

The British Red Cross during the First World War

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Introduction

The British Red Cross was founded in response to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Colonel Robert Loyd-Lindsay, a war veteran who had himself experienced the horrors of war firsthand, believed that Britain should provide neutral aid to sick and wounded soldiers on both sides of the conflict. Mere days after the war broke out, the colonel penned a letter published in *The Times* newspaper on 22 July 1870 that called for the creation of a voluntary aid organisation in Britain to join the global Red Cross Movement. This appeal would resonate with several prominent figures in British society, precipitating many to donate generously toward the establishment of such an organisation.

Less than a month later, on 4 August 1870, a public meeting held in London led to a resolution mandating the creation of a National Red Cross Society in Britain to aid sick and wounded soldiers during wartime. Initially named the National Society for Aid to the Sick and Wounded in War, the Society was based upon the principles of the Geneva Convention and aptly adopted the red cross emblem. Surgeons and nurses were promptly deployed soon after its establishment and both medical equipment and cash donations were sent to help sick and injured soldiers of the Franco-Prussian War. Thus began the British Red Cross.

Following the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the British Red Cross once again took action to ease the suffering wrought by the war. The organisation formed the Joint War Committee with the Order of St. John to work collaboratively to fundraise, provide resources and services to people affected by the conflict, and organise Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) both in Britain and abroad. Auxiliary hospitals, convalescent homes, ambulances, and hospital trains were a few of the vital services provided to sick and wounded members of the armed forces as a result of these efforts. Hospital clothing and books were likewise given to the wounded while food parcels were sent to prisoners of war (POWs). The National Society also supported civilians displaced as a result of the conflict, caring for them in hospitals, setting up displacement camps, and providing clothing, medical supplies, and other essentials.

With the majority of men conscripted to fight on the front line, it was left mainly to women to lead efforts to provide vital aid to the sick and wounded. Out of more than ninety thousand British Red Cross VADs, around sixty-six thousand were women. Some refused to accept any monetary compensation at all, while many worked for nominal pay. Volunteers worked in various roles—as nurses, ambulance drivers, dispensers, orderlies, and, among others, searchers for the missing. Scores of women used their artistic talents to document and promote the work of the British Red Cross. By the end of the war, volunteers had demonstrated their importance in helping save lives in the wake of global conflict.

The British Red Cross entered a new phase in its history upon the closure of the First World War. As a founding member of the League of Red Cross Societies, now the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the British Red Cross petitioned for and obtained a supplemental charter that extended its objectives to include the improvement of health, the

prevention of disease, and the mitigation of suffering throughout the world. This enabled the charity to embark on a program of peacetime activities both in the UK and abroad.

In the years since, the British Red Cross has continued to play a vital role in times of conflict and peace. The organisation has upheld its mission to be here for humanity, providing aid before, during and after emergencies to those in need, regardless of who or where they are. This commitment to alleviating suffering and championing humanitarian values continues to resonate in today's world.

Voluntary Aid Detachments

In 1909, the War Office commissioned the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John to form Voluntary Aid Detachments to support territorial medical services during wartime. These teams, referred to as VADs, were composed of men and women who had successfully completed a comprehensive training program. While both men and women were required to pass first aid examinations, women also needed to pass nursing examinations—all qualifications that had to be renewed regularly.

Membership to these detachments surged during the first weeks of the First World War as people signed up to help provide relief. Eventually, on 24 October 1914, an agreement was drawn up forming the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John. These two organisations combined their resources to fundraise, train and recruit volunteers, and provide services to the sick and wounded.

Dame Katherine Furse was head of the VAD Department from 1915 until 1917, at which date Lady Ampthill assumed leadership. Viscount Chilston, nominated as chief county director to supervise the work of the VADs in the UK, served as the official liaison with the War Office.

VADs were dispatched throughout Britain and abroad, where they fulfilled a variety of essential services such as nursing, transporting patients and supplies, searching for missing soldiers, and organising Working Parties, rest stations, and hospitals. Women made up the majority of the more than 90,000 British Red Cross VADs, with 66,000 female volunteers filling the department's ranks. All of these individuals, but especially nurses and ambulance drivers, dealt with hazardous conditions, frequently working under shellfire and bombardment.

Prominent Individuals

Princess Sophia Duleep Singh (1876–1948)

Princess Sophia Alexandrovna Duleep Singh, the daughter of the last Maharajah of independent Punjab and goddaughter of Queen Victoria, was a well-known socialite in London and a prominent suffragette. Princess Duleep Singh joined the Women's Social and Political Union and led the Women's Tax Resistance League.

The princess dedicated much of her time volunteering with the British Red Cross during the war. Working as a VAD nurse at the Percy House Auxiliary Hospital in Isleworth and the Royal Pavilion Hospital in Brighton, she played an instrumental role in saving countless lives. Her work included nursing sick and wounded Indian soldiers and organising fundraising events for them.



▲ *Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, 1914–1918*



Vera Brittain (1893–1970)

Vera Brittain, a writer and campaigner, is best known for her memoir *Testament of Youth*, in which she reflects not only on her experiences working as a VAD in Britain, Malta, and France but also on the war's devastating impact on her family and friends. Brittain also shared her thoughts on the status of women in this memoir, highlighting the vital role they played during the war.

◀ *Vera Brittain, 1914–1918*



Angela, Countess of Limerick (1897–1981)

Too young for VAD overseas service when the war began, Angela Trotter falsified her age to nurse the wounded in France. This marked the beginning of her journey with the Red Cross, with whom she worked for sixty years, eventually being awarded the Henry Dunant Medal for outstanding service in 1975.

◀ *Angela, Countess of Limerick, c. 1914–1918*



Princess Mary (1897–1965)

Princess Mary, at the age of seventeen, played an active role in assisting those affected by the war, visiting hospitals and welfare organisations and working as a VAD at London's Great Ormond Street Hospital. After more than a decade of dedicated involvement, she was appointed the first commandant-in-chief of British Red Cross VADs in 1926.

◀ *Princess Mary with her mother Queen Mary, 1914–1918*

Dr. John Alcindor (1873–1924)

Dr. John Alcindor was a physician and activist for racial equality who, having been born in Trinidad, personally overcame discrimination to aid others during the war. Despite holding a medical degree from Edinburgh University and years of experience working in several London hospitals, Dr. Alcindor was initially rejected by the Royal Army Medical Corps because of his origin. Undeterred, he joined the British Red Cross as a volunteer, where he treated countless wounded soldiers at London railway stations upon their return from the battlefield. As a testament to his dedicated service, Dr. Alcindor was awarded a Red Cross medal for his tireless and life-saving efforts in treating injured soldiers.



▲ *Dr. John Alcindor, c. 1914*

Edward Morgan Forster (1879–1970)

Edward Forster, a British social and literary critic, novelist, and essayist, joined the British Red Cross during the First World War. As a searcher in the Egyptian port city of Alexandria, his role involved interviewing wounded hospital patients to gather information on the whereabouts of soldiers reported missing.



▲ *Edward Morgan Forster, c. 1924*



▲ *Group of ambulance drivers next to Red Cross ambulances in France, c. 1914–1918*

Women War Artists

Women led aid efforts directed to the sick and wounded, as most men were conscripted to fight on the front line during the First World War. Working as a VAD was a transformative experience for many, especially for the women who, having been freed from family and social constraints, gained access to occupations traditionally reserved for men. The First World War was a turning point for women's status in British society, with some women being given the right to vote for the first time in the UK in 1918.

Although women are often celebrated for caring for the sick and wounded, their artistic contributions are often overlooked. Many women used their creative talents to promote and memorialise the work done by the British Red Cross. These women played an integral role in interpreting and documenting the conflict, capturing the impact of the war and the experiences of women who carried out humanitarian work both in Britain and abroad.

Joyce Dennys (1893–1991)

Joyce Dennys designed this well-known VAD recruitment poster for the First World War. It lists different VAD positions and features members of the British Red Cross, Order of St. John, and Territorial Force. The response to the poster is believed to have been so great that no other VAD recruitment poster was deemed necessary.

Dennys was an illustrator, playwright, and author of the book *Henrietta's War*. She decided to volunteer to help those in need when her art studies were interrupted at the war's outbreak. She served as a VAD with the British Red Cross from 1914 to 1917.



◀ *VAD are urgently needed*

*Artist: Joyce Dennys
(1893–1991)*

Poster, 1915

Marion Saumarez (1885–1978)

This painting depicts a British Red Cross VAD and a trained nurse treating a patient, Mr. Worpe, in Shrubland Park Hall in Suffolk. The Saumarez family loaned Shrubland Park Hall for use as a hospital during the First World War, making it one of the thousands of auxiliary hospitals administered and staffed by the British Red Cross during the war. The Red Cross had made preparations during peacetime to identify suitable properties for conversion into hospitals in the event that a war broke out.



▲ *Shrubland Park Hospital*. Artist: Marion Saumarez (1885–1978). Oil on board, c. 1918

A call was issued for women to join the medical profession as more of their male counterparts enlisted in the armed forces and the number of injured people increased. Women predominantly managed the day-to-day affairs of auxiliary hospitals and VADs carried out duties that, albeit less technical, were no less important than those performed by trained nurses.

The artist Marion Saumarez served as a British Red Cross VAD nurse in Shrubland Hall together with her sisters. Gladys Saumarez served as the quartermaster and Evelyn Saumarez as the commandant.

Olive Mudie-Cooke (1890–1925)

Although women artists were not officially commissioned to enter the war zone during the First World War, several found themselves close to the front line while working in hospitals



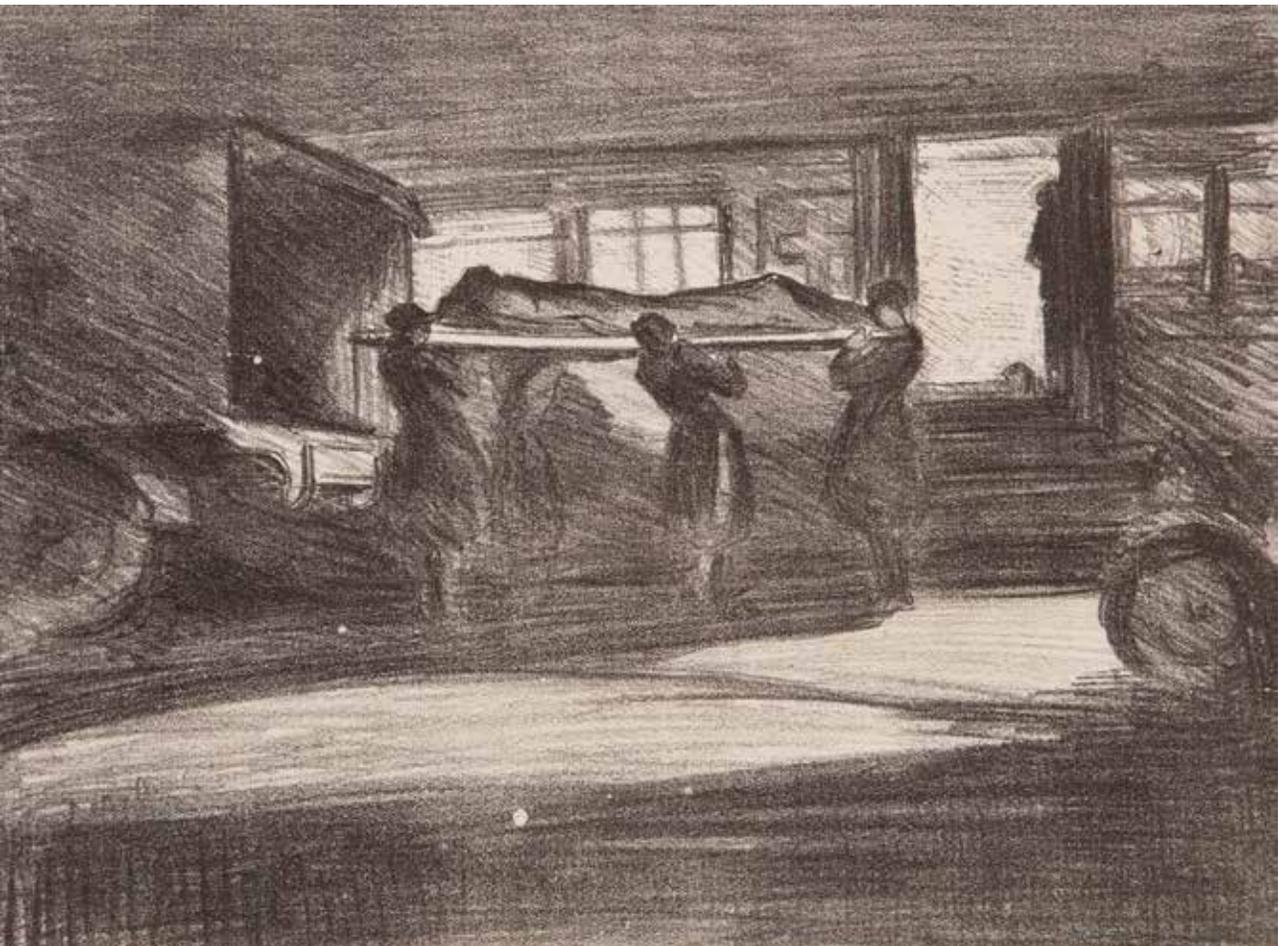
◀ *Ambulance driver*

*Artist: Olive Mudie-Cooke
(1890–1925)*

Pencil sketch, c. 1920–1921

and ambulance units. The first convoy of female VAD drivers arrived in France in April 1916, where they proved so successful that a further 110 drivers were dispatched to Étaples.

Olive Mudie-Cooke worked in France and Italy from 1916, driving ambulances for the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry and later the British Red Cross. Fluent in English, French, Italian, and German, she also worked as an interpreter for the Red Cross. Mudie-Cooke sketched and painted the scenes she witnessed, including ambulance drivers and medical staff on the job. Her art depicts the humanitarian work undertaken by British Red Cross volunteers close to the front line. The Imperial War Museum's Women's Work Sub-Committee acquired several of her works of art.



▲ *Camiers: VAD convoy unloading an ambulance train at night after the Battle of the Somme*

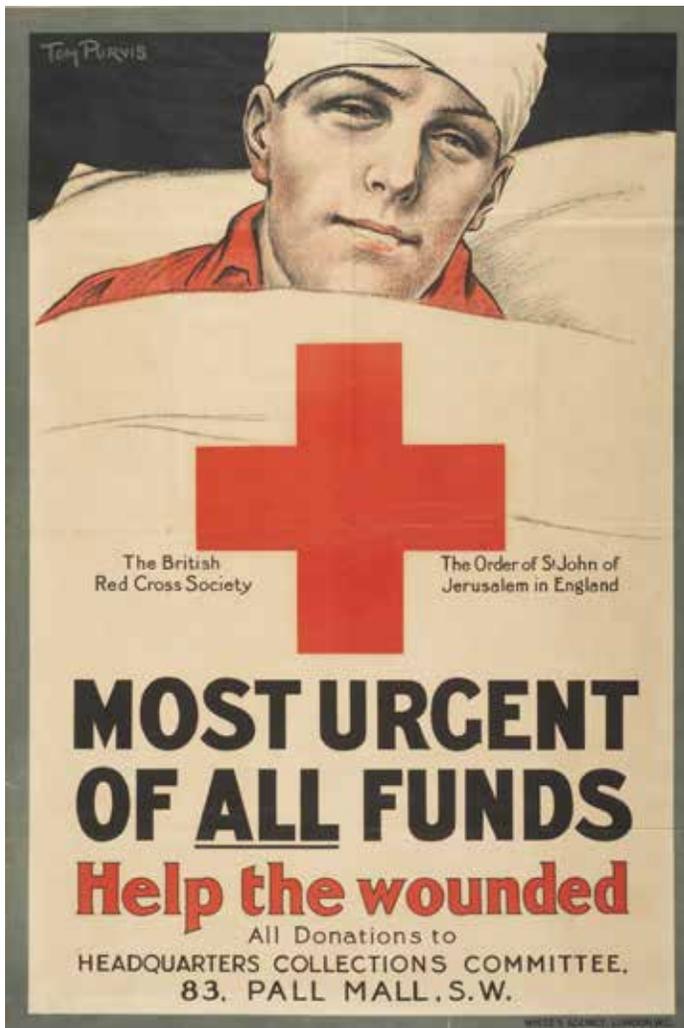
Artist: Olive Mudie-Cooke (1890–1925)

Lithograph, c. 1920–1921

Fundraising

Fundraising was crucial for the Joint War Committee to sustain its operations and deliver essential services to aid those in need throughout the First World War. Money and in-kind donations were collected through various fundraising initiatives, supporting hospitals, medicine, clothing, grants, and aftercare for the sick and wounded.

Posters were widely used by the British Red Cross during the war to appeal to the public for funds. They promoted the charity's work and raised awareness of the needs of the sick and wounded. The artist Tom Purvis, one of the most important English poster artists of his day, was commissioned by the Joint War Committee in 1915 to design several fundraising posters.



◀ *Most urgent of all funds*
Poster, 1915

Artist: Tom Purvis (1888–1959)

The Times Fund was a fundraising campaign which involved the newspaper giving a significant amount of free advertising space to the British Red Cross almost daily throughout the war. All funds raised contributed towards services to support sick and wounded servicemen. The total raised by the campaign was around £16.5 million, equivalent to roughly £800 million today.

Charity shops—or, as they were known at the time, gift houses—were effective in raising money for relief work. On 22 May 1916, a gift house (possibly at 48 Pall Mall in London) was opened where gifts were donated and then purchased. In February 1918, a gift house opened at 92 Kensington High Street in London, lent to the British Red Cross free of charge. The profits were shared between the Red Cross' Kensington division and the Kensington war hospital supply depot. A Red Cross shop at 39 Old Bond Street was a popular place to shop for souvenirs and gifts following the armistice.

A Red Cross fundraising event called *Our Day* was organised for the first time in 1915 and continued annually throughout the war. This initiative drew inspiration from Queen Alexandra's *Rose Day*, during which the public supported the Queen by purchasing flowers to raise funds for her favorite charities. Street collectors sold flags that had been ordered and sourced centrally during *Our Day*, with small flags sold for a penny and silk flags for sixpence. In addition to selling flags, local events such as concerts and market stalls served as venues for fundraising.



▲ *Alexandra Rose Day at Netley Hospital, 1916*

Individuals from other parts of the British Empire contributed funds for the charity. Canadian women residing in London sold tinted maple leaves, while women from New Zealand sold kiwi badges. Australian sellers sold special Australian flags and leather kangaroos. By the end of the war, approximately £8 million (≈£400m today) had been raised through Our Days.

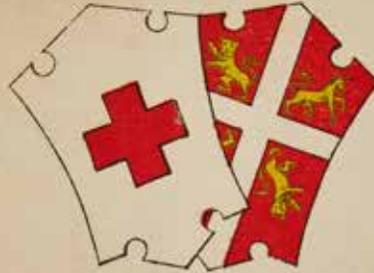
Christie's London-based auction house organised several events where jewellery and other valuable items donated to the British Red Cross were auctioned for charity. A total of seven auctions were held during which silver, porcelain, embroidery, jewellery, and works of art by well-known artists such as George Fredrick Watts and Max Beerbohm were sold.

Christie's played a pivotal role in the high-profile Red Cross Pearls Appeal, a campaign driven by Lady Mary Northcliffe, the wife of the owner of the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*. These newspapers amplified the initiative's reach by appealing to the public for pearls to create a necklace, which would be sold through a lottery and whose proceeds would be used to aid sick and wounded servicemen. While the British Red Cross had initially intended to collect enough pearls for a single necklace, the overwhelming generosity of donors resulted in plans to craft multiple pearl necklaces. An exhibition of the pearls held at the Grafton Galleries in Mayfair, London, from 22 June to 1 July 1918 attracted more than sixteen thousand people and resulted in nearly three hundred additional pearls being donated. The pearls, which ranged from priceless heirlooms to treasured trinkets, were generously donated by various women from across Great Britain. Some women gave single pearls in memory of loved ones lost during the war, while others came together to contribute one pearl on behalf of their communities. Many pearls were also donated as a tribute to the nurses and VADs who had served during the war.

Although the House of Commons rejected a bill to allow a lottery for these pearls, the necklaces were auctioned with help from Christie's. Nearly four thousand pearls were donated to the appeal, enough to make forty-one pearl necklaces. The necklaces were sold at an auction on 19 December 1918, raising around £85,000 (≈£4m today). The amount raised by the appeal totaled approximately £100,000 (≈£5m today).

The Pearl Necklace Appeal officially came to an end on 23 May 1919 when Lady Mary Northcliffe presented a cheque to the then-president of the Red Cross Pearl Necklace Committee, Princess Victoria. The money raised for the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John helped cover the costs associated with the rehabilitation of soldiers following the end of the war.

Miss Elizabeth Asquith, daughter of former British Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith, established the Red Cross Gold and Silver Fund in April 1918. The fund aimed to collect and sell gold and silver to raise money for the British Red Cross. While broken or useless items were melted down, a silver tankard inlaid with gold from the King was sold for £1,000. In addition, a teapot and stand were given by the Queen. The fund raised around £53,000, equivalent to roughly £3 million today.



THE RED CROSS PEARLS

THE
BRITISH RED CROSS SOCIETY

AND THE

ORDER OF THE HOSPITAL OF
ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM
IN ENGLAND

SALE
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19th, 1918

CATALOGUE PRICE TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE
(Sold for the benefit of the above Societies)

▲ *The Red Cross Pearls auction catalogue, 1918*

A need was identified to provide relief to POWs, and the British Red Cross began a service to pack and dispatch parcels containing food and other items to British POWs overseas. These packages were made possible by the Central Prisoners of War Fund, and donations from the public reached around £675,000 (≈£33m today). By November 1918, the Packing Department was dispatching over 47,000 parcels a month.

Hospitals

The British Red Cross administered thousands of auxiliary hospitals and convalescent homes for wounded servicemen in Britain during the First World War. At the outbreak of the war, the Joint War Committee and the War Office were inundated with offers of buildings that could be used as hospitals. These properties included town halls, schools, and both large and small private houses. While the Joint War Committee established suitable locations into auxiliary hospitals, the War Office provided grants to take care of patients housed there.

The auxiliary hospitals were affiliated with central military hospitals and provided care for patients without life-threatening injuries but who needed a place to convalesce. These hospitals were usually overseen by a commandant responsible for the entirety of hospital's operations excluding medical and nursing services. Staff included a quartermaster who managed the receipt, custody, and distribution of supplies; a matron who supervised the nursing staff; and VAD members trained in first aid and home nursing. While local women from the neighborhood often volunteered part-time, it was often necessary to supplement volunteer work with paid staff, such as cooks. The War Office eventually decided to offer compensation to some of the local medics who had also volunteered in the hospitals for their services.

Volunteers and staff also travelled to work overseas throughout the world, including France, Belgium, Serbia, Malta, Italy, Russia, Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), and Northern Persia (modern Iran). Surgeon General Sir Alfred Keogh, the chief commissioner of the British Red Cross overseas commission, arrived in Brussels on 19 August 1914 to inspect the newly arrived unit composed of ten surgeons, ten dressers, and twenty trained nurses. Keogh held discussions in Paris with the French Red Cross and the British ambassador, leading to the opening of four hospitals in the city that month in line with the ambassador's recommendations. In addition, a hospital containing three hundred beds opened in Rouen in September to treat officers and provide accommodation for patients' relatives. The Joint War Committee managed a number of other hospitals in France, including in Le Touquet, Abbeville, Wimereux, Étaples, and Le Tréport.

Six doctors and twelve orderlies were dispatched to Serbia in October 1914, followed by a second unit to Vrnjačka Banja in 1915. The second unit included five surgeons, one matron, six trained nurses, seven VAD members, and nine orderlies. Given the high number of typhus cases at the time, it was initially decided to focus on treating those patients only. Although

the typhus epidemic gradually subsided, it became necessary to treat civilians in addition to soldiers. Unfortunately, several members of the unit in Serbia were taken as POWs. After first being transferred to Kruševac and then to Belgrade, they were allowed to return to England in March 1916.

On 19 January 1915, a Joint War Committee hospital unit from England left for Montenegro. Dr. Clemow, accompanied by two doctors, two trained nurses, two VAD members, and four orderlies, assumed command of a military hospital housing 126 patients upon arrival to Montenegro. However, it became necessary to evacuate the hospital that November.

As the situation escalated in the Mediterranean, military hospital bases were established in Malta, Egypt, and Mudros (on the Greek island of Lemnos). The ever-rising number of sick and wounded created a shortage of available hospital beds. In response, dedicated volunteers worked tirelessly to meet the increasing demands, leading to the recruitment of additional staff from the Malta St. John Ambulance Brigade.



▲ Oakley VAD Hospital in Kent, UK, 1914–1918



▲ VAD hospital in Gournay, France, 1916

Relief Supplies

The Stores Department of the Joint War Committee played a crucial role in providing hospital equipment and other resources. A store was established in the stables of Devonshire House in London within a few days of the outbreak of war to receive and distribute in-kind donations. As goods continued to pour in, an additional store opened in the cellars of 83 Pall Mall in London followed by other locations to respond to the department's growing needs. Sir William Garstin and Mr. James Caulfield Goff served as this department's director and general manager, respectively. The department provided medical and first aid items, lamps, stoves, hot water bottles, tea urns, coal, tents, beds, hospital clothing, and various other much-needed supplies. Large quantities of equipment were sent across Britain and overseas, including France, Switzerland, Malta, Romania, and Salonika (modern Thessalonika), as well as further afield to Egypt, Mesopotamia, Uganda, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Russia, and India.

The department also supplied serum and vaccines for Red Cross personnel sent abroad and arrangements were made with doctors to administer vaccinations locally. Perishable food and tinned products were made available to meet the demands of hospitals in Britain and abroad. In addition, collars and chains were provided for the teams of dogs that brought in the wounded on sleighs from the North Russian Front.

Working Parties began forming across the country as soon as the war began to organise the supply of hospital clothing. In addition to ensuring that patients had the socks, shirts, belts, and other clothing they needed, Working Parties manufactured bandages, splints, swabs, and other essential medical items. To better coordinate the Working Parties, the Joint War Committee established Central Work Rooms in 1915. Work Rooms were charged with registering and coordinating existing sources of hospital supplies, creating new procurement opportunities, and serving as a central hub of information for special hospital needs and urgent supplies. Hospital and surgical equipment patterns were distributed to ensure uniformity and workers received training to organise and lead Working Parties effectively. Work Rooms were likewise tasked with registering homeworkers—individuals unable to participate in existing Working Parties because of illness or distance.

It had become necessary to supply reading materials to the sick and wounded after the war broke out. One soldier in Egypt explained the need for reading materials in a letter he wrote:

All we have to read here is a scrap of the advertisement page of the *Daily Telegraph* which I picked up in the desert, and on it we saw that you send books to sick and wounded. Please hurry up and send us some.¹

Founded in August 1914 by Helen Mary Gaskell, honorary secretary of the library, and her brother Beresford Melville, treasurer of the library, the Red Cross War Library initially began as the British War Library. Sir Charles Hagberg Wright, librarian of the London Library, along with five of his staff members, advised on the best method for classifying and circulating books. Based at Surrey House in Marble Arch, London, the library's mission was to supply books and newspapers to the navy, army, and associated hospitals. In response to an urgent public appeal, thousands of books were generously donated by various people from around the country.

The library was renamed as the British Red Cross Society and Order of St. John War Library when, in 1915, the Joint War Committee was asked to assume financial responsibility for it. The library provided, free of charge, books and magazines to sick and wounded soldiers and sailors in hospitals and hospital ships at home and abroad. The books were distributed in packages to France, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Malta, Salonika, Italy, India, and other conflict areas. By the end of the war, over four million books had been distributed through the library, of which 1,237,246 books were bought for the library and another 2,889,233 were received as gifts.

¹ See Oliver, Beryl. *The British Red Cross in Action*. Faber and Faber Limited, 1966. p. 305.



▲ *British Red Cross store in Étapes, 1914-1918*

Transport

The Motor Ambulance Department of the Joint War Committee used hospital trains, motor ambulances, and motor launches to transport the wounded by rail, road, or water. The widespread use of motor ambulances was among the many innovations introduced during the First World War. The British Red Cross used motorised ambulances to transport the wounded for the first time during this conflict, replacing the slow and jarring horse-drawn vehicles that would exacerbate the suffering of injured soldiers as they were rocked and shaken along the way.

Efficient and comfortable transportation methods to carry the wounded to hospitals and rest stations were determined to be needed. As such, on 12 September 1914, a meeting was held at the Royal Automobile Club where members volunteered both their cars and themselves as drivers to the Red Cross. Following this, Dr. Edward Stewart was sent to Boulogne to search for wounded men with eight motor ambulances, six motor cars, and their drivers. *The Times* appealed for funds on behalf of the British Red Cross in October 1914, raising enough for 512 vehicles within three weeks. By the end of the war, a total of 3,446 motor vehicles had been sent to various destinations.

In addition to providing vehicles to transport the wounded, the Motor Ambulance Department supplied specially-equipped units with x-ray machines, dental facilities, soup kitchens, and laboratories. Lorries and cars were also used for communication between the Joint War Committee bases and services across France and Belgium.

Male volunteers worked as ambulance drivers both in Britain and overseas, with men on the home front often dividing their time between serving as local ambulance drivers and working as night orderlies in auxiliary hospitals. As more men were enlisted in the armed services, however, the need for women to volunteer as ambulance drivers emerged. The first convoy with women VAD ambulance drivers was established in the France commune of Étretat in April 1916, when twelve female VADs carried out an evacuation in connection with the hospital and camps in that area. This proved so successful that a further 110 female drivers were sent to Étapes and additional drivers to Le Tréport, Wimereux, and Saint-Omer. Although driving motor vehicles had previously been considered inappropriate for women, the war changed attitudes toward women as they successfully carried out jobs traditionally undertaken by men.



▲ Ambulance drivers in Étapes, France, c. 1916

A close relationship developed between the British Red Cross and the Friends' Ambulance Unit. The Friends' largely depended on the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John for vehicles to supplement their small fleet. Their work also included staffing the Red Cross ambulance trains and hospital ships. Ernest Proctor was one of the men who volunteered with the Friends' Ambulance Unit attached to the Red Cross. A conscientious objector, Proctor volunteered as an orderly to support the life-saving work of the Red Cross during the war. Proctor was also a professional artist who documented his experiences during the war by producing a series of artwork.



▲ *Joint War Committee ambulance depot at Étapes, France. Artist: Ernest Proctor (1886–1935). Gouache painting, 1919*

The 1899 Princess Christian Hospital Train, the first purpose-built hospital train in Britain, was designed by Sir John Furley and named after Queen Victoria's daughter, the chair of the British Red Cross Ladies' Committee. Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, née Princess Helena of the United Kingdom, helped fund the construction of this train, which was used during the Second Boer War to distribute relief items and transport the wounded to Cape

Town. The 1915 Princess Christian Hospital Train (No. 15) used during the First World War was supplemented by the No. 11 train—the Red Cross commissioner converted from existing French rolling stock. In addition, the UK Flour Millers' Association presented the Red Cross with two specially built and equipped ambulance trains (Nos. 16 and 17), constructed by Great Western and Great Eastern Railways.

Motor launches were also required to transport the wounded, Red Cross personnel, and supplies. The British Red Cross sent three motor launches to serve in Mesopotamia on the Tigris during the summer of 1915. Following this, the Motor Launch Section of the Ambulance Department was formed to organise further launches in August 1915. A total of thirty-three Red Cross launches were in operation in Mesopotamia by the end of 1916 and four river motor launches were sent to the Dardanelles. In addition, six specially equipped motor launches, known as pulling boats, were provided to evacuate the Gallipoli beaches while the Red Cross hospital ship Nabha made rounds carrying patients between Basra and Baghdad from May 1917.

Refugees and Displacement

The First World War displaced an estimated ten million people around the world. The Joint War Committee organised a refugee service for displaced people that continued after the war had concluded. The service included caring for civilians in hospitals, setting up displacement camps, and providing food, clothing, medical equipment, and essential items. Volunteers from the British Red Cross supported refugees in France, Belgium, Egypt, Palestine, Salonika, Corfu, Mesopotamia, and Northern Persia. Additional work was carried out in Switzerland and Malta, particularly after the armistice.

As Enteric fever spread among Belgian refugees in 1915, British Red Cross trained nurses were sent to care for patients in a hospital near Saint-Omer. Trained nurses were also sent to assist the Friends' Ambulance Unit, after it opened a hut-hospital at Malo-les-Bains. Attached to this hospital was the Isle of Wight barge hospital on the Dunkirk canal, which provided accommodation for twenty-six patients, all of whom were Belgian refugees.

A rest station was opened in Boulogne to provide food to French and Belgian refugees fleeing the bombardments. British Red Cross volunteers served at the rest station, which fed over ten thousand people between March and June 1918.

Volunteers also supported some of the 250,000 Belgian refugees forced to flee to Britain. One of the many volunteers was Hedvica Shlehover, who enrolled as a member of the London/38 branch of the British Red Cross in September 1914. Shlehover undertook various duties, including caring for Belgian refugees.



▲ *Refugees leaving Ham, 1918*



▲ Miss Hedvica M. Shlehover. Artist: Hans Knoechl
(1850–1927). Oil on canvas, 1916

The British Red Cross contributed funds to help refugees who had arrived in Salonika after travelling over the mountains in Serbia and Albania. The aid helped prevent the spread of diseases and provided much-needed food, water, clothing, and other supplies to people in desperate need. Large numbers of civilians were displaced as opposing armies advanced and retreated across Mesopotamia and Northern Persia. Red Cross supply depots in Northern Persia provided refugee camps with food, clothing, and medical equipment to treat dysentery, fever, and influenza. In addition, refugees travelling through Switzerland from Austria, Poland, and Hungary were provided bags of washing supplies and clothing as many only had the clothes they were wearing.

Following the armistice, Allied POWs were transferred to Egypt to return home, and hundreds of civilian refugees travelled on the repatriation ships along with them. The British Red Cross gave food, clothing, and other essential items to the department responsible for these civilians in Egypt.

Post-War Rehabilitation

The armistice of November 1918 did not end the work that the British Red Cross performed caring for sick and wounded servicemen, many of whom had been suffering from shell shock or left with physical disabilities. The organisation's post-war services involved running several auxiliary hospitals and convalescent homes for patients who had yet to recover enough to return home. Several of these establishments were managed in collaboration with the Order of St. John.

One of the vital aftercare services for wounded soldiers was the provision of artificial limbs. By 1918, although many men needed permanent artificial limbs, they faced a lengthy waiting period before having their permanent limbs fitted. In response, the British Red Cross began supplying provisional artificial limbs, and by December 1919, the Provisional Limbs Department had produced 11,750 of them.

Another useful post-war service of the Joint War Committee was the provision of orthopedic centers. In 1918, a grant of £10,000 was given by the Joint War Committee to the Military Orthopaedic Hospital in Shepherd's Bush in London. The funding went toward the establishment of treatment departments within the hospital, including operating theaters and hydro-therapeutic, electro-therapeutic, massage, and plaster clinics. Centers were also set up in other parts of the country, such as in Liverpool and Leeds.

Manuel II (the last king of Portugal), working in collaboration with the surgeon Sir Robert Jones, supported the work of the Joint War Committee during and after the war by visiting orthopedic centers throughout the country. His main focus was on the importance of curative workshops, which involved training men in a handicraft of their choice as part of their recovery treatment. There were workshops for numerous subjects, including carpentry, tailoring, general and electrical engineering, painting, commercial photography, fretwork, plumbing, ironworking, printing, sign writing, splint-making, and shoemaking. The workshops allowed men to retrain for a new career and exercise injured limbs simultaneously. It was hoped the work would help to improve the patient's mental health. Embroidery became a popular form of occupational therapy for convalescing men and the works of art produced were often given to the VADs caring for them.



◀ *This embroidered cloth was created by a soldier recovering in a hospital. It was given as a gift to Florence Baker, a VAD nurse.*

The medical loan service established by the Joint War Committee to support sick and wounded servicemen temporarily loaned wheelchairs and other medical equipment. After the war, the British Red Cross found itself with a surplus of hospital equipment that it sought to put to good use. In response to doctors' requests to borrow bed rests and wheelchairs, the organisation established medical loan depots. Beyond this surplus, additional equipment was made available for weekly hire. The medical loan service, now called the Mobility Aids Service of the British Red Cross, has grown to become the UK's largest provider of short-term wheelchairs.

The 1918 Influenza Pandemic

Considered the deadliest global pandemic in history, the 1918 influenza claimed an estimated 50 to 100 million lives worldwide. An appeal was made by the British Red Cross chief county director to recruit and train volunteers to help treat patients with influenza at the outbreak of the pandemic. Joyce Sapwell, a British Red Cross VAD nurse, wrote about her experiences working in a hospital in France during this health emergency in her memoir:

About one-third of the staff were down with it, and the hospital was full. We had one hundred and eight deaths in eight weeks... I had not even one orderly to help. Several patients became delirious, and if they got out of bed, they usually died. I had to go from one ward to the other all night long... This was a very hectic time, on the go all night.²

Despite the dangers, volunteers continued to care for the sick and wounded, many of whom caught the virus while nursing patients. One of these volunteers was Miss Allwood, whose obituary states that she "died on 11th November from pneumonia following influenza contracted while on duty in the Auxiliary Red Cross Hospital, Louth. She was an excellent and devoted voluntary worker at the hospital, and was loved and trusted by all.

The British Red Cross Stores Department was in great demand during the pandemic, distributing large numbers of medical supplies to hospitals across the country and overseas. During the autumn and winter of 1918, French and Belgian medical units in military rest stations, inundated by patients suffering from influenza, requested four hundred beds from the British Red Cross.

British Red Cross VADs stationed in French hospitals faced an overwhelming workload, treating not only patients suffering from influenza but also large convoys of severely wounded men arriving from the front lines. When a severe outbreak of influenza swept across Swiss soldiers in November 1918, the British Red Cross extended its support, providing food, towels, clothing, and other relief items.

² Sapwell, Joyce. *Reminiscences of a VAD in two World Wars*. 1977.

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described. We should add, however, that no report by Mrs. Harker was given, but merely extracts from letters she had received from V.A.D. members referring to their personal experience. No attempt to give an account of the Hospital itself was made.

According to the *American Red Cross Bulletin*, a request was lately received by the American Red Cross Society to provide a *dot* for an intending bridegroom in the following terms: "I am on the point of getting married, and should like to know whether you could help me slightly in a financial way, as all my relatives are in invaded Belgium, and the only money I have is my army pay. My fiancée is as poor as I am. She is a refugee at St. Brieux."

The *Nursing Times* says—

It is possible that some trained nurses are thinking that, with the signing of the armistice, the work of the war is over; but we are asked to remind them that the Joint War Committee Hospitals are as numerous as ever, and sisters holding a three years' certificate and staff nurses holding a two years' certificate are urgently needed for home service. Applications should be made to Miss Swift, 93, Pall Mall, London, S.W.

The *Daily Telegraph* suggests that V.A.D. members with nursing experience would be invaluable as aids to doctors and nurses in country districts. This is a suggestion which has often been made, and one great merit which it possesses is that it can be carried out voluntarily by whomsoever it is approved. There is nursing and nursing. V.A.D. members would be quite unsuitable to take charge of the nursing of many complicated surgical and medical cases. But who, in these times, has not felt the want of an "aid" in simple cases of illness where all that is required is ordinary help in the sick room? For the want of such help lives have been lost during the past months, and we read of a doctor with seven latchkeys of houses where there was no-one to answer the door owing to influenza having prostrated all the inmates.

Princess Mary visited the Continent last month in order to see the working of the V.A.D. and other women's organizations in France. During her stay she visited various hospitals, convalescent homes, rest stations, clubs, and hostels. Her Royal Highness, who has herself qualified as a V.A.D. member, was much impressed by the extent and variety of the work overseas in which so many women are engaged.

We regret to announce the deaths of Miss Ethel Dunning, Cheshire/28, Mrs. Parkinson, Breconshire/2, Miss Sollars, Worcester/52, Miss Maud Helena Allwood, Lincoln/26, Miss Margaret Carew, Devon/70, Miss Gwladys Bell, Hereford/16, Miss Dora Phillips, Warwick/38, Mrs. Mabel Florence Stuart-Richardson, Herts/38, Mrs. Mary Ann Hunt, Lincs./68, Miss Hannah Wilson, Cumberland/10, Miss Edith Cosham, Warwick/70, Miss M. O. E. Owen, Warwick/28, Miss Phyllis Park Crump, Cornwall/68, Miss Dora Helen Craven, Leicester/28, Miss Doris May Drodge, Devon Reserve, B.R.C.S., Miss Winifred Furlong, Essex/106, B.R.C.S., Miss Anstice Fairfax Harvey, Dorset/86, B.R.C.S., Miss Bertha Lerner, Birmingham Reserve, S.J.A.A., Miss Minnie Dorothy Miller, London/232 (R.), Miss Edith Radford, Notts/122, S.J.A.A., Miss Violet Helen Moseley, London Reserve, B.R.C.S., Miss Gertrude Consans, London/146, Lady Maybell Ogilvy, London/168, Miss Russell, London/268, Miss Mildred Peeny, London/198, Miss Vickers, London/30, Miss Mary Orrid, London/58, Miss Constance Highton, London/58.

Miss Dunning, whose death resulted from pneumonia

following influenza, joined the Acton detachment in 1912, since when she had worked consistently with the utmost devotion for the Red Cross. She was beloved by all with whom she came into contact.

Mrs. Parkinson, who died on 27th October, was Commandant of Breconshire/2. She had done much good work both in her detachment and at the County Red Cross Hospital and will be greatly missed by all her co-workers.

Miss Sollars, who died from pneumonia following influenza, had belonged to Worcester/52 since 1911 and had worked at Powick Red Cross Hospital since the opening. Her Commandant writes: "Her work which was untiring and devoted in its character was much appreciated by patients and staff and I have lost a keen supporter."

Miss Allwood died on 11th November from pneumonia following influenza contracted while on duty in the Auxiliary Red Cross Hospital, Louth. She was an excellent and devoted voluntary worker at the hospital, and was loved and trusted by all. Her name recently appeared in a list of Nursing Honours.

Miss Carew had worked continuously since December, 1914, serving three years at No. 1 Hospital, Exeter, and afterwards, up to the time of her death, at Coulter's Hospital in London. Her Commandant writes: "She had quite made her mark as a surgical nurse and had held really responsible positions. She was buried on 7th November, at Rattery, South Devon, where many personal friends gathered to pay their last token of respect and esteem. A contingent of wounded from a neighbouring V.A.D. Hospital also came to do honour to one who had so nobly worked amongst the sick and laid down her life in the cause."

Miss Bell died at the British Red Cross Hospital, Netley, on 15th October, of pneumonia following influenza. The Matron writes: "Miss Bell had served at this hospital since August, 1916, and contracted the disease in the performance of her duties. Her quiet, unostentatious performance of the work entrusted to her gained the warm respect and regard of fellow workers and patients alike. She was buried in the officers' section of the Military cemetery attached to the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley."

Miss Phillips, who died from pneumonia following influenza, had worked regularly for two years at the Auxiliary Hospital, The Rectory, Berkswell. Her Commandant writes: "She was always bright and helpful and much liked by her fellow workers and patients."

Mrs. Stuart-Richardson, who died on 21st November, was one of the original members of her detachment which she joined in 1911. She worked at Bricket House Hospital, St. Albans, from October, 1914, first as cook, then as head-cook, and from 1916 until January, 1918, when her health failed, as joint quartermaster.

Mrs. Hunt died of pneumonia following influenza. Her Commandant writes: "She has been a willing and conscientious nurse in this hospital (Billingborough, Horthing and District V.A.D. Hospital) for two years and her devotion to duty and unflinching courtesy and kindness have endeared her to patients and staff alike."

Miss Wilson worked for some time at the Eggerslack Auxiliary Military Hospital, Grange-over-Sands, and the Commandant of this hospital writes: "Miss Wilson was so bright and willing we were always glad to have her when she could be spared."

Miss Cosham, who died of pneumonia following influenza, had done four months nursing duty at the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital.

Miss Crump, who died on 3rd November of pneumonia following influenza, was an Art Mistress and gave her services in the Cornwall Auxiliary Hospitals during her holidays.

The League of Red Cross Societies

The League of Red Cross Societies, now the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, was formed on 5 May 1919. The League expanded the role of National Societies to include peacetime initiatives, aiming to respond to natural disasters and health emergencies whilst also promoting healthy living so as to prevent potential health crises. The British Red Cross was granted a Supplemental Royal Charter on 12 December 1919, thereby extending its original objectives to encompass the improvement of health, disease prevention, and alleviation of human suffering throughout the world.



◀ *Wash hands always before meals*
 Published by: *The Junior Red Cross*
 Poster, 1940s

Another development to emerge following the conclusion of the First World War was the Junior Red Cross. Young people from around the world had helped with relief efforts during the war. In the UK, for instance, children collected sphagnum moss used to make wound dressings. The British Junior Red Cross was officially formed in 1924 upon the League of Red Cross Societies' recommendation that all National Societies recruit junior members. The three objectives of the Junior Red Cross were formally defined in 1925: the protection of life and health, service to the sick and suffering, and fostering international friendship and understanding. Although the Junior Red Cross has been discontinued, young people continue to be involved with the British Red Cross through youth engagement and education programmes.

The British Red Cross Today

Since the First World War, the British Red Cross has continued to provide hope and help in times of armed conflict. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is bound by the principles of neutrality and impartiality. It does not take sides in fighting – it exists to reach people with critical support, no matter who they are. Whether in Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza and the West Bank, Israel, or Syria – whether a conflict lasts hours or decades, whether it's in the headlines or not – teams focus solely on meeting humanitarian need. Right now, as conflicts rage around the world, the British Red Cross's mission to be here for humanity has never been more important.



▲ *Volunteers from the Palestinian Red Crescent in the city of Deir al-Balah, Gaza, 2023.*

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