

The William Hardy Shield for infant welfare rediscovered

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Abstract

In 2008, a large commemorative silver-mounted shield was handed over to the Department of Paediatrics by the heirs of a previous Malta Chief Government Medical Officer. Subsequent investigations confirmed that this was the prestigious William Hardy Challenge Shield that had been commissioned by the National Baby Welfare Council (UK) and subsequently awarded every year from 1925. This shield was presented to the Malta Mothers and Infants Association in 1947 in appreciation for Malta's sterling work in infant support and record keeping during the period of hostilities during the Second World War, 1939-1944. This paper explores the philosophy behind this award, the history since its arrival in Malta and reviews changes in healthcare and, specifically, infant mortality rates that justified the shield's award to Malta during an extremely difficult period in the country's history.

During the period spanning the last two great wars, several movements were established in the UK, as elsewhere, to promote awareness and attention to maternity and child welfare. Many of these societies operated on a voluntary basis and included the National Baby Welfare Council, UK.¹ This philanthropic society was founded in 1917, initially as the National Baby Week Council, and generated widespread publicity and an enthusiastic press, supporting its mission to disseminate awareness of infant and child care, healthy living and appropriate mothering. Amongst its various activities, the Council organised competitions with the award of splendid shields designed to sustain interest in infant welfare at both a regional and national level. These activities were very successful and not, as dubbed by some elements of the popular press at the time, merely 'lighthearted beauty competitions.'¹ The scope of these activities was to focus public attention on important health and welfare related issues such as dental care for both mothers and children below the age of five.²

The National Baby Week Council established a National Baby Week that caught the public interest and attained such a high profile at a national level, that many other national societies organized their own annual meetings and conferences during this same week. Indeed, by 1950, the Council listed 45 affiliated societies.¹ The National Baby Week was organised annually, without interruption even during the Second World War. Indeed, the 'silver jubilee' 25th Meeting in July 1941 received this message from Queen Mary: 'I am sorry that the jubilee celebration of the 25th National Baby Week should have fallen in time of war... I know that the Council are now doing their utmost in helping to solve the many new and urgent problems in the care and well-being of mothers and small children arising out of the difficulties and tragedies of wartime conditions. To one and all... I send my congratulations... and best wishes.' The proceedings of this meeting were published in a special edition of the *Mother and Child* issue of July 1941. This included papers on milk preparation, deficiency syndromes, diphtheria immunisation and correlation between mother-craft teaching and family allowance.³ Interestingly, many of these issues are still relevant in the early 21st century.

The National Baby Council was keen to disseminate its philosophy and strongly encouraged local authorities to set up their own welfare groups within the UK and to establish their own advertising campaigns. This encouragement was later extended to other authorities within the British Commonwealth

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and Empire. In the period following the Second World War, the Council was particularly interested to determine how infant welfare had fared during the period of hostilities during 1939-44. It duly offered its four silver challenge shields, each with a monetary prize of twenty guineas, for those institutions or countries that had kept the best records of maternity and child welfare at the time. The Lady Astor Shield was reserved for the institution that secured first place amongst high population towns, whilst the Kettering Shield served as the second place award in this category. For low population areas, the William Hardy Shield was awarded to the institution that secured first place, while the Gwen Geffen Rose Bowl was awarded for second place.⁴ Despite the enormous problems posed by the hostilities of the Second World War, there were several entries competing for the awards. Malta outperformed all other entries in the low population category and was awarded the William Hardy Shield. With reference to this achievement, Edith A. Wood, writing in *The Eugenics Review* in 1947 commented: 'Particular praise must be given to Malta, which, in addition to the George Cross for its war services, has now been awarded the William Hardy Challenge Shield for its record of maternity and child welfare work during those years of trial and tribulation.'⁵

The Malta Mothers and Infants Association

In March 1946, the National Baby Welfare Committee circulated notice of the forthcoming award of excellence in maternity and child welfare work performed during the period of hostilities during 1939-44. This notice was circulated to all the statutory and voluntary committees in the British Commonwealth and Empire. The William Hardy Shield with its monetary prize of twenty guineas was subsequently presented in 1947 to the Malta Mothers and Infants Association (MMIA).⁶ The MMIA was a voluntary organisation that had been active since 1919 and was partly assisted financially by the Maltese government. In many respects, it could be considered a revival of an earlier association known as Pro-Infantia set up in 1906 by the civil servant and poet Alberto Cesareo.⁷ The inaugural meeting of the 'new' Association was supported by the serving Governor of Malta Field Marshal Paul Sanford Lord Methuen and his spouse [appointed Governor of the Maltese Islands on 27 January 1915 and served until 10 June 1919]. The Chief Government Medical Officer serving at the time, Dr Attilio Critien, also fully supported the initiative. In his inaugural address, Dr Critien expressed concern that from about 148,000 babies born during the previous twenty years, 36,000 had died before their first birthday (equating to a mean infant mortality rate of about 243 per 1,000 live births). By November 1919, the Government had allocated a subsidy of £500 to the Association that duly opened two walk-in consultation centres in Hamrun and Valletta.⁸ By 1936, the infant mortality had been reduced to 190.3 per 1,000 live births,⁹ and the Association had opened two additional walk-in clinics in Cospicua and Zejtun manned by volunteer workers.¹⁰ These complemented other dedicated child-oriented services that included the Children's War Memorial

Hospital (established in November 1918). This hospital, like the Mothers and Infants Association, was supported by a government subsidy of £450.⁹ In addition to its walk-in clinics, the Malta Mothers and Infants Association emulated the UK Council, and promoted child welfare by organising popular activities such as baby shows.¹¹ The Association was still extant until the mid-1950s, and received regular subsidies from the Department of Health.¹² By 1953, a branch of the 'Save the Children Fund' was inaugurated in Malta under the auspices of the International Union of Child Welfare with financial aid being provided by the parent body in the UK. This new organisation strove to expand on the previously existing clinic facilities initially set up by the Malta Mothers and Infants Association, and by 1955 had set up eight district clinics. The management of these proved difficult for a voluntary organisation, and the government stepped in to manage these in April 1956.¹³

The outbreak of the Second World War hostilities against Malta in June 1940 stretched the resources of the Maltese Medical and Health Department to the full. The turmoil of War left a wake of devastation in the social and administrative structure of the population, and this social upheaval resulted in a marked reversal of the previously noted fall in infant mortality rates to a peak of 350 per 1,000 live births in 1942. The main culprits for this decline included an increase in enteritis and congenital debility/prematurity. However, despite the adverse odds, efforts made by the Department of Health and supporting associations including the Mothers and Infants Association yielded a marked positive effect, to the extent that soon after the cessation of hostilities, the infant mortality rate not only returned to pre-war levels but actually improved even further to 130.7 per 1,000 live births by 1946 (Figure 1).¹⁰ This significant achievement was acknowledged by the UK-based National Baby Welfare Council who, in March 1946, awarded the prestigious William Hardy Challenge Shield to the Malta Mothers and Infants Association.⁵

The arrival of the William Hardy Shield to Malta

The presentation ceremony took place in St. Pancras Town Hall, London, UK on 26 June 1947 during a session of the International Conference on Maternal and Child Welfare. Professor Walter Ganado who was completing a BSc (Hon) at University College in London, received the award from Dr Hogben on behalf of the Malta Mothers and Infants Association (Figure 2). He also read a paper entitled 'The causes of Infant Mortality in Malta' during the conference.¹⁴ Professor Ganado was one of the key medical officers who had assisted the Malta Mothers and Infants Association during the Second World War period, and had been detailed to care for infant welfare work on a national level during the period of hostilities.¹⁵ On his return to Malta, Prof Ganado formally passed on the shield on the 4 October 1947 to Professor Guzé Ellul, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology during the period 1930-55. Prof. Ellul had been responsible for managing the maternity services during the

Figure 1: Infant Mortality Rate in the Maltese Islands, 1935-1950

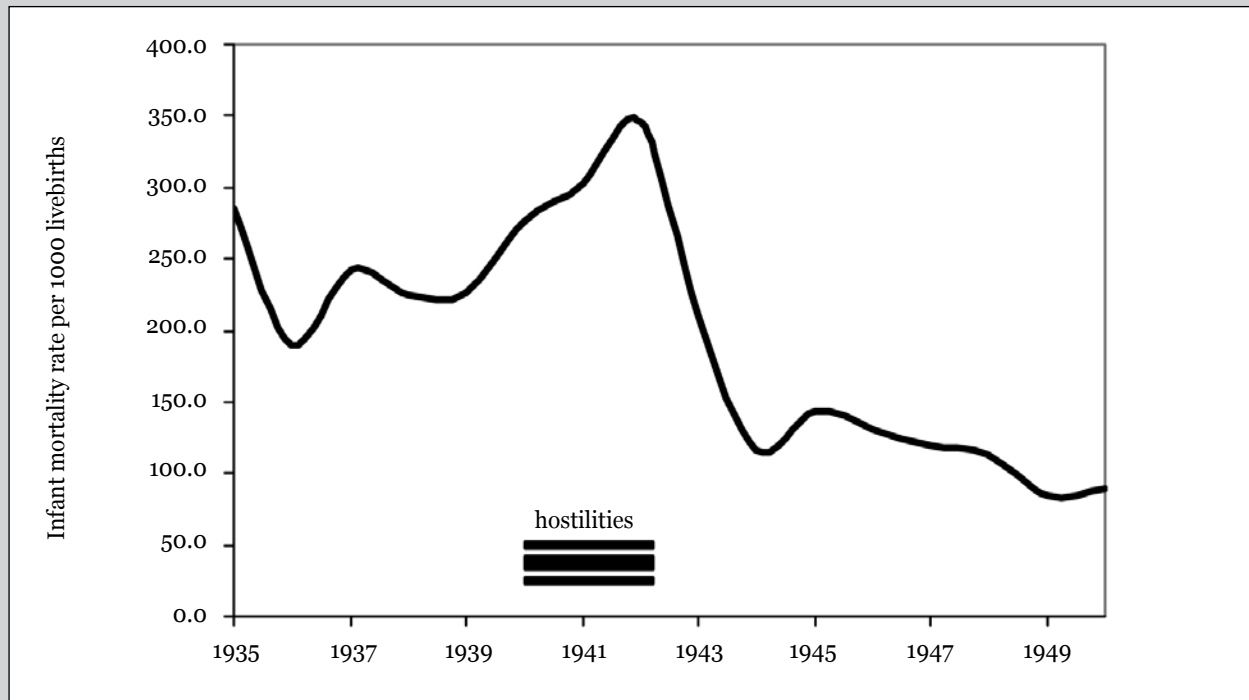


Table 1: List of previous winners on William Hardy Shield

Award Year	Position on Shield	Citation
1925	Top left 'strap' mount	Halesowen, Local Baby Week Committee
1927	Middle left 'strap' mount	Cambridgeshire, Federation of Women Institutes
1928	Bottom left 'strap' mount	Hill and Cakemore (Wores), Local Baby Week Committee
1929	Top right 'strap' mount	Welwyn Garden City, Local Baby Week Committee
1930	Middle right 'strap' mount	Longmoor (Hants), Local Baby Week Committee
1931	Bottom right 'strap' mount	Crawley Down (Sussex), Local Baby Week Committee
1932	Top right 'floating' mount	Welwyn Garden City, Local Baby Week Committee
1933	Second right 'floating' mount	Bungay (Suffolk), Local Baby Week Committee
1934	Third right 'floating' mount	Welwyn Garden City, Local Baby Week Committee
1935-36	Bottom right 'floating' mount	Mayfield Women's Institute (Sussex)
1935-1936/37	Central lower scroll	Awarded to Women's Institutes for the Best Scheme of Propaganda in Rural Areas
1938	Top, left rectangular plaque	Senior Council School Christchurch Hants, 1 st Place in Baby Week Test on Child Care
1939	Top, central rectangular plaque	Intermediate (Girls) School Brighton, 1 st Place in Baby Week Test on Child Care
1940	Top, right rectangular plaque	The Totton Council Senior School, Southampton
1939-1944	Top left 'floating' mount	Malta G.C., Mothers and Infants Association

Second World War and its aftermath, and was the Chairman of the Mothers and Infants Association when the award was made in 1947 and until 1958. The presentation ceremony took place at the Boy Scouts Association Headquarters at Floriana in Malta.¹⁶

The William Hardy Shield

The William Hardy Shield award was set up by the U.K. National Baby Welfare Council to serve as an annual merit award for documented excellence in infant care efforts in regions involving low population size. The runner up received

the Gwen Geffen Rose Bowl.⁴ The William Hardy Shield was first presented in 1925 to the Local Baby Week Committee of Halesowen, a town in the West Midlands, England. It remains unclear as to who was William Hardy. The citation on the shield refers to a 'William Hardy Esq' and gives no further clues as to his origins or status. We can only assume that *he* was an altruistic benefactor who must have bequeathed a sum around 1925 in order to commission the shield that was then named in his honour. A Professor Sir William Hardy MA, FSA, is known to have lived during the period in question. He was an eminent biophysicist at Cambridge University at the time, and who was deeply involved in fishing techniques. Indeed, the first 'experimental' fishing vessel launched in the UK was christened with his name, only to be rechristened the *Rainbow Warrior* when acquired by Greenpeace sometime later.

It had been the policy of the U.K. National Baby Welfare Council that awardees of the shield were to keep the shield for a period of one year and subsequently return this to the council. Indeed, in one instance when the same group won the award on two consecutive occasions, the 'winners' were required to return the shield after the first year. During the period 1925-1944, the shield was awarded a total of 15 times (Table 1). It remains unclear what happened to the William Hardy award in the subsequent decades. In 2007, a William Hardy Shield was donated to the Paediatric Department by the heirs of Dr Anthony Cuschieri who died in 2006. Dr Cuschieri had served as Chief Government Medical Officer for Malta during the period 1968-1973. His spouse, Marie Cuschieri neé Ellul, is the daughter of Prof Guzé Ellul, who was the Chairman of the Mothers and Infants Association at the time the shield was awarded in 1947. It was initially assumed that the 'newly discovered' shield was the original that, for some reason, had not been returned to the U.K. National Baby Welfare Council as was previous policy. Investigations of the shield proved otherwise.

The Malta Shield

When 'found', the shield was in a dusty but generally well preserved state with slight scuffing of the frame, a moderate amount of active woodworm, thankfully almost all on the reverse, and just one decorative silver stud missing. The woodworm was treated effectively but, since the significance of the shield was not immediately appreciated, it was allowed to 'sleep' once again before the co-authors finally researched into its background, some two years later! There was no further damage and, after a thorough polish of the silver mounts and wooden plaque, the splendour of the trophy was finally exposed (Figure 3). It measures an impressive 55 x 58 cm, weighs 5.5 kg, and is made of two large sections of solid mahogany, expertly joined off-centre with the surface buffed to a fine polish and the back left matt. Multiple silver mounts are affixed to the surface, with two of the larger silver mounts having identical Maltese silver hallmarks arranged in four 'boxes' with the annotations in the following sequence: [PC] – [Maltese cross] – [917] – [J] (Figure 4). The largest central section measures 34 x 42 cm and is, in

Figure 2: Professor Walter Ganado receiving the Shield in London in 1947



fact, a composite mount with a rectangular base and 14 smaller superimposed mounts. The largest, central focal point portrays a knight not unlike Britannia holding an infant above a scroll proclaiming 'SAVE THE BABIES'. This is framed by a silver scroll with the words 'NATIONAL BABY WELFARE COUNCIL' above, and a larger silver plaque below announcing: 'WILLIAM HARDY SHIELD PRESENTED BY WILLIAM HARDY ESQ. FOR ANNUAL AWARD BY THE NATIONAL BABY WELFARE COUNCIL'

Below this is a further, smaller silver scroll that is left blank. The four corners of the central rectangular mount are 'fixed' by stylised arrow-headed straps and the two sides each have three smaller strap-like mounts upon which are engraved the

Figure 3: The William Hardy Shield after cleaning and minimal restoration



Figure 4: Maltese 917 grade silver hallmarks, dated after 1940



citations for previous winners. The same applies to the other independent silver mounts that are pinned directly to the mahogany backboard, and consist of three large rectangular mounts at the top, one scroll-shaped plaque below and eight small rectangular ones, positioned equally on either side. The name 'FRANCIS MELI' is engraved along the lower edge of the lower corner strap on the left side.

The original shield would almost certainly have been made in the UK, probably using English 924 grade silver by an English silversmith sometime before the date the shield was first presented in 1925. The rediscovered 'Malta shield', however, bears the silver hallmarks with the following sequence: [PC] – [Maltese cross] – [917] – [J], confirming that the mounts are made of Maltese 917 grade silver. The [PC] mark refers to the silversmith and could refer to one of three Maltese individuals: Carmelo Pace who received his warrant in November 1925, Pio Celini (warrant, dated April 1914), and Paul Coleiro (warrant dated May 1903). A further Maltese link is the name 'FRANCIS MELI' engraved on one of the mounts. This refers to a local family firm of jewellers established in Valletta, Malta since 1850 and still trading there. The firm must have been asked to reproduce the original shield probably by the Malta Mothers and Infants Association after the original was presented in 1947, and commissioned silversmith 'PC' for the silverwork reproduction. The [J] silver mark is the key to the date of production of the shield, as this was a personal mark of the Consul for Goldsmiths and Silversmiths appointed at the time the work was carried out. Indeed, the annotation [J] belonged to Joseph Azzopardi who was appointed Consul in March 1940, thereby confirming that the Shield must have been commissioned after 1940 [Information about 20th century Maltese silver hallmarks was supplied in correspondence by Mr David Borg, current Consul for Goldsmiths and Silversmiths]. This dates the 're-discovered' shield to well after the original shield was first presented in the UK in 1925, confirming the local origins of the 'Malta Shield'. The original must then have been returned to the UK National Baby Welfare Council after the statutory period of one year.

The Malta copy was then retained locally. This would then also explain why there are no further citations for additional winners on the shield after Malta's entry for 1939-44.

Discussion

The William Hardy Shield was awarded to the association or agency that was assessed to have conducted the most novel and effective maternity and child welfare propaganda. The onset of hostilities in 1939 spurred the health authorities in Malta to initiate an active campaign to promote infant welfare in those trying years of conflict. Under the supervision of Professor Walter Ganado, regular visits were made to dormitory shelters and refugee centres where children were examined and instructions given to mothers on the care of infants. Children needing any treatment were managed in the district dispensaries or the hospital. Child-care clinics were held once or twice weekly in each district, where instructions about child care was given to all mothers who attended for the first time, while infants were examined and mothers advised regarding the child's condition and needs. Detailed case notes were kept to assess progress. A series of lectures were delivered to mothers and health paramedical personnel with particular emphasis on breast-feeding promotion. These talks were also broadcast on the Rediffusion radio system. Monetary grants to purchase milk for babies were made available to 311 necessitous families. Experiments were furthermore conducted to assess the suitability under local environmental conditions of the infant's anti-gas helmets supplied by the UK Ministry of Home Security. All these activities were strongly supported by the volunteers of the Mothers and Infants Association, who continued providing their services sometimes from private and temporary premises.^{15,16} While the infant mortality rate rose from 227.0 per 1,000 live births in 1939 to 345.2 in 1942, the efforts of the Maltese health partners in promoting infant welfare had significantly curbed the potential rise expected with the havoc wrought by the social and environmental upheaval brought on by the intense hostilities during those three years. The propaganda programme had its desired effect in the subsequent years when a steady drop in infant mortality rate reaching 113.0 per 1,000 live births in 1948 was observed, and lower still in subsequent years.¹⁰ It was therefore quite appropriate for Malta to receive the William Hardy Shield award. Proud of this achievement, the Malta Mothers and Infants Association commissioned the reproduction of the original William Hardy Shield that has now been donated to the Department of Paediatrics of the University of Malta Medical School.

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