

ENCOUNTERS WITH  
**VALLETTA**  
A BAROQUE CITY  
THROUGH THE AGES

EDITED BY

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## The International Institute for Baroque Studies

Since its foundation in 1996, the International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta has been involved in a range of activities that support its mission to disseminate multidisciplinary knowledge about the Baroque heritage of mankind, and to promote its appreciation and conservation for posterity.

This objective has been taken forward through teaching activities at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as well as through extensive research work which has formed the basis of various publications and theses. The Institute has also performed consultancy services concerned with aspects of the Baroque heritage of the Maltese Islands which is linked to the Hospitaller Knights of the Order of St John in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On an international level, the Institute has enhanced its teaching activities by actively participating in academic conferences at universities overseas, and has also taken the initiative to organize international seminars in Malta. The Institute assumed a pioneering role in the foundation of the Baroque Route Network of the Council of Europe, on behalf of which the Institute still regularly publishes a newsletter. The Institute's publications as well as its courses offered at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, reflect the interests of the academic staff members in the political, military, religious, social, philosophical, scientific, literary, artistic and conservation aspects of the Baroque age.

The Baroque world is approached as a holistic cultural entity which embodies the two contradictions of the age: the abstract mathematical and methodical aspect on the one hand, and the rebellious, emotional and exuberant aspect on the other, which are both manifest in the architecture and art forms of the great Baroque capital cities of Europe. The enduring residues of this eminently European cultural expression bears witness to an age of learning, discovery, brilliance and splendour which continues to attract the attention of many scholars and poses a formidable challenge for them to provide answers to a host of yet unanswered questions, and to use archival research to identify and disseminate new knowledge about the Baroque achievement.

*Opposite: Decision by the Order's Council to confer the title of 'Most Humble' on the city of Valletta on 14 February 1567 (NLM, AOM 91, f. 177)*

*Inside covers: Eighteenth-century paintings depicting Valletta from the Grand Harbour and from Marsamxett Harbour (Private collection)*



# LIFE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY VALLETTA

## MALTESE AND BRITISH CROSS-CURRENTS

Petra Caruana Dingli

The first century of British influence in Malta left a deep mark. The island had been under foreign domination for centuries but when the British settled in Malta from 1800 onwards, its status changed fundamentally. While the Order of St John had received revenue from its estates in Europe, Malta was the principal seat of the knights. The grand master lived in Valletta and had complete jurisdiction over the island. Valletta was the capital city of a sovereign state.

Under the British, the island became a small dependency of a much larger political entity. It was now part of a global empire whose head of state resided elsewhere. The island was governed by a representative of Britain's monarch, who answered to the Colonial Office in London where important decisions over Malta's affairs were taken by the secretary of state in Westminster. Malta's status as a British naval base was the primary consideration in all political, military and civil decisions concerning the island.

Local interests were always weighed against imperial interests, with the latter generally taking priority. The entire island was governed as a defence post, mainly focused on

Valletta and its magnificent harbour, strategically located in the central Mediterranean. The secondary role of the British military garrison on the island was to defend and provide a secure environment for the naval forces. Most of the governors posted to Malta in the nineteenth century were military officers, entrusted with managing the civil affairs of the island with the needs of the fortress in mind.

Like the Order of St John before them, the British based their centre of government in Valletta. And like the fleet of the knights, the British naval ships sheltered in Galley Creek (later Dockyard Creek) at Birgu on the opposite side of the harbour as Valletta did not offer suitable inlets. Valletta and the Three Cities across the harbour (Birgu, Senglea and Cospicua) formed the urban centre of Malta.

The Grand Master's Palace in Valletta was turned into the seat of the governor, and from 1835 onwards councils of government including Maltese members were held there. The Auberge de Castille, probably the grandest building built in Valletta by the knights besides the Palace and the churches, became the seat of the military garrison. The army was largely

*Monument  
dedicated to Sir  
Alexander Ball at  
the Lower Barrakka  
Gardens in Valletta*



stationed around Valletta and Floriana until new barracks began to be built at St George's Bay in the 1860s, as well as at St Andrew's, Mtarfa and Sliema.

While the Navy was initially based in Birgu, its commander-in-chief retained his main residence in Valletta, in what is today still known as Admiralty House in South Street. Until very recently this building housed the National Museum of Fine Arts. The civil service and government departments were also based in Valletta, scattered among the former auberges and palaces of the Order of St John. The Castellania in Merchants Street continued to be used as the law courts until they were moved to the Auberge d'Auvergne in Republic Street in the 1850s. This auberge was destroyed in the second world war and replaced with a new law courts building on the same site as that previously adopted by the British administration.

### Society

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the entire population of Malta numbered 100,000 persons. By 1900 it had practically doubled in size, expanding at a faster rate in the second half of the century. Excluding the troops, the population of the urban harbour area in the 1860s was around 60,000 persons, nearly half the population of Malta at the time. This rapid increase in residents created huge pressures on housing and sanitation in Valletta.

Due to its size and scarce resources, Malta depended on external supplies for food. Its agricultural produce was too limited to sustain the population. Unemployment and over-population resulted in chronic and severe poverty among the lower classes within both urban and rural areas. Under the Order of St John, the export of cotton had brought in much-needed revenue to Malta. While the knights did not put the island's economy on sound foundations, they averted economic disaster by investing some of their foreign revenue in Malta, which was their main base. Their inability to continue to inject funds into Malta in the late eighteenth century, partly due to the loss of their estates

in France, coincided with great dissatisfaction with their rule by the Maltese, many of whom were delighted to see the back of the Order of St John when it capitulated to Napoleon in 1798, leaving behind serious debts.

By the first decades of the nineteenth century Malta was losing its cotton trade. Attempts were made to encourage other industries such as fisheries under Civil Commissioner Alexander Ball before 1810, and the planting of mulberry trees to produce silk in the 1820s,<sup>1</sup> but these initiatives did not amount to much. Between 1805 and a severe outbreak of plague in Malta in 1813 (starting on board a ship in the Valletta harbour), the British commercial community in Valletta expanded rapidly. This was helped by developments in international trade, particularly the French blockade on British goods on the continent.<sup>2</sup>

Due to this expansion of trade and the influx of foreigners, house prices in Valletta began to rise. This benefitted some sections of the community but not others – the living conditions of the urban poor suffered due to escalating rents.<sup>3</sup> After the 1813 plague, the social and economic situation worsened. In 1824 a committee appointed by Governor Hastings reported that the lower classes in Malta verged on extreme poverty, with some almost on the brink of starvation.<sup>4</sup> A British visitor in the late 1820s described the abysmal condition of the rural poor streaming into Valletta every morning, wearing rags and begging for bits of bread.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, he noticed that with ‘arrivals of the disabled ships of the fleet ... everybody seemed to feel the *genial* influence of war’.<sup>6</sup> As the century progressed, British naval and military activities and spending determined the level of prosperity of the inhabitants of Valletta and the surrounding areas.

This fluctuated in line with the international political situation and the military threats facing Britain.<sup>7</sup> The island flourished in times of war, for example, spending increased in the aftermath of the battle of Navarino in 1827, and during the Crimean war in the 1850s. The crews of the fleet poured large sums of money into the local economy.<sup>8</sup> Besides government and military expenditure, there was also personal spending.

Navy and army personnel returning from battles and a tough life on board ship were understandably eager to celebrate and have some fun once they reached the safety of Malta. In one example, in 1841 some ships in harbour were obliged to undergo a long quarantine due to plague on board. One of the officers, Captain Collier, was taken to the naval hospital in the harbour with serious injuries to his leg sustained at the second explosion of Acre. Once the quarantine was over and the captain was released from hospital, he gave ‘a splendid dinner’ for all his officers at the United Services Club House in Valletta, ‘where the greatest hilarity prevailed. The dinner consisted of every delicacy of the season, and the sparkling champagne was passed around in double quick time’. Collier thanked the officers of the naval hospital who had helped him avoid the dreaded amputation of his leg. A ball was organized at the Auberge de Provence for friends, officers and the ‘principal inhabitants of the island’ which lasted until daybreak. They then organized a regatta in the Valletta harbour, and enjoyed themselves so much that a second ball was planned.<sup>9</sup>

The harbour was the centre of the revenue and economic activity of Malta. After the opening of the Suez Canal, Malta also earned an income from coal-bunkering activities, with steam ships stopping in Valletta as they headed to India and other ports.

The ship-building and repair facilities used by the Order of St John in Birgu were soon outgrown by the British naval fleet. In the 1840s the navy built a new dry dock there. The dockyards remained a very important source of employment for Maltese skilled labourers throughout the century and well beyond. Skilled labourers depended increasingly on the British services for their livelihood.

By the 1860s Malta had become the chief British naval station, supply depot and repair base in the Mediterranean. The Admiralty continually expanded its area and property within the harbour. Besides Dockyard Creek it also moved into nearby French Creek and Corradino on the other side of Senglea. This part of the harbour was traditionally used for mercantile activity, which was now obliged shift further inside the harbour

*Opposite:  
Musicians outside  
Porta Reale, 19th-  
century painting  
signed G. Gianni  
(MUŻA – Heritage  
Malta)*

*Valletta Marina  
in the late 19th  
century*



towards Marsa.<sup>10</sup> In the late 1850s Maltese Crown Advocate Adrian Dingli oversaw the purchase of private property in French Creek for the Admiralty, while Governor John Gaspard le Marchant initiated plans for the new commercial port at Marsa, to include facilities for loading and unloading as well as storage.<sup>11</sup> As part of this transaction, the Admiralty later also agreed to hand over to the civil government the Ordnance Office and the adjoining buildings in Valletta, in front of the opera house.<sup>12</sup>

The navy continued to construct more docks and facilities over the years, offering employment for Maltese workers and encouraging increasing numbers to move into the harbour towns. Sanitation and housing conditions deteriorated further. Besides building the docks, the British also strengthened military defences around the harbour to keep the fleet safe, such as Lascaris Battery at the Valletta Marina in the 1850s. They also

built forts and other defence posts in the rest of Malta, expanding beyond the environs of the harbour to other strategic points around the island. The naval base and the army were major employers in Malta. The other principal source of employment was the public service, which had almost 1,000 employees by 1860 with most of its departments based in Valletta. Within the literate and middle classes, as well as some of the old nobility, many hoped for a secure job with the public service.<sup>13</sup> Besides limited commercial activity, the professions and agriculture (which often subsisted on a thread), there were not that many other jobs available.

In 1809 the large hall and some other rooms of the Valletta university, the Collegium Melitense, were segregated from the rest of the building and let to the British merchant community to be used 'as a meeting place or Bourse'.<sup>14</sup> The lease was for eight

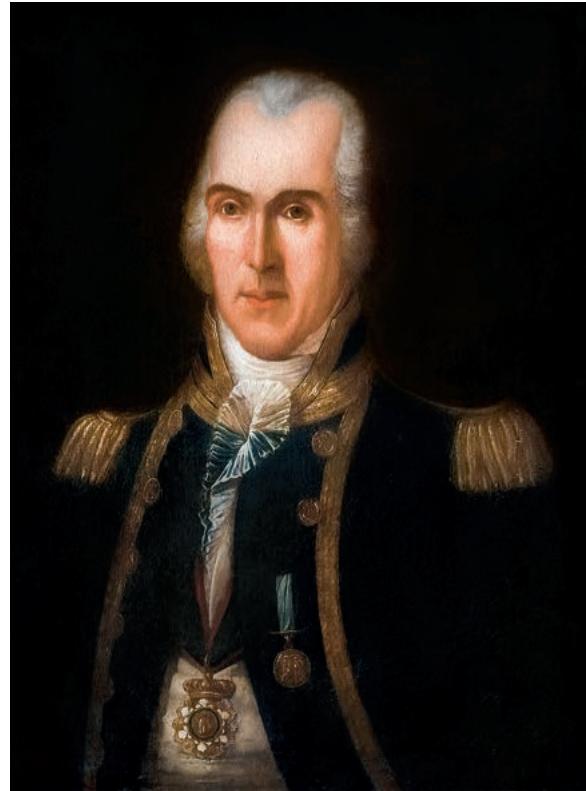
years, with an optional further eight years. The entrance to these new Commercial Rooms was in St Paul Street (Strada San Paolo), and they occupied the same premises as the Banco Anglo Maltese.<sup>15</sup> In his guide book of Malta of 1839, Thomas MacGill described these chambers at the university, writing that,

In 1809 Sir Alex. Ball granted the court-yards, and a considerable part of the building, to the mercantile body here, to form an exchange; since that period, the merchants have assembled there; – they receive many newspapers from different countries; and are liberal, in admitting to the perusal of them, all strangers, and officers on the Island; the entrance is from Strada San Paolo, and within the premises, is the Anglo Malta Bank; immediately opposite, in Strada St Paolo, is another Bank, called the Malta Bank; those banks, which are of great utility to trade, are simply banks of deposit and discount.<sup>16</sup>

In 1809 Malta was enjoying a high amount of commercial activity, concentrated in the Grand Harbour of Valletta, partly due to the continental blockade. Trade quietened down after the severe epidemic of bubonic plague in 1813, which started on an infected ship and spread throughout the harbour area. Commerce in Malta struggled to rise to its former levels in the following decades.

The Commercial Rooms in St Paul Street were established by the Society of British Merchants, and Maltese merchants only began to be admitted there in 1822.<sup>17</sup> The Committee of Maltese Merchants or Casino San Giorgio was then set up in 1823, taking premises in Palace Square (Piazza San Giorgio). The Irish Catholic Richard More O’Ferrall was governor of Malta in the late 1840s. He is well remembered for having encouraged the setting up of a chamber of commerce in Malta. He also introduced various legislative and policy reforms which helped trade and improved the economy. Unfortunately, there was also less successful side to his governorship. His adamant refusal to allow a group of Italian political refugees to land in Malta

in July 1849 was harshly criticized in both the Maltese and the British press.<sup>18</sup> More O’Ferrall was badly affected by this widely-publicized incident and he left Malta in 1850 citing ill-health. While he was unpopular with certain pro-Italian sections of Maltese society and the liberal press in England, the members of the chamber of commerce regretted his departure and tried to persuade him to stay.



*Portrait of Sir Alexander Ball (Ministry for Gozo)*





A new chamber of commerce was set up in December 1848 during More O'Ferrall's governorship, bringing both British and Maltese merchants together under the same roof. This new institution was essentially a merger of the Society of British Merchants and the Casino San Giorgio, and first began operating in the old Borsa premises in St Paul Street.<sup>19</sup> The chamber immediately planned to set up a new exchange building which would also include the two banks active in Malta at that time – the Banco Anglo Maltese and the Banco di Malta.

The first two Valletta sites that were considered for the new exchange were a house opposite the Auberge d'Auvergne near St John's co-cathedral, and another in Palace Square. The superintendent of public works, William Lamb Arrowsmith, drew up some plans, and Governor Sir William Reid referred the request to the Council of Government.<sup>20</sup> Both sites were rejected as unsuitable and a third site at 65 Republic Street was proposed, in a large old palace then occupied by Major Mitford, the *maggiore di piazza*. An image of this building is captured in a watercolour of 1815 by Charles Frederick de Brocktorff.<sup>21</sup> Together with the rest of their property, once the knights left Malta this old palace had devolved to the government. It formerly belonged to the Langue of Castille and León of the Order of St John and was leased to *Bali* Zarzana until 1798.<sup>22</sup> During the brief French rule of Malta, Major General Claude-Henri de Vaubois ordered that accommodation should be found for the military and naval units as well as senior officers, preferably in large houses, the houses of unmarried persons, or those belonging to former knights of the Order of St John. At the time, this building was given as accommodation to General Jean Antoine Dejean.<sup>23</sup>

Major Mitford moved out in June 1854 and the palace was given to the chamber of commerce at the rent of £30 per year.<sup>24</sup> Instead of refurbishing their newly-acquired premises, the members of the chamber decided to demolish it and construct a new, purpose-built exchange. A call for proposals was issued, and a design put forward by Giuseppe Bonavia (1821-85) was chosen. Bonavia was a talented Maltese architect who had worked with the Royal Engineers. Funds for the building were

raised from among the chamber's members and Michelangelo Azzopardi was chosen as the building contractor to execute the works, which were completed in 1857. The building was constructed in a Neo-Classical design, and the influence of the Scottish architect Robert Adam has been suggested.<sup>25</sup> Bonavia also designed the Neo-Gothic Presbyterian church in South Street, Valletta, during the same years. A house in the narrow Frederick Street, directly behind the New Exchange, was also annexed to it. This house also formerly belonged to the Langue of Castille and León.

The proportions of the New Exchange, also known as La Borsa, were grand and prestigious, with a large portico, wide staircase, high ceilings, a ballroom and a spacious central courtyard which was later roofed over. The mid-1850s were a boom period for commerce and trade in Malta, mainly due to the Crimean war. The building was officially opened at a large ceremony on Saturday 11 April 1857, and a Grand Ball was held two days later. The New Exchange was opened for normal business on Monday 20 April. The building also included a Casino della Borsa or social club for 'all the respectable classes of Maltese society.' The initial aims of the club were 'Conversation, Newspaper Reading, Card and Billiard Rooms'.<sup>26</sup> Numerous similar clubs flourished in Valletta at this period. Popular social events, including luncheons, dinners, dances, parties and balls were frequently held at the Casino over the years until well into the twentieth century, and it was considered to be a prestigious venue.<sup>27</sup> While the professional interests of the chamber continued to evolve and grow, the club-like atmosphere of the place had died down by the time Malta achieved independence in the 1960s. The billiard room was converted into offices in 1969. In 2008 the institution took on its new name as Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry after one of the major milestones of its recent history, a merger with the Malta Federation of Industry.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1870s, among 141,775 listed inhabitants of Malta around 10,000 worked in commerce, 2,290 worked in the professions, and 1,210 belonged to the clergy. A further 2,133 were landowners. Apart from the civil servants, most of rest were working class, or the 'poorer' classes, the majority of

*Opposite:  
Courtyard of the  
Borsa – today  
the Chamber  
of Commerce,  
Enterprise and  
Industry*

whom were illiterate.<sup>29</sup> During the time of the Order, the Maltese population had come to depend on a paternalistic form of government. The Colonial Office in London in the nineteenth century, on the other hand, held that the poverty and lack of self-sufficiency of the island was the result of paternalism and resisted this model. But successive governors, familiar with the difficult reality of life in Valletta and the rest of Malta, felt that they could not ignore Maltese welfare and that exploiting the strategic resources of the island should involve a cost for Britain.<sup>30</sup> This debate underpinned and slowed down many economic and political decisions of the day. The other obstacle to progress was the insistence of the Colonial Office on treating Malta as a military fortress, which held back political reform on the island and resulted in considerable agitation among the Maltese as the years went by.

To alleviate the abject living conditions of the lower classes, the government distributed alms<sup>31</sup> and invested in charitable institutions. The Ospizio, a home for vulnerable people such as the poor, elderly and infirm, had first been established in around 1730 by the Order of St John outside the city walls in Floriana. In the 1880s this facility was considered inadequate and was replaced by a new Asylum for the Aged and Incurables in Luqa, today St Vincent de Paule Hospital. A central role in tending to the needs of the poor was also played by the Maltese Roman Catholic Church. A new Lunatic Asylum was built at Wied Incita in Attard, today Mount Carmel Hospital, and completed in 1861.

Due to overcrowding in Valletta, it was not possible to develop these charitable institutions within the city itself. A lack of space was also partly why the naval hospital was built on the other side of the harbour in the 1830s.<sup>32</sup> The former slave prison in Valletta had served as a naval hospital until 1819, before it first moved to Birgu and then to the new premises at Bighi.<sup>33</sup>

By 1860 the housing shortage and lack of sanitation around the harbour was critical. Sanitation and its role in preventing contagious disease and improving public health was a major concern in Victorian society. Under Governor Le Marchant several sites were proposed for new dwellings for people with low incomes in Valletta and its suburb Floriana. The largest of

these government projects was the Camerata block in the lower part of Valletta, built in the early 1860s and still in use today. This block was intended to house around 800 persons in apartments. It was built around a central courtyard, with good ventilation and light, as well as a water supply.<sup>34</sup>

Valletta suffered from severe epidemics of cholera in 1837, 1850, 1865, and 1887, killing hundreds throughout Malta.<sup>35</sup> Due to poor sanitation, urban areas were especially badly affected. The outbreak in 1865 was followed by severe drought, which added to the hardship.<sup>36</sup> Despite objections from the Treasury in London, Governor Bouverie had already embarked on a scheme to improve the water supply of Valletta and the Three Cities after two severe droughts in less than six years in the 1830s, but the situation remained precarious and there were frequent water shortages.

## Religion

When Malta was ruled by the Order of St John, secular and religious power were fused together. In line with the ideas of Republican France, the brief French rule over Malta in the late eighteenth century had introduced a separation between the role and powers of State and Church. This distinction was maintained by the British as they came to govern the island.

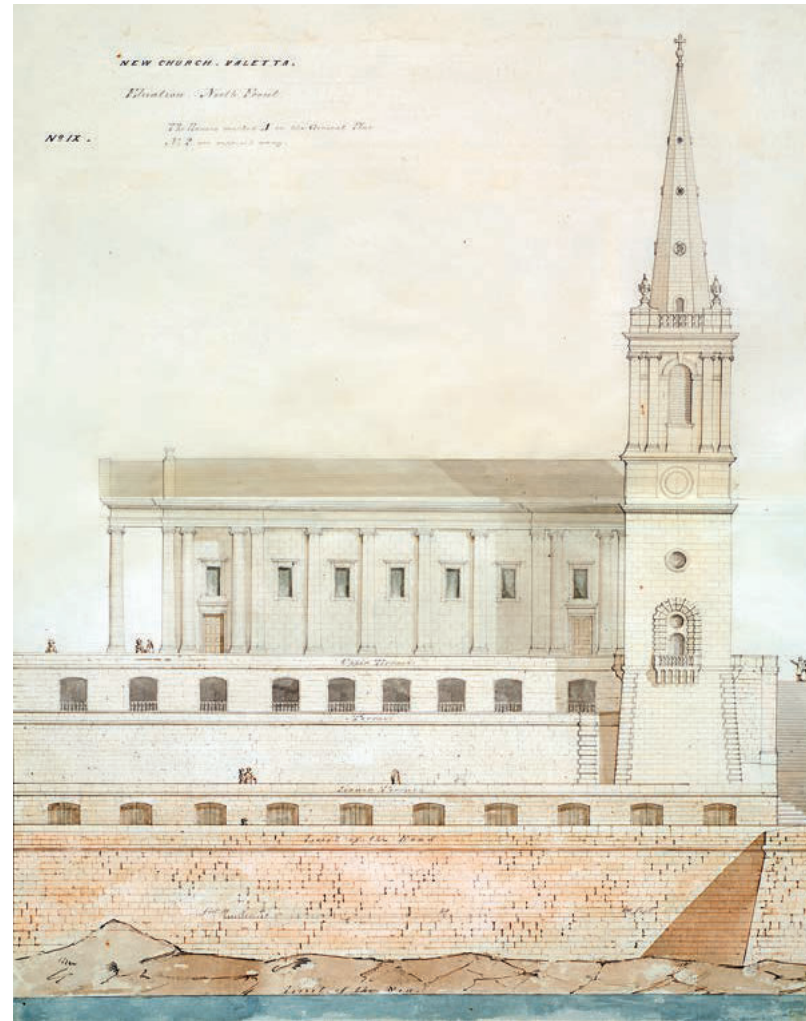
The colonial government in Malta followed a policy of respecting established religious practices, particularly Roman Catholicism as the dominant religion in Malta. The British professed tolerance and non-interference in religious matters, however the Maltese were always wary of any potential attempts to assert Protestantism on the island. But the British were mainly interested in Malta for strategic reasons, and were keen to maintain good relations with the Church authorities in Malta. For the first time in Malta's history, in the nineteenth century the bishops of Malta were chosen from among the Maltese population and were not foreigners. They therefore tended to be relatively pro-British.<sup>37</sup> The archbishop also maintained a residence in Valletta. In 1835 when British Malta's first Council

*Opposite:  
Elevation of St  
Paul's Pro-cathedral  
by William Scamp  
(Wignacourt  
Museum, Rabat)*

of Government was established at the Palace in Valletta, the seat of government, the bishop of Malta was also given an official nomination. Bishop Francesco Saverio Caruana (1759-1847) refused to occupy his seat as he objected to taking the oath.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from the Maltese language, Roman Catholicism played a central role in the growing sense of Maltese national identity which was emerging in the nineteenth century. The British were fully aware of the strength of feeling of the Maltese on this subject. The first Protestant church in Valletta, the Anglican church of St Paul, was not completed before 1844 when the British had already been in Malta nearly half a century. As the number of British residents and visitors in Malta increased during the nineteenth century, the lack of suitable spaces to conduct Protestant religious services in Valletta was soon felt. The first idea was to construct a church at the end of Republic Street, probably somewhere near Fort St Elmo, however acquiring a suitable site proved difficult and costly.<sup>39</sup> In 1825 George Whitmore (1775-1862) created designs for a new church to be built in East Street (Strada Levante) where it would be visible and accessible to visitors entering Valletta through the Porta Marina (formerly Porta Del Monte) entrance on the Grand Harbour side of the city.<sup>40</sup> The chosen site was near the Lower Barrakka Gardens, in an open space near the old prison formerly known as the *'bagno degli schiavi'*. Part of the prison wall and an adjacent house began to be removed to make way for the new church, however the plan was abandoned due to high costs and structural setbacks.<sup>41</sup> This area was badly bombed during the second world war and social housing was constructed on the site.<sup>42</sup>

In the 1820s the British also considered converting a Catholic church in Valletta, one among those which had belonged to the Order of St John and which the Colonial Office now held as government property. Among others, potential churches included the Jesuit church, St James church and the conventual church of St John. While the Jesuits church was seriously considered for conversion to a Protestant place of worship, a pertinent problem was the number of Catholics already buried in there as well as its numerous private altars, 'the proprietors of





which would need to be indemnified'. This church was also used by Roman Catholic British soldiers. St James church, formerly of the Langue of Castille of the Order of St John, was also looked at. No Catholics were buried there, which was advantageous, however the building was too small.<sup>43</sup> Eventually the idea of converting an existing church was rejected to avoid causing offence, 'as it would militate severely against the prejudices of the Maltese people'.<sup>44</sup>

Protestant services in Valletta continued to be carried out in private houses and in the former kitchen of the Grand Master's Palace. This arrangement was however felt to be wholly inadequate. In 1830 the Protestant population in Malta numbered around 700 persons excluding the garrison.<sup>45</sup>

Protracted discussions and correspondence between the governor's office in Malta and the Colonial Office in London ensued, considering various sites for the erection of a new Protestant church. In 1836 the director of works in Malta, John McKenzie, drew the outline of a plan for a church on the site of the so-called Auberge d'Angleterre.<sup>46</sup> Another suggestion was the market site in Merchants Street, however this would have necessitated the building of a new market elsewhere.<sup>47</sup>

Dowager Queen Adelaide (1792-1849) visited Malta in the late 1830s and offered to pay for the erection of a new Protestant church on the island. This prompted the Governor of Malta, Sir Henry Bouverie (1783-1852), to offer a site in Independence Square (Piazza Celsi) for the building of a new church. This was the site of the former Auberge d'Allemagne of the German knights of St John, built by the Maltese *capomastro* Geronimo Cassar in the late sixteenth century. Parts of this old building were being used as a naval bakery and mill room, and a section was rented out to the Chief Justice, Sir John Stoddart (1773-1856). Bishop Francesco Saverio Caruana (1759-1847) in Malta informed the Vatican about these developments and was instructed 'to use all his prudence and wisdom to impede the implementation of the Project'.<sup>48</sup> Yet the plan went ahead and Queen Adelaide laid the foundation stone in a grand ceremony on 20 March 1839. The Auberge d'Allemagne was demolished and construction began under the supervision of Richard Lankesheer (1803-

41), who was appointed superintendent of public works in 1838. Problems developed as Lankesheer was not adequately familiar with Maltese construction methods and materials to undertake such a large project, and did not have the required training. The new building soon began to display serious faults. Lankesheer was taken off the job and replaced by the Admiralty architect William Scamp in 1841, who redesigned and rebuilt the defective structure. Scamp was also in charge of constructing the large naval bakery at the Vittoriosa waterfront in 1841-48, today the Malta Maritime Museum.<sup>49</sup>

Scamp's church has a large and impressive Neo-Classical portico looking onto the square, and a side entrance. Its detached tower with a high spire is today a familiar landmark in the skyline of Valletta as seen from the Marsamxett side. The church was consecrated in 1844. It now holds the status of Pro-cathedral and is still in regular use by the Protestant community in Malta. In 1842 the see of Gibraltar was established, exercising jurisdiction over the Anglican clergy and laity resident in Gibraltar and Malta, as well as in other places around the Mediterranean. While Valletta would have been a more central location for the see to be established, Gibraltar was chosen to not offend the existing Roman Catholic bishopric of Malta.<sup>50</sup> The first bishop of Gibraltar was George Tomlinson, who held this post from 1842 until his death in Malta in 1863.<sup>51</sup> Upon his appointment Tomlinson pledged to reside in Gibraltar or Malta for six to eight months each year, and he usually spent this time in Malta during his 20 years as bishop of Gibraltar.<sup>52</sup> The diocese of Gibraltar was held to have a colonial and 'distinctively representative and interpretive character, and a peculiar duty of reconciliation'. It was specifically not intended to proselytize or interfere with the established jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic church.<sup>53</sup>

In 1842 a public meeting for British residents was held in Valletta, to create a fund for the bishopric of Gibraltar and enable the sending out of Protestant bishops to Malta. The resolutions were moved by Governor Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Bouverie, and seconded by the retired diplomat John Hookham Frere. It was noted that the permanent British residents in

*Opposite:  
Neo-Classical  
façade of St Paul's  
Pro-cathedral,  
designed by  
William Scamp*

*St Andrew's Presbyterian church in South Street, built in a Neo-Gothic style by architect Giuseppe Bonavia in the late 1850s*



Valletta 'far exceed those of our other colonies and settlements in the Mediterranean' and that British visitors were increasing annually.<sup>54</sup> A group of Methodists purchased a house and church in Melita Street, corner with Old Bakery Street, in Valletta in 1824. At that time, legal restrictions prevented Protestant religious groups in Malta from acquiring property and the house was

held in the name of the vicar. To avoid friction with the Maltese Roman Catholic community, the building was also obliged to look like a private house rather than a church. In 1843 the building was sold to the Free Church of Scotland. In 1868 the Methodists moved into premises in Strait Street and in the early 1870s the centre of Methodist activity shifted from Valletta to a building in

Piazza Maggiore in Floriana, where the Naval and Military Home for servicemen was set up.<sup>55</sup> In 1876 a request was made to the governor's office by Reverend John Webster and Reverend John Laverack for permission to build a Wesleyan church on a site near St John Counterguard in Valletta at Windmill Street. It was estimated that around 400 people would make use of these religious facilities. The military authorities had no objection to this site as long as it would not obstruct 'the fire from St John Cavalier', however Giuseppe Trapani, collector of land revenue, objected as the proposed church would obstruct the light and view and reduce the value of the houses opposite, which would revert to government following the expiry of their 99-year lease. He pointed out that the tenants may have spent considerable money in improving or reconstructing their homes.

The chief secretary to government Sir Victor Houlton, replied tersely that the residents may be inconvenienced but 'in such case would have no more right to complain that I had when Mr Casolani built a house of four stories in Strada Mezzodi opposite to mine ... and which completely overshadowed and deprived me as tenant of the house opposite, on a 99-year lease also, of ... sun and ventilation'.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, the idea of constructing a Wesleyan church at Windmill Street was abandoned.

The Methodists eventually built a large church in a Neo-Gothic style in Floriana, designed by architect T.M. Ellis of London and overseen by Webster Paulson (1837-87) from the Malta public works department.<sup>57</sup> Works were completed in 1883. A new Soldier's and Sailor's Home was built next to the church in 1908 and named Connaught Hall. The Wesleyan Methodist church in Floriana was transferred to the Maltese government in 1973 and the Methodist community joined up with the Presbyterians in Valletta. Their former church is now called the Robert Samut Hall and is managed by the Floriana Local Council as a cultural venue.

Having bought the Valletta premises owned by the Methodists in December 1843, the Scottish Presbyterians used this as a base for some years. It soon proved too small, and money began to be collected to build a new place of worship. Reverend John Wisely arrived in Valletta in 1854 during a period

of intense activity in Malta due to the Crimean war, and played a central role in this initiative. He obtained permission from the colonial government to build a new Presbyterian church on a site in South Street corner with Old Bakery Street, and began to seriously fundraise for this purpose. The foundation stone of what was to become St Andrew's church was laid without a public ceremony on 27 June 1856 by John Grant, president of the chamber of commerce.

The Governor of Malta Sir William Reid (1791-1858), whose father had been a minister of the Church of Scotland, supported the building of this church. The Maltese Bishop Publius Maria Sant (1779-1864) tried to prevent it from being allowed to look like a church or include a belfry. Thirty years earlier these arguments had successfully obliged the Methodist church in Valletta to resemble a house from the outside. But Reid rejected the bishop's claims which he viewed as 'intolerant'. The *Malta Times* reported that 'His Excellency the Governor immediately on application headed the subscription list with a donation of £50'.<sup>58</sup>

The chosen architect was the Maltese Giuseppe Bonavia (1821-85) who in 1854 had also been engaged to design the Neo-Classical Borsa building for the recently established chamber of commerce in Republic Street. Both buildings were completed in 1857. While Bonavia had already designed the façade of the Carmelite church in Valletta in 1852, the new St Andrew's Presbyterian church was the first building in Valletta designed in the Neo-Gothic style, moving away from the usual Maltese urban architecture which was still heavily influenced by Baroque designs and traditions. Soon afterwards Bonavia also created a Neo-Gothic design for the first Carmelite church at Balluta in St Julian's.

Simon Rose, a wealthy Scottish merchant residing in Valletta and a member of the chamber of commerce received the subscriptions for the new church, together with John Grant. Grant and Rose were both on the committee supervising the execution of Bonavia's design for the new chamber of commerce building.<sup>59</sup> Rose's Maltese wife Giovanna (Jane) Zimelli was the sister of Hector Zimelli, then superintendent of public works, who



*Opposite:  
The entrance into  
Valletta through  
City Gate in the  
early 19th-century  
showing the old  
Ferreria on the left  
and the Casa alla  
Giornata on the  
right, later the site  
of the Royal Opera  
House*

designed the new covered market in Valletta in 1858. The new Presbyterian church was first opened on 29 December 1857<sup>60</sup> and is still in regular use today. The Methodist church moved there from Floriana in 1974 and it is now the only direct local partnership between the Church of Scotland and the Methodist churches in the world. The church buildings are also regularly used by a German-speaking Lutheran congregation, the Andreas Gemeinde.

Another Protestant church, known as the Garrison chapel at Castille Place, was built in Valletta by the Royal Engineers and completed in 1857. Similar buildings were constructed elsewhere in the British Empire and used as schools for the children of military and naval personnel, as well as for the servicemen themselves, and for religious functions. The building has a plain façade with corner pilasters, a two-column portico and a small bell-cot. Unusually for Malta, it has a pitched roof. It was constructed on the Valletta fortifications next to the Upper Barrakka Gardens, overlooking the Grand Harbour. Initially the building served as a school during the week and a multi-denominational place of worship on Sundays. It continued to be used for religious functions until around 1950. It served as a military social club and later became the Malta Central Mail Room. In 1999 it was taken over by the Malta Stock Exchange.

Like all other buildings which had belonged to the Order of St John, the Roman Catholic churches of the knights in Valletta did not devolve to the Maltese Church after the departure of the knights but were considered as state property. This included the former conventual church of the Order, the richly decorated and prestigious St John's church together with all its treasures. This led to some wrangling and discontent over claims to religious property between the British and the Maltese Church authorities. The latter held that St John's should have devolved to them. The grand master of the Order of St John was authorized by the pope to have a throne in the church, on the right of the main altar and within the railings. In 1808 Civil Commissioner Sir Alexander Ball came to an arrangement with the Maltese Archbishop Ferdinando Mattei, whereby a throne displaying His Majesty's Arms would be reserved for the British

representative of the king, in all the principal churches which had previously held a throne for the grand master.<sup>61</sup> Although the king's representative had the right to use this throne, the seat was always left empty. When Sir Thomas Maitland was governor of Malta from 1813 to 1824, a second throne was erected on the opposite side for the archbishop.<sup>62</sup> In 1816 Pope Pius VII conferred the status of cathedral on St John's and in 1822 Mattei requested Maitland to authorize the use of the church as a co-cathedral. Maitland agreed but insisted that this was a favour and 'the government did not in the smallest degree give up the full and complete Right and Title which it possessed to the property of this Church.'<sup>63</sup>

Burials taking place in the overcrowded churches and crypts of Floriana and Valletta were problematic. In 1812 Civil Commissioner Hildebrand Oakes wrote a letter to the bishop of Malta asking for his cooperation in restricting burials in the churches of Valletta. As advised by the committee of public health, burials in Valletta churches were to be restricted to persons and families owning a private grave. The general population should be buried in the public cemetery owned by the Università of Valletta and attached to the church of St Publius in Floriana.<sup>64</sup> In 1811 a British visitor to Malta was dismayed by the 'awful' cemetery he saw at St Publius, which he described as a 'large vaulted cemetery with 365 graves, all numbered and flagged over; each is to contain ten bodies; they are arranged for the reception of the poorer classes. One is opened every day in succession, and all the middle and lower classes are buried here. They are not allowed coffins, but come dressed in their best clothes, and are thus deposited bodies, whether somewhat perfect (which sometimes happens) or all bones, are then taken up and thrown into a large vault; there I saw millions of bones – an awful lesson for contemplation!'<sup>65</sup> In 1869 burials in churches and crypts were finally prohibited in Valletta, Floriana and the Three Cities. This was done in agreement with the Church authorities and coincided with the opening of the large new Addolorata cemetery in Paola in the 1860s, designed in a Neo-Gothic style by Maltese architect Emmanuele Luigi Galizia. The government also attempted to extend this prohibition to other





towns and villages of Malta in the 1890s but 'met with great opposition from the country people who opposed interment outside their churches.'<sup>66</sup> Protestant burials had already been taking place outside the Valletta city walls since the first days of British rule in Malta. The first Protestant cemetery was established at Msida Bastion in Floriana. Once this proved too small for the community, the British government ordered the construction of a new cemetery at Ta' Braxia in Pieta in the 1850s, which was also designed by Galizia.

A well-known incident in Valletta where religious sensitivities were upset was triggered by Sir Patrick Stuart who was governor from 1843 to 1847. Stuart was a staunch Presbyterian, and disapproved strongly of holding Carnival festivities on the Sabbath. In 1846 he forbade the use of masks on Carnival Sunday. This provoked a strong reaction from the Maltese, who considered this to be 'an act of Protestant oppression and despotic interference with the Catholic religion.'<sup>67</sup> Violent scuffles ensued among people demonstrating in the streets of Valletta. The crowds grabbed and smashed some of the pipes and drums of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment who were beating a retreat on Palace Square. The secretary of state in London, William Gladstone, asserted that it would have been more prudent had Stuart consulted the archbishop of Malta before proceeding with his order. He directed Stuart not to renew a similar order the following year unless he had a written agreement from the Maltese Church authorities on the matter.<sup>68</sup>

In 1899 an Anti-Masonic League (Unione Antimassonica) was set up under the patronage of Maltese Archbishop Pietro Pace. Meetings were held at the bishop's palace in Valletta, with the archbishop taking an active part in the proceedings. Its members included prominent Maltese members of the professional classes, such as Judges Paolo Debono and Luigi Ganado; Emmanuele Luigi Galizia, former superintendent of public works; Fortunato Mizzi, editor of the *Gazzetta di Malta* and member of the Council of Government; as well as Dr Salvatore Castaldi and Dr Vincenzo Frendo Azzopardi.<sup>69</sup> This group held that freemasonry in Malta was not a harmless institution and was aimed at 'ousting the religion of our forefathers and supplanting it by Protestantism'

and that 'the substitution of the English language by Italian is another means of attaining that end'.<sup>70</sup> The Catholic Church in Malta was convinced that knowledge of the English language would be used as a tool to spread the Protestant religion and strongly opposed it.

## Education

Maltese concerns about Protestantism were still very prevalent in the last years of the nineteenth century, and were linked to the controversial politicization of language in tri-lingual Malta and the so-called 'language question'.<sup>71</sup> By the 1870s the British government was pushing forward the teaching of English and Maltese in schools, thereby suppressing the learning of Italian.

In the early decades of the British presence in Malta, the government had not tried hard to anglicize the population. But in the late 1850s a new competitive examination for entry to the public service was introduced, which was the first of its kind in the British empire.<sup>72</sup> One of the requirements of the exam was knowledge of English, which quickly made learning the language more desirable for the literate Maltese. English was also an important asset for skilled labourers seeking work at the dockyards. Maltese was the language spoken by the large majority of the population, but its orthography was very fluid until well into the twentieth century. Italian was the language of education, and was mainly restricted to the literate middle and upper classes. Although knowledge of Italian was more widespread than English, it was still quite limited. A census carried out in 1861 recorded the total population of Malta and Gozo as 134,055 persons. Of these, 6,355 men and 2,214 women were identified as being able to speak English, and 4,385 men and 1,918 women could also write the language. Italian was somewhat more widespread, with 10,305 men and 4,981 women able to speak it, and 8,785 men and 4,797 women able to write it. The same census listed 1,270 as the total number of English residents of Malta, excluding the garrison, with only 11 in Gozo.<sup>73</sup>

*Opposite:  
Old photographs  
of 19th-century  
Valletta depicting  
the road leading  
to City Gate (top  
left), Republic  
Square with garden  
(bottom left) and  
St John Street (right)*



During the turbulent years of the Italian Risorgimento, a small community of political activists had taken refuge in Valletta, escaping persecution and imprisonment in Italy and Sicily. In Valletta they continued with their clandestine political agitation for the unification of Italy, setting up printing presses and newspapers, and gathering arms and support. These refugees integrated into Maltese society, particularly among the pro-Italian professional classes. Already by the 1840s some educated Maltese were supporting Italian unification as seen in newspapers such as *Il Mediterraneo*.<sup>74</sup> After the dramatic political events of 1860 on the Italian peninsula, Britain began to fear that the loyalty of the Maltese population might be swayed towards Italy. This gave impetus to their drive to promote the English language in Malta and to suppress the use of Italian in schools.

The state of elementary education in Malta was very poor for a large part of the nineteenth century. During their two-year governance of the island from 1798 to 1800, the French had unsuccessfully planned to establish new schools teaching the French language and culture. The university in Valletta was replaced with the *École Centrale*, but this shut down in December 1798 during the blockade of Valletta.<sup>75</sup> The French administration had tried to send 60 Maltese youths between the ages of nine to fourteen 'from among the wealthiest families' to study in Paris. Their parents were to provide them with an allowance of 800 francs and 600 francs for their journey. They would be given uniforms and travel on men-of-war to Marseille. Another six youths were to be enrolled as naval cadets. Parents who refused would be fined 1,000 *scudi*. But this initiative proved difficult to implement as Maltese families invented every excuse to ensure that their sons stayed in Malta.<sup>76</sup>

Civil Commissioner Alexander Ball reopened the university in Valletta in October 1800 after two years of closure, and in 1826 a new Neo-Classical entrance was inserted into the old building in line with the British tastes of the day. But for several decades the British authorities did not pay much attention or dedicate any resources to improving elementary schooling in Malta. Education was not compulsory and working-class parents

encouraged their children to seek employment early.<sup>77</sup> The situation became so dire that a commission was sent to Malta in 1836, led by George Cornewall Lewis and John Austin. Besides the university in Valletta there was also the lyceum, a higher secondary school. Only one state primary school operated in Valletta when the commissioners arrived in Malta, and there was another in Senglea across the harbour.<sup>78</sup>

Small private schools also offered some teaching, but school buildings were inadequate and badly equipped. Teachers were barely trained and the majority of the Maltese population was illiterate. Recommendations for improvements were put forward and there was gradual progress. Between 1847 and 1891, the school population trebled, with almost 30% of the student population based in Valletta and another 39% in the Three Cities across the harbour.<sup>79</sup>

By 1881 in a population of 149,782 there were 10,281 persons who could read English, the majority of whom lived in Valletta and the harbour towns, and 16,817 persons who could read Italian. There was a distinct difference between the urban population around the Valletta harbour and the more rural population in the rest of Malta.

Together with the language question, taxes were another highly sensitive topic. In 1877 the government recommended reducing the grain tax and recouping the loss in revenue from new taxes on other goods. This caused such unrest that a crowd of around 2,000 Maltese gathered in Valletta, smashed windows and disrupted proceedings in the Council chamber. Political activist Sigismondo Savona supported the abolition of the bread tax as, in his view, it enabled the government 'to lord it over the country' and effect 'all their petty schemes for the embellishment of Valletta'.<sup>80</sup>

Tempers flared high among the Maltese on the political front, often linked to the language question. In 1880 the Maltese nationalist party was founded 'to fight anglicization with the weapon of *italianità*'.<sup>81</sup>

Politics was led by the professional classes and the clergy. Band clubs and religious fraternities provided social points of contact, but participation in politics was concentrated primarily

in Valletta and the harbour towns.<sup>82</sup> In 1901 the government banned all public political meetings within the precincts of Valletta, Floriana and the Three Cities, arguing that these were an integral part of the fortress with their fortifications and armed services establishments.<sup>83</sup> In response, the Maltese held two large political meetings outside Floriana in the open space at Ta' Braxia, close to the Protestant cemetery, protesting about questions related to language and taxes. The clergy were also present. These meetings ended up as anti-British manifestations with the crowds defying the government by entering Valletta despite the ban.<sup>84</sup>

### Leisure

Besides the realities of the economy, politics, education and poverty, the social life of Valletta was very active, with a continuous stream of occasions and visits to celebrate. A young naval officer remarked drily that in the early 1860s, 'unless the ships are in the sailors have little to do, and the soldiers ... comparatively nothing, there are a great many entertainments, and everybody meets everybody else at least twice a day'.<sup>85</sup>

Besides evenings at the theatre, social life in Valletta for the British and the Maltese upper classes included balls, dinners, fancy dress parties, musical and theatrical events. Many of these events were held at the Auberge de Provence where the Union Club established its premises in 1826. The garrison also hosted dinners and dances at the Auberge de Castille. One of the favourites parties of the year was the annual fancy dress ball in February during Carnival, hosted by the governor at the Palace and to which up to 900 guests would be invited.<sup>86</sup>

Visiting dignitaries or military officers were honoured with balls and dinners in Valletta. Besides the civil government, the central role of the garrison in Malta is readily observed in the details of such visits, which give a sense of the atmosphere of the time.

In 1827 Admiral Sir Edward Codrington reached the Valletta harbour. On leaving his ship the *Asia* he was loudly cheered by

*Opposite:  
Entrance to the  
Collegium Melitense  
in St Paul Street,  
remodelled in a  
Neo-Classical style  
in the early 19th  
century*

the crew, as well as by other ships of the combined fleet. As he landed on the Customs House mole he was greeted by the principal civil and military officers of the government and the garrison, and a salute was fired from Fort St Angelo. He then met the governor at the Palace, and a ball was given at the Auberge de Provence in honour of the battle of Navarin.<sup>87</sup> In 1831 the French frigate *Artemese* arrived in Malta, with the Prince of Joinville on board for his nautical education, the third son of King Louis Philippe of France. He was only a young teenager, but he was honoured with salutes, manning of yards, reviewing of troops, state visits and state dinners. The French consul in Malta gave a ball in his honour 'on a splendid scale' at the Auberge de Provence.<sup>88</sup>

In 1839 Dowager Queen Adelaide spent some time in Malta for health reasons. Every day she would walk along the Valletta bastions overlooking the harbours, or drive out into the country. She was invited to many dinners and parties, including an 'elegant *soirée* given in her honour by Colonel McDonald, commanding the 92<sup>nd</sup> Highlanders, at the Auberge de Castille. The queen's carriage took her to the auberge and a guard of honour stood on the illuminated grand staircase as she went upstairs. In the large mess-room upstairs a theatrical stage was set up for the occasion, and the 'national drama of *Rob Roy* was admirably performed by the amateur soldiers of the regiment.' She was then taken by Governor Sir Henry Bouverie to the colonel's apartments in the auberge, where a large dinner party was held. Then it was back to the mess-room for the dancing of quadrilles, waltzes and the national reel. The dowager queen herself gave an evening party at the Palace 'to which the nobility and gentry of Malta were invited.' Dinner was served in the Tapestry Room at eleven o'clock and there was dancing in the Hall of St Michael and St George until the early hours of the morning.<sup>89</sup> There was an active social life in Valletta.

That same year Prince George visited Malta and accompanied the governor 'in the half-yearly inspection of the several regiments in garrison'. The prince then 'honoured the officers of the garrison with his presence at a ball' at the

Auberge de Provence where he danced with the daughters of a rear-admiral. St Andrew's Day was celebrated in 1844 with a big dinner in the large hall, or the mess-room, of the Auberge de Castille by the officers of the Black Watch, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of Royal Highlanders. Governor Sir Patrick Stuart attended and during the meal the instrumental band of the regiment played Scottish tunes alternately with the band of pipes, with fifteen pipers marching in file around the table. The pipe-major played from a pair of silver pipes presented to the regiment after the battle of Waterloo.<sup>90</sup>

The 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the Royal Highlanders were in action again at the Auberge de Castille with a Grand Ball in January 1847, one of the 'most splendid balls ever witnessed in the garrison' which was attended by both British residents as well as 'all the elite of Malta', described in the British press as follows:

... the whole of the vast Auberge de Castille, its noble entrance, double staircases, vestibules, spacious saloons, galleries, corridors, all profusely and most elegantly draped, and tastefully embellished with transparencies, coloured lamps, illuminations, military trophies, arms arranged in a variety of devices, regimental standards, bearing the names of many well-fought fields crowned with victory, royal standards, and national colours of all sorts, were thrown open to the guests. At a little after nine the company began to assemble, soon after which dancing commenced. Refreshments of every description, and of the most elegant kinds, were abundantly supplied.<sup>91</sup>

In November that year, the officers of the garrison gave a Grand Ball and supper at the Auberge de Provence, attended by two admirals and a great number of naval officers. On the anniversary of the battle of Navarino, the admirals and captains of squadron celebrated with a dinner. On the anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar, the officers of the *Trafalgar* gave a ball on board their ship in the Valletta harbour.<sup>92</sup> And in this style the social life of

Valletta carried on and on. The economist Nassau William Senior (1790-1864) dined at the Palace and noted that among the large number present all the guests were military or naval, except for Crown Advocate Adrian Dingli.<sup>93</sup> But besides the British officers, civil servants and residents, the guest lists often also included influential Maltese high-ranking professionals, businessmen, civil servants, politicians and nobles. In the streets outside, as we have seen, the majority of people lived in poverty.

Besides the balls and dinners hosted at the Palace and the main auberges, similar occasions were also held at the social clubs in Valletta, particularly at the Union Club and from the 1850s onwards also at the new chamber of commerce. Many events were attended by both British and Maltese residents of Valletta. These clubs were an important element of social life in Valletta at this period.

There were also other forms of cultural activity. For the more educated classes of society, admiring the remains and sculpture of antiquity was increasingly fashionable. During the eighteenth century, British travellers to Italy, following the typical routes of the Grand Tour, increasingly began to devote time and energy to viewing, as well as purchasing, remains from classical Greek and Roman culture as well as other periods of ancient history. Neo-Classicism soon dominated architectural trends in Britain, which continued until well into the Victorian period.

In 1812 Civil Commissioner Hildebrand Oakes established a small museum of antiquities at the public library in Valletta, displaying a collection of archaeological artefacts gathered from all over Malta, to make them more accessible for visitors and antiquarians to view.<sup>94</sup> The library of the Order of St John, which was in the Conservatory and not in the Biblioteca constructed by Stefano Ittar in 1796, had also housed a small collection of archaeological artefacts from 1760 onwards. This was open to the public and several visitors left records of its contents.<sup>95</sup>

National exhibitions of art, crafts and industry were fashionable from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Sir William Reid, who became governor of Malta in 1851, had been the chairman of the committee of the Great Exhibition in London, in which Malta participated. Reid set up the Malta



Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in Valletta, modelled on a similar institution in London. This society organized competitions and exhibitions on a regular basis and awarded medals and prizes. Continuing this initiative, Malta participated in international exhibitions including the Paris exhibition of 1867 and the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886.<sup>96</sup>

The religious feast days which dotted the cultural calendar were particularly important for the Maltese, with street processions and general festivity. Carnival was a big annual event in Valletta. Popular boat regattas were staged in the harbour. Band clubs were also centres of musical activity, at all levels of Valletta society. Wide patronage was extended to such clubs. On one occasion, the committee of the King's Own band with

*Opposite:  
Early 20th-century  
military parade  
in Palace Square,  
Valletta*



*Opposite:  
Aerial view from  
across the ditch of  
Valletta showing  
Hastings Gardens on  
St John Bastion with  
the cavalier in the  
background*

over 600 people boarded the steamship *Calabria* in the Valletta harbour and went on a tour to Catania in Sicily to celebrate the anniversary of the composer Bellini.<sup>97</sup>

Catering and accommodation also expanded at this period. Numerous hotels and restaurants were established in Valletta in the nineteenth century. In 1839 a British visitor noted that thirty years previously it was necessary to depend on the hospitality of English residents to have dinner, but now it was possible to eat out at various places.<sup>98</sup> Café society was thriving, with coffee shops in Republic Street serving sorbets and ices flavoured with chocolate and coffee or various fruits and berries. The ice was brought to Malta from Mount Etna in Sicily in boats. Marsala wine, liquors and a wide variety of drinks were available. In 1860 the coffee room overlooking Victoria Gardens (Republic Square) served aerated soda water, lemonade, ginger, magnesia water and all sorts of other beverages.<sup>99</sup>

Businessmen imported foodstuffs to Valletta, with some items clearly catering for their British clientele, such as Twining's teas, Fortnum and Mason's jams, jellies, cocoa, chocolate paste and powder, crystallized fruits and Malaga raisins.<sup>100</sup> In 1886 Nicola Zammit noted that Valletta had 23 hotels and restaurants, 15 clubs and *kazini*, two gymnasiums and three libraries with reading rooms.<sup>101</sup> Some places also offered billiard tables and the Windsor Castle Hotel in Zachary Street (Strada Zaccaria) had a tea garden and a 'museum of curiosities'. Most hotels and restaurants had English proprietors but there were also some French, Italian and Maltese owners.

When the weather got too hot, many British residents left the city. Sliema and St Julian's on the other side of the Marsamxett harbour became increasingly popular as summer resorts, and a permanent ferry service to Sliema began in the 1880s. Bathing sheds, with small pools cut into the rock for dipping into the sea, were constructed along the Marsamxett side of Valletta as well as at Sliema. Summers by the sea were pleasant, and in winter it was popular to go out of Valletta for a ride or picnic in the countryside or at the small woodlands at Buskett (Boschetto) in Rabat, to escape the overcrowding and dirt of the city. There were very few public gardens for relaxation in Valletta itself.

Hardly any houses in the city had private gardens and most were restricted to internal courtyards. The Order of St John had usually established their summer houses and gardens outside Valletta. In the early seventeenth century, however, Grand Master Lascaris had built himself a garden and villa on the Valletta bastions near the Marina, which became known as *Ġnien is-Sultan* or the *Giardino Marina*. But the villa was demolished and the garden dramatically reduced in the 1850s, in a bid to strengthen the harbour defences.

The knights had also cultivated a botanic garden in the ditch of Fort St Elmo in Valletta and close to the hospital, with plants mostly grown in stone containers. This was still in use until around 1800.<sup>102</sup> This space was however quite limited, and in the first years of the century Alexander Ball shifted the Orto Botanico to Floriana. In 1855 it was relocated to nearby gardens, today Argotti Gardens, which had belonged to the knight Fra Ignazio Argote de Guzman and formerly also to Fra Manuel Pinto de Fonseca. Ball also began converting the Maglio in Floriana, formerly an area where the knights played recreational games, into a garden.

From early in the century, the British set about embellishing choice spots along the Valletta bastions with plants and monuments to create public gardens. Apart from the importance of the monuments, these gardens were also intended as 'places of social gathering'.<sup>103</sup> In 1809 a Neo-Classical monument dedicated to Sir Alexander Ball in the style of a Grecian temple was built at the Lower Barrakka Gardens. It was designed by Maltese artist Giorgio Pullicino and embellished with work by sculptor Vincenzo Dimech.

In the 1820s there were no trees yet along the bastions bordering Windmill Street (Strada Molina), named after the windmills close by. Yet when the Marquis of Hastings died in Malta his monument was placed there, in what later became Hastings Gardens, as the spot was deemed suitable for creating an attractive, or 'ornamental', public walkway.<sup>104</sup> The Ponsonby column on the Marsamxett side of Valletta was erected in 1838. These important monuments, placed high on the imposing fortifications of the city, were 'not only points of reference in



modern, stylistic trends but collectively a powerful colonial statement'.<sup>105</sup> In 1839, a British guidebook noted that 'since the English became masters, the proud bastions of Valletta have become sepulchral'.<sup>106</sup> The 'new' Barrakka, today the Upper Barrakka, on the Bastion of St Peter and St Paul, was also developed as a garden with walkways and monuments. The Order of St John had already embellished this attractive space with a row of large arches, but the site was remodelled by George Whitmore in 1824 and opened up to the public. Governor Thomas Maitland was buried there. The wide view over the harbour from this garden was much admired. When the Prince of Wales visited Valletta in 1876 he was taken to the Upper Barrakka Gardens to see 'a magnificent illumination of the dockyard and the entire circuit of the Valetta harbour', staged to honour his visit:

All along the bastions, troops stood closely ranged with coloured lights. Two thousand Chinese lanterns had been distributed among the boats plying the harbour. The ships of war and several yachts were illuminated at the masts and yards, the portholes throwing up thousands of beautiful and repeatedly changing tinted lights.<sup>107</sup>

Another chief source of entertainment in nineteenth-century Valletta was the theatre. Until the 1860s, the main venue for this was the Manoel Theatre, and visitors describe evenings there right from the earliest years of the British rule. In 1800 one British officer thought the theatre was 'small and neat, though now much out of repair'.<sup>108</sup> This is hardly surprising, so soon after the disastrous period when the French were blockaded in the city. Indeed, a major refurbishment was undertaken soon afterwards. Whitmore redesigned the interior substantially in 1812, only 80 years after the theatre was first opened in 1732 by Portuguese Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1663-1736). Further changes were introduced in 1844 and again in 1906. Whitmore was following the brief of Hildebrand Oakes who wanted to have the building restored, providing better facilities and seating arrangements in a 'modern and elegant'

style. Paul Xuereb notes that the theatre 'as we know it probably owes its appearance to Oakes and Whitmore even more than to Vilhena and Carapecchia'.<sup>109</sup> Many of the performances at this period were Italian operas, with 'God Save the King' played during the intermission with everyone standing up to sing. The theatre was also used regularly for balls and for lotteries.<sup>110</sup>

In the 1860s the Council of Government chose a design for a new opera house by architect Edward Middleton Barry, who had built the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden in London only a few years earlier. He had trained under British architect Thomas Henry Wyatt who originally designed the home for the elderly at Mgieret, today St Vincent de Paule Hospital. Discussions between Barry and the Council were handled by Crown Advocate Sir Adrian Dingli, who had also played a similar role in discussions about the new covered market in Valletta and the new lunatic asylum in Attard in the 1850s.<sup>111</sup> The government was accused of spending excessive funds on a project which was only of interest to a privileged sector of society, and neglecting the needs of the poor.<sup>112</sup> The official opening of the new opera house in Valletta took place on 9 October 1866 to a full house. The national anthem was sung 'by the theatrical company and played jointly by the resident orchestra and a military band, the latter stationed on the stage, with the flags of Malta and Britain as backdrops. During the singing of the anthem the manager unveiled a marble bust of Queen Victoria'.<sup>113</sup> Seven years later, on 25 May 1873 the opera house was completely gutted by a fire. During rehearsals for a new production *La Vergine del Castello* by Sicilian composer Giuseppe Privitera, some of the stage scenery caught fire. The flames spread rapidly and while everyone present managed to make it safely outside through the doors and windows, the roof and interior of the theatre were destroyed. The ill-fated stage scenery that night was painted by Maltese artist Giuseppe Cali. Three fire engines were brought from Fort St Elmo, the Arsenal and the stores at the Marina to tackle the flames 'but the water reservoirs in the area were nearly empty'.<sup>114</sup> The *Illustrated London News* reported that 'immense volumes of flame arose from the burning theatre and lighted up the town and country around. A terrible panic



*The Royal Opera House, built in a Neo-Classical style and designed by architect Edward Barry in the 1860s (Private collection)*

was excited by the fear of gunpowder explosions in the military magazines, of which there was really some danger, if the wind had blown a little more strongly or a little more that way. Thousands of people – men, women and children – some half-dressed, others laden with household treasures, crowded the Marsamuscetto and other wharves, crying for boats to pass over to Sliema and St Julian's; while some ran off into the country.<sup>115</sup> A select committee chaired by Adrian Dingli decided to rebuild the theatre to its original plan, paid for by public funds. Nearly four and a half years after the fire, the Royal Opera House reopened on 11 October 1877. It was managed by impresarios,

and frequently ran into financial difficulties. This theatre was a focal point of Valletta social life right until it was bombed and destroyed in the second world war. When the original designs for the opera house were being drawn up in the 1860s, one point of contention was the front terrace of the theatre, overlooking Republic Street (Strada Reale). The Council of Government in Malta did not like this terrace but Barry insisted upon it. Ironically, today the front terrace is the only intact part of the former opera house which has survived, in its contemporary reincarnation as an open-air theatre among the ruins.



### **Life in Nineteenth-Century Valletta: Maltese and British Cross-Currents**

Petra Caruana Dingli

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