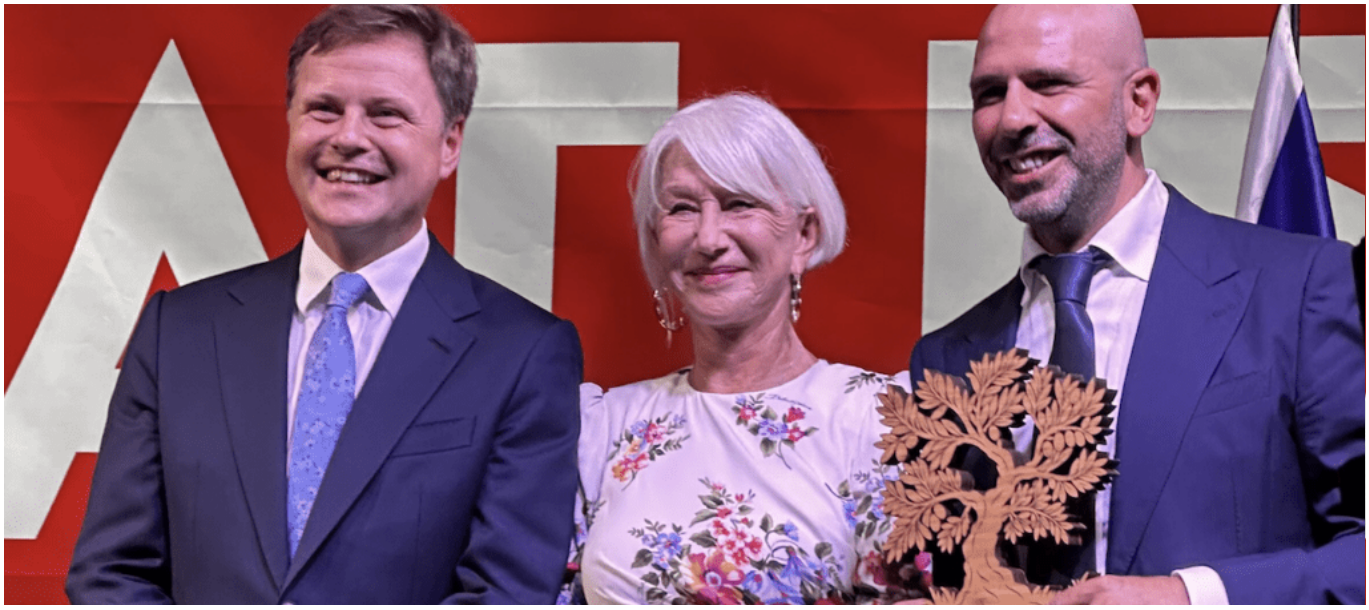


Helen Mirren on Italy, olives and a royal honour

Posted on June 20, 2026 by Alina Trabattoni, Sabina Castelfranco

ROME — A sculpture carved from olive wood passed into Dame Helen Mirren's hands at Villa Wolkonsky on June 18, as the British embassy crowned its celebration of King Charles's official birthday by naming her the first winner of the UK-Italy GREAT Award. The event was hosted by recently-appointed Ambassador Stephen Hickey.

Some 2,000 guests filled the ambassador's residence, with Justice Minister Carlo Nordio there for the Italian government. Days earlier the King had appointed the 80-year-old actress a Companion of Honour, one of Britain's highest distinctions, and here she led the room in singing Happy Birthday to him. The comedian Checco Zalone, a friend, presented the prize.

The award honoured her long bond with Puglia, where she and her husband, the director Taylor Hackford, live for much of the year.

Q. How did your love of Italy begin?

"My love for Italy began many years ago, in a small cinema, on a rainy afternoon in England, when I saw Antonioni's L'Avventura. Everything about that film enchanted me. The beauty of Monica Vitti, the musicality of the Italian language, the mystery and magic of a sunlit piazza in Sicily. Later I found my great inspiration as an actress in Mamma Roma, with the magnificent Anna Magnani."

Q. You and your husband made a home in Tiggiano, in the Salento. What did you find there?

"My profession kindly allowed me, with my husband Taylor, to make a home in the Salento, in Tiggiano. That was the start of a beautiful journey for us both, discovering the gentle, passionate,

Source: https://italynow.co.uk/helen-mirren-on-italy-olives-and-a-royal-honour/

vital and above all generous spirit of the Italian people. We found a real affinity with our neighbours, who are here tonight. Hello Mari Rosaria, Ippazio and Manuela."

Q. And the village took you in.

"We tried to be good members of that community. I will always be the actress, but we were welcomed with kindness and became part of a large family. It was like the first time I wore a Dolce and Gabbana dress. I buttoned it up and it fit perfectly, as if made to measure for me."





Mirren, Checco Zalone, Franco Nero at British embassy’s reception for King’s birthday (*Credits: Italy Now*)

Q. Checco, you handed her the award. What does she mean to you?

“I will speak in Italian because people don’t understand English, not because I don’t know it. I can say I am your friend. I don’t like receiving prizes, also because they never give me any, but I give you this one gladly. You are beautiful. It’s a shame I didn’t meet you sooner.”

Q. The friendship began with a dinner invitation that did not go as planned.

“I got a call saying Helen Mirren was inviting me to dinner. So I went and bought the good suit, it cost me 5,000 euro. I arrived in this little town, Tiggiano. A woman in a tracksuit and slippers came to meet me, and I said, excuse me, waitress, where is Helen Mirren? And it was Helen Mirren. There I was dressed up, she in a tracksuit, and yet she was extremely elegant. That evening was a great lesson in elegance.”

Q. Your award is carved from olive wood. Why does the olive matter so much?

“This is very important for me and for Italy. The most important tree for Italy is the olive, and we have done a great deal of work on this. We have watched the Salento overwhelmed and devastated by the tragedy of Xylella. Together with my husband I have tried to bring this terrible economic and cultural destruction to the world’s attention.”

Q. Why should the rest of Europe care?

“The people of the Salento are strong in mind and body, independent and resourceful. But this destruction of their heritage by an external, invisible force must be taken seriously by the wider community in Europe.”

Q. The affection runs both ways with Checco Zalone.

“I fell in love with him on a plane from America to Italy, watching one of his films. I did not understand a single word he said. Not one. There were no subtitles, and I think you were speaking in Salentino dialect. But I fell in love with him.”



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Ambassador Hickey, Mirren and Checco Zalone at King’s reception (*Credits: Italy Now*)

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