



# historical society

## Historical Happenings

### ST JOHN'S WORT

As mentioned in Open Airways last month, St John's Wort is represented on the Service Medal of the Order of St John. The word "wort" means a plant with medicinal properties. The wort also is reproduced on other St John insignia, for example, on the previously issued St John medallions, on bars to the Service Medal, on various badges of rank and on the Grand Prior's Badge.

The St John's wort plant grows to a height of about one metre, and was introduced to Australia in the 1850s. It has gold flowers. If you hold a leaf from the plant up to the light, you may notice small clear dots on the leaf's underside. It seems as if the leaves are perforated. In fact the dots are glands that hold oil. The perforated appearance resulted in St John's wort gaining the botanical name *Hypericum perforatum*.

The name "St John's wort" came about as in the northern hemisphere the plant flowers on or about the 24th day of June. This is St John's Day, the anniversary of the birth of St John the Baptist, the Patron Saint of St John Ambulance. There is no suggestion that St John was afflicted by the same sounding, but differently spelled, wart!

In ancient times, an alternative name for St John's wort was "Fuga Daemonum" meaning "scare devil". In a fifteenth century manuscript it is recorded that the devil would not come within nine paces of the plant. With this in mind, the Historical Society presented our CEO with a St John's wort plant!

In mediaeval times some childless wives were known to have been urged to pick St John's wort flowers at midnight while naked. This was in the belief that the woman would have a child by the time of the next St John's eve. Conversely perhaps, and also in medieval times, the leaves of St John's wort were put in the undergarments of virgins to protect their chastity.

Extracts of St John's wort can be found in chemist shops, health shops and supermarkets. It can be effective in the treatment of mild depression. It is not effective in treating severe depression. The active ingredient, hypericin, acts by altering the brain's uptake of naturally occurring substances in the body including serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine.

There can be side-effects. One is photosensitivity. Others can be life-threatening in patients who have received organ transplants or who are taking Warfarin ("blood thinning") medication.

**Question: In the first paragraph of this article, mention is made of the St John medallion. It is no longer awarded, but previously what effort was needed to gain one?**

The answer will be in the next edition of Open Airways.

**Brian Fotheringham**  
Chairman



**Answer to the question in the last edition of Open Airways: The St John Service Medal is the only currently awarded British medal to retain the image of Queen Victoria.**

