

The Italian Hospital

The Italian Hospital in London started life as a few rooms in Giovanni Ortelli's house at 41 Queen Square. A successful businessman, Ortelli had become an important figure in the growing Italian community based in Clerkenwell. During his career, other benefactors had provided for an Italian school, an Italian church and various clubs. However, Ortelli felt there was a need for a medical centre which could treat people in their mother tongue and the Ospedale Italiano became the first hospital founded outside Italy by an Italian.

It opened on New Year's Day 1884, with five wards, which could treat 18 men and 8 women. Services were provided by volunteer physicians and the nursing staff were made up of nuns from the Order of St Vincent de Paul.

In 1889, Ortelli donated another house to increase the size of the hospital and just before his death in 1898, he instigated a rebuild of the hospital which led to the hospital we see today. This was formally opened on 14 March 1900.



"Here hope will fill their souls and in hearing their mother tongue again they will imagine themselves transported to their native land. On the facade of this building can be inscribed 'Charity knows no restriction of country' ... Here riches and poverty meet in the common sentiment of solidarity. The festival of today is not Italian only, it is a festival of civilisation. The sentiments which unite our hearts are the sentiments of human solidarity. In this rests the germ of possible happiness for the world."

Taken from Italian Ambassador's speech at opening of the building in 1900

The hospital steadily increased the numbers of in- and outpatients it was caring for, supported by fundraising work in the local community and the patronage of both Italian and British nobility. When war was announced in 1914, the hospital placed 25 beds for the use of sick and wounded soldiers. In 1915, when Italy joined the war effort, the hospital became a medical centre for the examination of recruits for the Italian front and increased numbers of beds were devoted to the recovery of British and Belgian soldiers.



William Field was a young British Royal Engineer, who was injured when a bomb exploded as he was laying cable in a tunnel near the front line. He suffered severe burns to his arms, hands, and neck. After receiving first aid at the front, Sapper Field was brought back to be cared for at the Italian Hospital, where 'he had high praise for his treatment'.

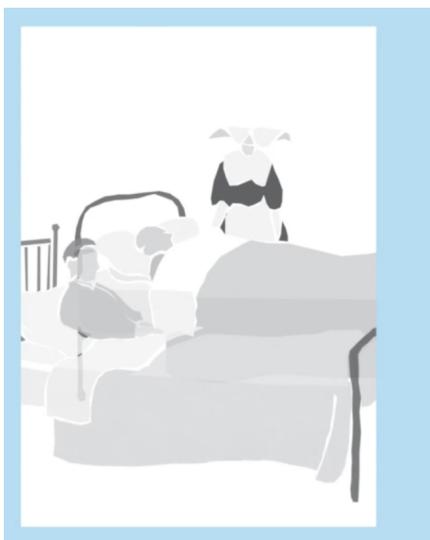
In 1919, the last military patients were discharged. The hospital then went through a difficult period financially and organisationally which lasted for a decade. Despite continuing fundraising work, eliciting support from Italian businesses and individuals, and receiving the patronage of the then Prince of Wales the hospital was forced to change its working practices. Patients who could afford to pay for treatment were asked to contribute, the sisters of the Order of St Vincent de Paul resigned from being nurses, and a new cohort of care staff was needed. As the necessity for more beds and new facilities emerged, the hospital ran up debts and periods of closure followed.

Just like today, the Italian Hospital needed to fundraise to help it pay for new equipment and services. Here are some of the activities that supporters organised:

- The Festival Ball at the Royal Opera House, promoted by Sir Thomas Beecham
- A concert by famous Italian opera star Signora Luisa Tetrazzini, held at the Royal Albert Hall
- A boxing tournament
- An art exhibition
- A wedding donation by Princess Yolanda of Savoy
- Street collections
- Dramatic performances



Although the hospital managed to survive through the 1920s and early 1930s, a period of mounting political tension now threatened its future. It had acquired the pub next door, The Brown Bear, which was assimilated and provided accommodation for the nursing staff – the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul who had returned to take on patient care once more. However, the rise of Mussolini and Fascism in Italy also had consequences for the hospital. The new Italian ambassador, Dino Grandi, was keen on fostering support for the Fascist government in Italy, and on rebuilding interest in the Italian Hospital within London's Italian community, even ensuring the funding of a new surgery for children. However, this more clearly partisan approach to the hospital led to divisions among benefactors and supporters as to its future direction. Twelve doctors resigned after disagreements between the medical staff and the management committee, and renovations and repairs meant that the hospital was again in a parlous financial state.



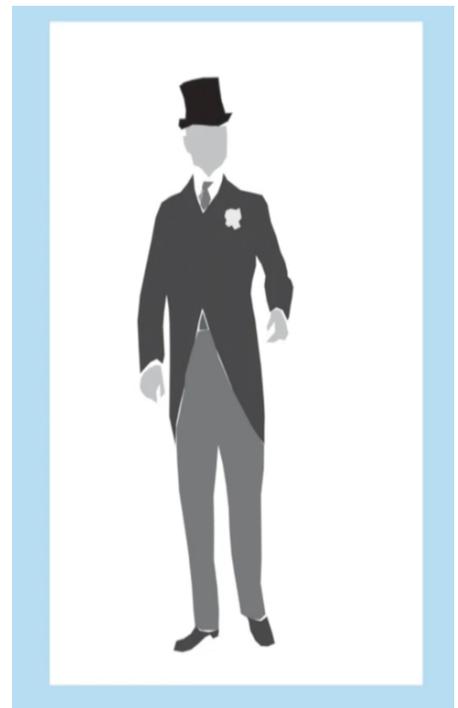
The declaration of war and Italy's entry as an ally of Germany saw many Italian members of staff leave for Italy or find themselves interned. Harold Avery, Senior Physician to the hospital, recalled that members of the management committee who remained 'were determined to show that the spirit of the founder of our institution still remained with us. Signor Ortelli had recognised no boundaries of nationality, race or religion, so we retained the name – The Italian Hospital- and kept the wards and out-patient clinics open.'

The bombing of London, the decrease in patient numbers, the threats to the nursing staff from air raids and the acute financial difficulties again saw the hospital closing in 1941. Parts of the building were used by local councils during the war as it became an administrative centre but by 1945, the Management Committee were determined to see it renovated, refurbished and reopened as the Italian Hospital once again.

The first clinics began to run in 1948, in the same year that the NHS was born. The hospital wished to retain its unique mission and with some high-level advocacy from both the new Italian ambassador and a former British ambassador to Italy, the hospital was able to stay independent. As usual, its financial situation remained a source of constant concern – particularly as access to free medical treatment had now become universal. Nonetheless, the hospital was officially reopened on 19 June 1950, when the Italian Consul General, the chair of the management committee, said the following words:

"To repair, reequip and reopen a small hospital of 54 beds may appear only a trifling matter in comparison with the great works in progress every day in this wonderful capital. But with the limited means at our disposal ... the task was anything but easy ... the Italian Hospital was practically an empty shell.

We have to thank the untiring endeavour of the members of the Committee of Management, of our good sisters, of the physicians and surgeons, who opened and attended the out-patients' department ... thanks to the efforts of everyone it is no longer an empty shell. It now contains its pearl, the precious gem of human charity and love".



The 1950s saw the Italian Hospital receive the patronage of Queen Elizabeth II, as well as visits from the Italian Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and a generous donation from the Italian parliamentary budget which cleared its capital debts. It continued to treat the local Italian community, offering free beds for those unable to pay, with others being asked to contribute £6 6s 0d towards the estimated £10 weekly bill and private patients paying up to £21 for their weekly care. In June 1950, the nursing services were provided by the Sisters of Verona, and regular clinics were being held for outpatients, staffed by young doctors recruited from Italy, often recently qualified and wishing to improve their English.



In 1956, a 10-year-old boy, Angelo Musumesci, arrived at the Italian Hospital from Sicily to receive treatment for a growth that had damaged one eye and was obscuring one side of his face. The hospital administered radium treatment, and the tumour was reduced to such a degree that Moorfields Eye Hospital was then able to operate to remove it. Angelo was able to convalesce at the Italian Hospital once more.

The 1950s also saw the inauguration of the League of Friends of the Italian Hospital – an organisation dedicated to raising money to support the hospital's work. Over the next three decades, with Lady Thorneycroft at its helm, the League organised balls, tea dances, operatic concerts, Christmas bazaars and film showings (including a gala performance of *Dr Zhivago* in 1966) and was later joined in its fundraising by a public relations committee which added proceeds from golf and tennis tournaments, angling and clay pigeon competitions. The league contributed over £600,000 to funds in the 10 years before the hospital's closure.

From 1980 to 1983, the League's and PR Committee's funding helped pay for:

- * Patients' food trolley system
- * Chairs and stools for ward areas
- * Refurbishment of bathroom suites
- * Upgrade of 6 bedrooms
- * Carpeting of first- and second-floor corridors and staircases
- * X-ray equipment
- * Electric hair clippers
- * Emergency equipment trollies
- * An intensive care bed
- * Infusion pumps
- * An ultrasonic therapy unit
- * A Curex cassette rack....

Raffle Prizes 1971

- 1st Prize: A Fiat Uno
- 2nd Prize: A colour television
- 3rd Prize: A holiday for 2 in Italy
- 4th Prize: A portable typewriter

From 1960, there was a steady improvement in both facilities and equipment offered by the hospital. The year 1961 saw the opening of a new operating theatre, 1965, the addition of new nursing accommodation with the purchase of 45 Old Gloucester Street and 1968, the re-equipment of the X-ray department. The 1970s brought an expansion of the services offered by the hospital, with cardiac surgery available for the first time (in 1977 alone more than 50 cardiac operations were carried out) and the Valentino Ward transformed into a new intensive care unit. The nursing staff had also changed, with the Elizabettine Sisters of Padua now in charge.

By the hospital's centenary year, 1984, it was still fulfilling the demand for 'a sympathetic service to members of the Italian community irrespective of their need'. According to the annual report, three outpatient clinics a week were conducted by resident Italian doctors, all nursing staff were fluent Italian speakers and even the hospital's consultants were able to communicate with patients in Italian. Fifteen new rooms had been added for the treatment of inpatients and £300,000 had been spent providing free treatment to public patients.

However, four years later, the situation was very different. A challenging financial position exacerbated by a 25 per cent fall in private patients and a 16 per cent increase in charitable patients was compounded by the diminishing demand from Italians in London, as older generations retired to Italy and younger generations sought help from NHS hospitals. In 1989, after 105 years of service, the Italian Hospital closed its doors for good.

The building is now the new Sight and Sound Centre for Great Ormond Street Hospital, which opened officially in June 2021. Another 'first-of-its-kind', the centre features an eye-imaging suite, a dispensing optician, state-of-the-art soundproofed booths for hearing tests and other testing facilities and equipment which include some enduring items used in the Italian Hospital's days!



This research was conducted as part of a GOSH Arts Project by Filament Theatre and summarises the history of the Sight and Sound Centre at GOSH, formally the Italian Hospital. It was produced by Filament and GOSH Arts as part of an HLF funded project celebrating the heritage of the building. You can watch the resulting film here - ['Ospedale'](#). Please see the [GOSH Arts Resources Page](#) for links to other activities. The Sight and Sound Centre, supported by Premier Inn, is a dedicated home-from-home for children and young people with sight and hearing loss.