part-time career in the Naval Reserve. In addition to his Naval involvements, 'Sir Nev' had a long-standing commitment to the St John Ambulance Association (Training Branch) from the early 1930s and had served on the Association's state councils in both NSW and WA.

Mr William Patrick Harrington KStJ (d. 2005)

As noted, WP ('Bill') Harrington spent seven years as Assistant Receiver-General understudying Sir Neville Pixley. The only Assistant to become Receiver-General, he took over from Pixley when 'Sir Nev' retired. Like Pixley, he was a business manager and during his tenure the revenues of the Priory continued their steep rise. He spent much of his business career as a senior executive with Publishing and Broadcasting Ltd, the Packer family's group of companies. He became a trusted lieutenant of Kerry Packer (1937–2005), who ran the firm for the three decades from the mid-1970s; and he worked as the managing director of various Packer companies.



Mr John Ian Messenger KStJ (1945–)

John Messenger served as Receiver-General for three triennia, 1996–2005. His original business experience was in insurance. He became a Certified Insurance Professional and a Senior Associate of the Australia and New Zealand Institute of Insurance and Finance. In a career in business spanning 50 years, he gained extensive insurance, property and risk management experience both in Australia and internationally. Key management positions he held included the managing director of MLC Insurance Limited, the chief executive officer of Corporate Risk Management for the Lend Lease Group, a non-executive director of the Investa Property Group, the deputy chairman of Territory Insurance Office and a non-executive director of the Calliden Group Limited.



Mr Messenger describes how he came into St John as follows:

I met Bill Harrington through a business relationship with Sir Harold Aston. They were looking for young blood with a commercial business background and a skill set to join the then Finance Committee of St John Ambulance Australia. Several meetings with them and Sir Neville Pixley and Charles Campbell [Priory Secretary 1975–97] persuaded me to join.

His expertise soon became apparent and so he was appointed to succeed Harrington as Receiver-General. He then spent the maximum possible time of three triennia in the position.

Professor Mark Raymond Compton KStJ (1961–)

Editor's note. this section of the article was written by Dr Ian Howie-Willis, not by Professor Compton. Dr Howie-Willis also presented this section at the Darwin History Seminar in May 2013.

Professor Compton originally trained in pharmacology but after experience in administrative positions in health care organisations and hospitals he graduated with an MBA from the Australian Graduate School of Management at the University of New South Wales. He then worked as the managing director and chief executive officer of a series of companies and institutions in the healthcare and life sciences fields, including Australian Securities Exchange listed companies and an international biotechnology pharmaceutical company. He is currently the CEO of St Luke's Care, an independent, not-for-profit charitable organisation that operates private hospital, aged care, retirement living and home care facilities. In addition he is an Adjunct Professor in Management at Macquarie University and sits on the



board of Macquarie University Hospital, Australia's first private teaching hospital, based on campus at Macquarie University, Sydney.

Professor Compton is unique among his predecessors as Receiver-General in having spent all his teenage years and adult life as a uniformed volunteer with the St John Event Health Services . A member of a four-generation St John family, his grandfather, father, uncle, brother and two sons have all been active Event Health Services members. He joined the Glebe Cadet Division the day after his 13th birthday and has remained an active and efficient Branch member for the 39 years since then. He gained his Grand Prior's Badge as a member of the Balmain Cadet Division in 1981, meanwhile climbing steadily through the divisional, regional, State and national Branch hierarchies. In the meantime, too, he was being promoted through the membership grades of the Order. Admitted as a Serving Brother at age 25, he was promoted to Knight at age 42. By this stage, he was Chair of the St John Council for New South Wales, a position he held for five years 1998–2003 before his appointment as Receiver-General in 2005.

That, however, was not the end of the Mark Compton story because in 2013 he was appointed Vice-Chancellor, an honour granted only to Sir Neville Pixley among the other five Receivers-General. Several months later, in March 2013 he was appointed Chancellor (Designate). He thus became the first Receiver-General to rise to the Chancellorship and the first of the eight Chancellors to have worked their way up from among the ranks of junior Cadets.

In ending this brief tour of the history of the Receiver-Generalship, we may consider some conclusions about the position. Most obviously, the position has been filled by men (hopefully a woman appointee is not far away) with advanced business management skills. Even Newman-Morris and Burston, the two medical practitioners to have held the position, were veteran directors of major institutional enterprises, and both were practised in the cut-and-thrust of medical politics as well as being skilled managers of large-scale institutional budgets. The other four Receivers-General, Pixley, Harrington, Messenger and Compton, all came to the job with a wealth of experience in business and corporate management.

Another obvious conclusion is that all were or became Grade 2 members of the Order, Knights of Grace, and in Pixley's case, a Grade 1 member, Bailiff Grand Cross. Two of them probably received accelerated promotion on the way to becoming KsStJ; however, that was an appropriate reward for performing their difficult, exacting role conspicuously well, to the great advantage of St John Ambulance Australia and the Order more generally.

Finally, we might ponder what motivated individual incumbents. Ambition was possibly a factor, but so too was a determination to serve the Order well by applying their advanced financial and managerial skills to its humanitarian cause. Pride in 'craftsmanship' was certainly a factor: having accepted the position, each incumbent was concerned to acquit himself well in the role. And then, too, there was certainly pride in worthwhile achievement. In raising the Priory's revenue and superintending its disbursement, each would have been acutely aware that the good works made possible through the Order's foundations ultimately depended on how well he performed his Receiver-General's duties. As each departed the position, we must hope that he went his way self-consciously aware of those Biblical words of approbation in Matthew 25:21, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant'; or in more contemporary prose, 'leaving the Order in better condition than when they were appointed'.