

THE SACRA INFERMERIA SINCE 1800 : A HISTORICAL SURVEY

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*My connection with the Sacra Infermeria goes back to the middle Nineteen-sixties when I was doing my post-graduate course in Architectural Restoration at the University of Rome, and had as my Thesis, **THE HISTORY OF THE VALLETTA HOLY INFIRMARY AND A PROJECT FOR ITS RESTORATION**. This involved me, at the time and for many years later, in extensive historical research which took me to some of the main archives in Europe, especially the Vatican Library for the period of the Knights, and to the Public Record Office in London for the post-1800 years, and naturally our National Archives for both periods.*

During the same time and later, as Head of the Antiquities Section of the Ministry of Works, I was engaged in the repair of damage at the Sacra Infermeria caused by the War and which was then still outstanding, and finally during its conversion into a Conference Centre in 1978-79.

Six months after the raising of the Great Siege, Grand Master La Valette laid the first stone of the new City of Valletta in March of 1566. First to be tackled was the re-construction of the fort at St. Elmo, and the building of the walls of the City's perimeter. In 1571, the Order transferred its seat from the Borgo, now Vittoriosa, to Valletta. The Magisterial Palace and the Church of St. John were the first important public buildings to be constructed, followed, in 1574, by the Sacra Infermeria. Within a few years, the Knights of the Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, backed by long years of tradition and experience, established their hospital as one of the foremost medical institutions in Europe. "This asylum", wrote a contemporary visitor, "is constantly open for the reception of the sick of all countries, who are treated with every possible attention and furnished with medicine and comforts of every kind. The Knights not only inspect the different branches of the administration (the head of which is one of the first dignitaries of the Order), but successively attend the sick..... The utensils used are almost all silver, but of such plain workmanship as sufficiently proves that the magnificence was adopted for a motive of cleanliness, and not as an object of luxury". (1)

This state of affairs at the Sacra Infermeria lasted throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. But towards the end of the 18th century, a general decline started to set in the general affairs of the Order. The reasons for the decline were many and varied. At this point in time, the threat from the East was no longer a determining factor in Mediterranean politics; piracy was being gradually suppressed, and peaceful co-existence, if not a lasting peace, was established between the Christian Powers and their traditional enemies. With this curtailment of activity, most of the Knights living in Malta found themselves with too much time on their hands, and therefore idle. (2) To make matters worse, the financial fortunes of the Order were at their

lowest ebb, since in 1792 all the rich estates of the Langues of France, Auvergne and Provence were confiscated. (3) The liberal ideas spreading in Europe and especially in France, found their way into the Island. The Order started rotting from within; indiscipline, lack of respect towards superiors, and a silent revolt against all authority became rampant, particularly among the younger ranks of the Order.

This general decadence pervaded also the administration of the Sacra Infermeria, and the conditions prevailing at the turn of the century were vastly different from those of its better days.

In 1786, the noted English philanthropist John Howard visited Malta's hospitals and recorded his impressions in a book titled '*AN ACCOUNT OF THE PRINCIPAL LAZZARETTOS IN EUROPE*'. This is one of the first indications of the decline of the Order's Hospital. "The ceiling is lofty", wrote Howard, "but being of wood is now turned black; the windows being small, and the walls hung round with dusty pictures, this noble Hall makes but a gloomy appearance.... All wards were dirty and offensive, so much so that it was necessary to use perfuming, and the physician had to keep his handkerchief to his face while doing his rounds... the patients were served by the most dirty, ragged and unfeeling and inhuman persons I ever saw". (4) Howard's accusations were echoed by another visitor, Sir Richard Colt Hoare who wrote in 1790 that "only a few devout and perhaps penitent knights still observe the ancient custom of attending the sick in person". (5) The Order was aware of this state of affairs, and in 1796 a commission was appointed to make recommendations on measures to be taken to assure the strict observance of the Hospital's rules and discipline among the staff. The financial situation of the Sacra Infermeria worsened when the Grand Master ordered that its superfluous silver-plate be melted down into silver coins to help the Order meet its

many commitments. (6)

The decline of the Sacra Infermeria continued during the two-year French interlude between 1798 and 1800. Its silver plate, already depleted, caught Napoleon's eyes, and was seized with the other treasures of the Order. (7) The Hospital itself was appropriated for the exclusive use of the French troops, only four days after their arrival in Malta, and the civilian patients cleared out. (8) They were first transferred to the so-called Casa delle Alunne, a home for illegitimate infant girls, which was vacated for the purpose, (9) and shortly after, to the Monastery and Church of St. Mary Magdalen, also in Valletta, following the suppression of the Convent and the eviction of the nuns. (10) A visitor to Malta, writing in 1813, remarked that "a more powerful injury could not have been done to the natural pride of the Maltese, and this measure of the French is said very much to have hastened their revolt against the French". (11) The best and fullest account of the Sacra Infermeria during the French occupation is given by Dr. Robert, who was its Physician-in-Chief, in a book published in Paris in 1802. Only a few wards were considered fit for the accommodation of patients; the pharmacy, situated in the upper quadrangle of the building, was criticized as being too far removed from the main wards, its laboratory too small, its storerooms too damp and badly lit. Acute fever cases developed into what he described as 'slow' fever, and later in the 'putrid' form, with frequent relapses in the case of patients housed in the less healthy parts of the wards.

ST LUKE'S DAY LECTURE 1987
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A Grandmaster of the Order of St. John administering to the sick at the Holy Infirmary: An Allegory. Oil Painting at the National Museum.

Dr. Robert carried out a number of improvements to prevent the recurrence of similar cases. He is outright in condemning the Sacra Infermeria as a hospital, and concludes by saying that "the praises showered on it during the time of the Order were deserved more by the administration than by the structure". (12)

In September of 1798, the Maltese revolted against the French invaders, and in September 1800, with help from the British and Allied blockades, forced Napoleon's troops to surrender and to leave the Island. Another page of history was opened, and the third foreign flag in the space of little more than two years was unfurled over Malta.

When the British troops marched into Valletta, the military authorities took over all public buildings for their use. In the very first despatch from Lord Hobart in Downing Street, the British Civil Commissioner in Malta, Sir Charles Cameron, was advised that "Property which formerly belonged entirely to the Grand Master and Order of St. John of Jerusalem, or in which that Order had a beneficial interest, must now be considered as belonging to the (British) Crown". (13)

The British, who had three hundred and fifty sick troops when they entered Valletta, (14) immediately occupied the Sacra Infermeria which they named the General Hospital. The Civil Commissioner was meanwhile instructed from London to "introduce into the administration of the Hospital the utmost regularity, and to enforce a system of strict Economy, as far as may be consistent with Justice to the persons employed in the service of the sick, and with due attention to the relief and comfort of the latter". (15)

As early as 1801, mainly as a result of the British presence on the Island the general health of the British troops and eventually of the Maltese population, began to improve. In 1801, Malta commenced to benefit from Edward Jenner's discovery of vaccination against small-pox, and a few years later, the General Hospital became one of the main vaccination centres for children.

In 1826 a separate ward was appropriated for ophthalmic patients, and when the new system of obtaining water from bore-holes was introduced in Malta in 1867, samples of water extracted from the shafts were sent to the Military Hospital for analysis.

In 1831 cases of infectious diseases, including small-pox, were transferred from the Civil Hospitals to a ward in the Sacra Infermeria.

The Sacra Infermeria had, since its inception, always boasted of a well-stocked and well-equipped pharmacy, and at one time, in 1817, it was proposed to add to it a small museum. A notice appearing in The Malta Government Gazette stated that "any specimens of curiosity in the Animal, Vegetable or Mineral Kingdoms, as also Works of Art, either ancient or modern, may be disposed of to advantage, by applying to the Pharmacy of the Military Hospital, Strada Mercanti, Valletta". The dispensary had a large number of pharmacy jars, many of them of majolica of the most exquisite make and design. These are now preserved at The Palace, The National Museum of Fine Arts, and in several Ministries, while a considerable number somehow found their way into private collections.

In 1800, a British Naval Hospital had been set up in the old Armoury of the Knights in Vittoriosa, but infectious cases continued to be treated in the General Hospital in Valletta. (16)

It should be remarked at this point, that not all of the building of the Sacra Infermeria was used as a hospital. The Long Ward, a little over 500 feet long and reputed to be the longest unsupported hall in Europe, served for some time as a rope-walk, where ropes, mainly for use by the British Navy, were manufactured.

A few years later, a considerable section of the Long Ward and a part of the ward in the basement floor, were let to Messrs. Woodhouse, the renowned Marsala wine-makers. The Woodhouse business was set up by John Woodhouse in 1773 at Marsala, then a small roadstead with no proper harbour or shelter for shipping, on the western coast of Sicily. Sicilian wine-growers received from John Woodhouse advances of money with a very low rate of interest, and within a few years, Woodhouse captured the wine-markets of England and America. (17) The Woodhouse business

soared when Lord Nelson signed a contract with the firm in March of 1800 for the supply of Marsala wine to the British Fleet in the Mediterranean (18). When Sicily became threatened by the possibility of a French invasion, most of the Woodhouse wine-stores were transferred to the safety afforded by the British presence in Malta, and extensive storage facilities were made available to the company at the Lazzaretto, Cospicua and Floriana, but principally at the Military General Hospital, and later in 1859 at the Valletta Old Slaves' Prison. (19) The advent of steam-ships and the improved harbour facilities at Marsala, led to the eventual transfer of the company's main wine-stores back to Sicily, but the Woodhouse business still existed in Malta at least up to 1923.

The British military medical authorities in Malta do not appear to have been particularly attracted to the old Sacra Infermeria building, and it was not long before they started looking for better accommodation. An English visitor, writing in 1813, complained of the dwindling importance of the General Hospital and that "there was only a very slender hope of its ever being re-established on a footing like the former, that is at the time of the Order. We can only deplore the change which has reduced or \approx of the most admirable institutions in Europe to a place of comparative insignificance". (20) The principal reason for the reduced worth of the Sacra Infermeria building as a hospital was obviously the direct result of improved knowledge in hospital construction, and of the then new approach to the question of hygiene in medical institutions.

The next important event in the life of the Sacra Infermeria, or Station Hospital, as it then became known, was the impact on Malta of the Crimean War between 1854 and 1856. The causes of the war lay in the perennial desire of the Russians to win access to the Mediterranean, at the time through the occupation of Constantinople, the consequent apprehension of the British about the security of their overland route to India, and in the wish of the French to retain their military prestige and glory. After the first French and British landings in the Crimean peninsula, the battles of Sevastopol, Alma, Balaclava and Inkerman ensued. The winter of 1854-55 was one of continuous siege warfare and terrible suffering. Lack of comforts and medical supplies for the British troops caused a scandal, but the situation was not relieved until the arrival of Florence Nightingale and her brave band of women nurses at the hospitals in Turkey. The Crimean War was, as most wars are, a futile and mismanaged affair, and the only result achieved was the exclusion of Russian warships from the Black Sea which, in the event, lasted for only fifteen years.

The first hint of Malta's involvement in the Crimean War was given by *The Malta Times* in February of 1854. "Orders were received here from England", wrote the newspaper, "to prepare quarters for 10,000 men. Several localities are being fitted-up; among others, the Lazzaretto and adjoining Plague Hospital, where it is said there is room for 1000 men, and the Dockyard lofts where as many men can be housed. Convents will be used if absolutely required, but not otherwise. The Principal Medical Officer of the Malta Garrison and of the Military Hospital has received orders to hold himself in readiness to join the contingent on the eve of starting for Constantinople".

On her way from England through Marseilles, Florence Nightingale and her party of thirty-eight nurses stopped at Malta in late October 1854. Nightingale herself stayed on board the P & O steamer VECTIS after a very rough sea passage, but the nurses went ashore and were taken round Valletta escorted by British troops.(21) *The Malta Times* wrote about the event: "In passing through the streets, they attracted the sympathy and admiration of the inhabitants, many of whom expressed themselves highly gratified with the interesting and cheerful appearance of these persons, engaged in so benevolent and Christian-like a purpose".(22)

In November, the first wounded soldiers arrived from Balaclava and Constantinople, and, said *The Malta Times*, "they received from the inhabitants the utmost assistance and sympathy. Several very respectable Maltese gentlemen were seen to help the wounded into the vehicles prepared for them, and the people spontaneously carried those who were unable to walk, upon their shoulders, and placed them upon carriages most carefully and many even accompanied them to the Military Hospital". (23) The Long Ward of the Sacra Infermeria, at the time still partly occupied by the wine-stores of Messrs Woodhouse, was cleared to make room for the constant flow of wounded soldiers from the Crimea.(24) Several Maltese doctors, on the other hand, joined British Army surgeons in the Crimean battlefields and hospitals, and among these are mentioned Drs. V. Muscat, Grillet, Bellanti, Arpa, Pisani, (25) and Antonio Pullicino, (26) Meanwhile, students of medicine and surgery of the University were given permission by Dr. Armstrong, the Principal Military Medical Officer, to attend at the General Hospital for training. Medical students mentioned by name in the *Portafoglio Maltese* on November 22nd, 1854 were Emmanuele Bonavia, Gavino Gulia and Emmanuele Arpa in Dr. Manifold's wards, Luigi Giammalva and Alfonso Darmanino in Dr. Giuseppe Ellul's wards, and Giuseppe Rocco Peralta and F.Vella in Dr. Giuseppe Montanaro's wards.

The bitter experience of the Crimean War, and the complexities of the injuries and illnesses suffered by the British and French troops on the battlefield, brought to the fore the many shortcomings and serious defects of hospital administration and hospital buildings. When Florence Nightingale returned to England from the hospitals of Scutari, she put pressure on the British Government and the War Office, and aided by influential political and medical men, she pleaded for a general and radical reform in the construction and organization of both military and civil hospitals in England and in the colonies.

In 1857, Governor Sir William Reid, prompted by the military medical authorities in Malta, drew the attention of the British Government to the inadequacy of the Valletta General Hospital and to the need of building a new hospital for use by the Army in the island.(27) The Royal Navy, had, since 1830, the hospital at Bighi, which served admirably the needs of the Mediterranean Fleet and of the local naval establishments. Sir William Reid was subsequently authorised by the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies to form a committee 'with a view to determining upon what would be the best site for such hospital, and to report particularly on the adequacy or otherwise of the site at St. Francis Barracks, Floriana, capable of accommodating five hundred patients'.(28) The committee reported back to London 'that the site was too small for such a purpose, and that a new site should be looked for, and, this, it is conceived, could only be obtained beyond the limits of the fortifications'.(29)

Two years later, yet another attempt was made to find a suitable site for a new hospital within the walls of Valletta, and a large area was proposed on St. Michael's Bastion overlooking Marsamxett Harbour opposite Fort Manoel.(30) The project was again dropped, apparently because of the high cost demanded for the purchase of part of the land which was privately owned.

In 1859 Florence Nightingale published in London a book titled *Notes on Hospitals* which immediately became a standard textbook for many years to come. In this book she included a suggestion for a new General Military Hospital intended to replace completely and permanently the Sacra Infermeria. "In Malta", wrote Florence Nightingale, "it is proposed to erect a general military hospital on the pavilion principle for 300 beds, with the partitions differently arranged from any existing example. The site chosen as the most healthy in the garrison, is limited, and the arrangement of the parts has to be conformed to the shape of the ground. But so flexible is the pavilion construction that it suits itself readily to this requirement. There will be six pavil-

ions arranged side by side, each containing two floors of wards, and the whole connected by open arcades sufficient to afford shelter from sun and rain, but to leave ventilation perfectly free. The entire administration is detached and placed in front of the hospital. The walls on the sides towards the sun, and the roof, will be double to ensure coolness". (31)

It would be interesting to remark at this point that Dr. F.V. Inglott, the Comptroller of Charitable Institutions, in a manuscript note at the bottom of a page of a copy of the book preserved at the National Library of Malta, claims that the design reproduced in Nightingale's book including block plans and all details, were drawn up completely by him, and that it was only given 'architectural proportions' by the architect Mr. Wyatt. The site chosen was at the bottom of Britannia Street, now Melita Street, facing Marsamxett Harbour, with one side along Strada Genio, the narrow street with steps that goes down to the old Marsamxett Gate. The new hospital remained only a proposal and was never built, certainly because of financial obstacles posed by the British Treasury.

In the absence of a decision to build a new hospital, steps were taken to relieve the pressure on the Valletta Military Wards, and in 1858 a new hospital was opened at Vilhena Palace, Mdina, first as an ophthalmic unit (32), and subsequently as a convalescent home.(33) Fever cases were eventually also transferred to Mdina, where the medical authorities noted with satisfaction that recovery was more rapid. A year later Spinola Palace at St. Julian's was also taken over as a hospital which began to serve the newly-opened Pembroke Barracks, as well as absorb some overflow from the Valletta Military Hospital.(34)

The only new hospital to be built in the 19th century besides the naval one at Bighi, was the Cottonera Hospital in 1873, with the intention of abolishing the Sacra Infermeria in Valletta.(35) The Cottonera Hospital was closed down in 1920, and is now St. Edward's College.

Another step forward for improving the health conditions of British troops in Malta was taken in 1865 when Governor Sir Henry Storks suggested to the Secretary of State to the Colonies that a Maltese medical man be sent to England for 'instruction in the Medical, Hygiene and Sanitary Sciences'. (36)

The idea of building a new hospital even outside Valletta was never completely discarded, and some years later four different sites were suggested by the Army authorities in Malta. These were:

1. Ta' Xbiex Hill, on the site now occupied by the Government Housing Estate;

2. In a locality known as Ta' Brejgex at Sta. Venera, approximately behind St. Joseph's Institute, overlooking Msida Valley;
3. At Mriehel, behind the Wignacourt Aqueduct, opposite the site now occupied by Farsons Brewery;
4. At Msierah, now San Gwann, between St. Margerita Church and Misrah Lewza.(37)

The relevant site-plans with supporting documents are preserved at the Public Record Office in London.

The military authorities in Malta, realising that all their efforts for a new hospital had come to naught, began putting pressure on London in order to obtain at least essential improvements at the Valletta Military Hospital. For this purpose, the Colonial Secretary in 1861 appointed a Commission composed of Dr. J. Sutherland and Capt. D. Galton of the Royal Engineers 'to ascertain the sanitary condition of the Hospitals and Barracks in Gibraltar, Malta and the Ionian Islands'.(38) Their report was published in 1863 and their conclusions about the Sacra Infermeria building were unequivocal; "Since it came into British possession, the Military Hospital has been a continual source of complaint for many years on the part of army medical officers, and although it can be improved in many respects, it will be more costly than would be the cost of a new building in a better position".(39) The Sacra Infermeria building was condemned for the following reasons:-

1. The sewers pass either close or under it, and discharge into the sea below;
2. It is cut off from healthy winds, and is exposed to the scirocco;
3. The wards are gloomy and badly ventilated; the windows are small and narrow;
4. Drainage is bad, and should be improved by filling up the present open drains and replacing them by drain pipes; the main sewers should be re-laid and carried by iron pipes into deep water;
5. There are no water-closets and ablution facilities;
6. Rain-water percolates from the upper courtyard through the walls into the rooms at a lower level;
7. The only exercising ground for convalescents is the lower court where the air is stagnant and foul from the bad state of the drainage.(40)

Some of the improvements suggested were in fact carried out between 1863 and 1865. The works consisted mainly in the opening of additional windows in the main ward at ground level, the construction of a long open stone balcony, the introduction of air

inlets and ventilators, the removal of some partition walls, construction of water closets with modern flushing apparatus, and the laying on of a piped water supply.

Galton's and Sutherland's Report of 1863, was followed by another report, this time by Sutherland only in 1867 "on the Sanitary Condition of Malta and Gozo with reference to the Epidemic of Cholera in 1865", during which there were three cases at the Sacra Infermeria, two of which fatal. As a result of this second report, further improvements to the Valletta Hospital were suggested, and subsequently implemented.(41)

Improvements at the General Hospital remained one of the main concerns of the local military authorities, and in fact it was one of the very first buildings to be supplied with electricity as soon as this became available in Malta.

We now come to an event of exceptional importance in the history of medicine which took place in the Sacra Infermeria building. I am fully aware that I, as a non-medical person, may be treading on dangerous ground and will therefore confine myself strictly to historical facts.

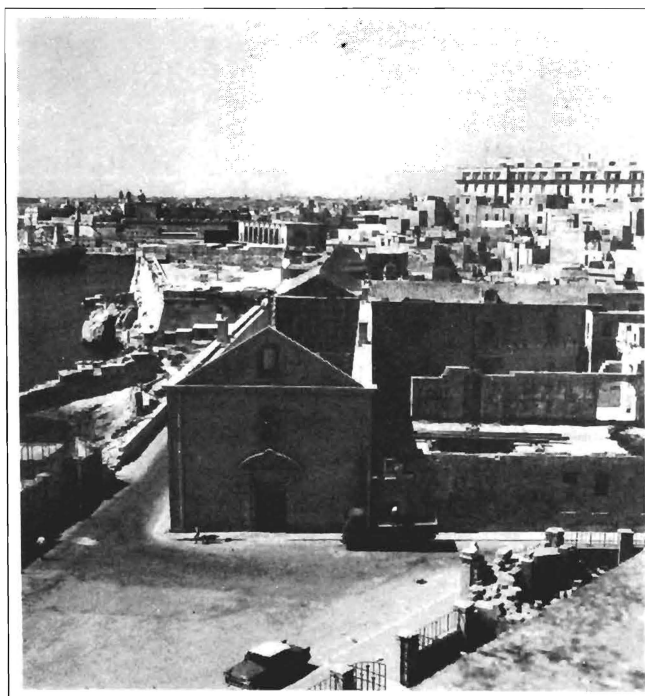
A visitor to Malta way back in 1581 had given an account of a particular type of fever, which he called 'erratic fever', and which he had contracted during his sojourn here.(43) This type of fever, registered in Malta for the first time towards the middle of the 16th century, continued to prevail on the Island well into the nineteenth century, and when British servicemen began to feel its disabling effects and their health situation started to develop into a serious crisis, the Army medical authorities focused their whole attention on the illness.

The causes of Gastric or Mediterranean or Malta Fever, as it was then known, were attributed to many different factors, but the real cause eluded the minds of the best medical men on the Island, until Surgeon-Major (later Sir) David Bruce, working in a small laboratory at the Sacra Infermeria announced in 1887 that he had discovered the microbe of the fever in the spleen of some British soldiers.(44) He named the microbe *Streptococcus Melitensis* and later *Mi-*

crooccus Melitensis. Bruce's discovery was deservedly widely acclaimed, and subsequently confirmed by other sources, while he continued his experiments on animals in a small room on the roof of the hospital.(46) This historic room was partly destroyed by bombing during the Second World War, and what remained of it obliterated when the building was converted into the Mediterranean Conference Centre.

But the burning question of the mode of transmission of the infection remained unsolved, and it was only years later that our own countryman Sir Themistocles Zammit, certainly Malta's worthiest figure in the local medical scene, discovered the presence of the *Micrococcus Melitensis* in goats' blood. Thus Zammit succeeded in identifying the all-important reservoir and source of the infection. This historic event took place exactly on June 25th, 1905, (46) in a small laboratory in the topmost floor of the Health Office at the Palace of the Castellania in Merchants' Street, Valletta. The terms Mediterranean and Malta fever gradually disappeared from medical textbooks, and in today's medical parlance are described as Undulant Fever or Brucellosis.

We now come to the next important happening in the long chain of events which made up the life of the Sacra Infermeria. August of 1914 saw the beginning of the First World War, and although Malta was not in the forefront of battle, yet it was destined once again to play an important part in the conduct of hostilities.



The Holy Infirmary building before restoration

In 1915 Turkey joined the Central Powers and entered the war against the Allies. For the two following eventful years, the Sacra Infermeria was again to prove its worth, and thus re-live moments reminiscent of its past life. These two years tested to the full Malta's medical services, and the thousands of British Empire and Allied troops treated here, earned her the name of Nurse of the Mediterranean. The number of beds in the Military Hospital before 1914 was only 26, but with the approach of the Gallipoli campaigns, its capacity was increased to 340, and later to 440 beds. This was achieved by renovating disused wards and bringing sanitary facilities up-to-date. (47) Military families had their hospital in a part of the Infirmary, but this was removed to the Auberge d'Aragon to make room for the wounded troops.(48) The Long Ward, up to March 1915 had not yet been used, but when the number of wounded increased considerably, adaptation works were hastily commenced. It had been in disuse for many years, and had been neglected for so long that all sanitary facilities, bathrooms and kitchens had to be re- provided, and lighting, water service, and ventilation improved. During the three-month period between July and September 1915, special ophthalmic and X-ray departments were set up, while the many enteric and dysentery cases, as well as serious surgical cases, were treated only in this hospital.(49) From the Gallipoli campaigns 2,500 officers and 55,400 other ranks were treated in the Malta hospitals, while from the 1917 Salonika campaigns 2,600 officers and 64,500 other ranks were received, a total of over 138,000 men.(50)

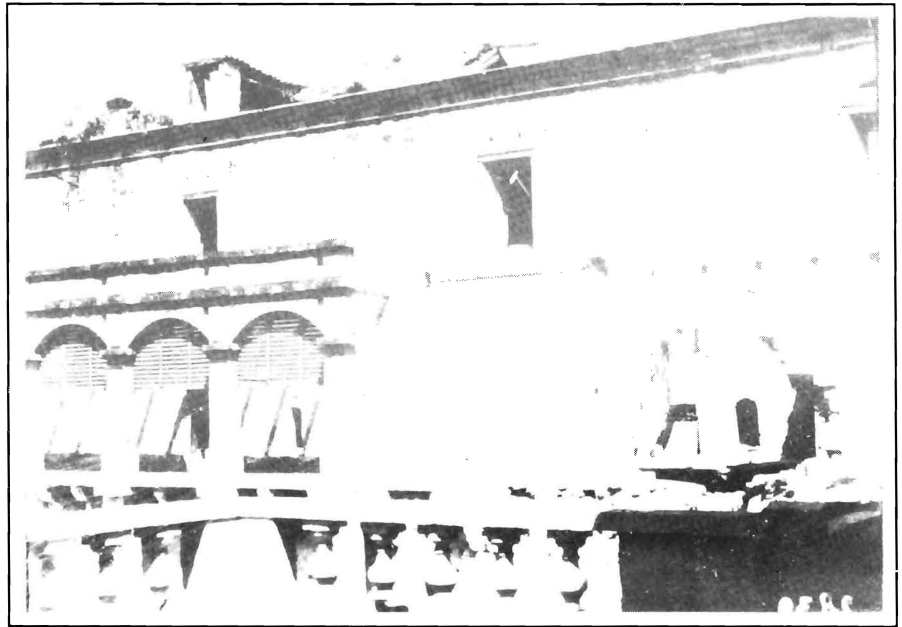
The Valletta Military Hospital, because of its proximity to the harbours, was used as a sorting-base for the wounded arriving in hospital-ships.(51) They were then distributed to the other 30 hospitals and camps spread all over the Island. The Valletta Military Hospital itself was used for dangerously ill cases which were found inadvisable to move elsewhere.(52).

The principal hospitals and camps were the Cottonera Hospital, the Bighi Naval Hospital, the Hamrun Hospital (now the Centre for Social Activities), Mtarfa Hospital, St. Andrew's, St. George's, St. Paul's close to St. Andrew's, St. David's and St. Patrick's, St. John's Hospital in the Sliema Primary School, St. Ignatius, in the old Jesuit College in St. Julian's, Forrest Hospital in Spinola Palace, Tigne Hospital, St. Elmo and Baviere in Valletta, Manoel Hospital, the Blue Sisters' Hospital, and Ghajn Tuffieha Camp. There were in Malta during the whole of World War I over 300 surgeons and 1,000 nurses, with some Maltese among them.(53) The University of Malta, in 1916, upon the recommendation of the Superior Council of Medicine and Surgery, amended its Statute, and for the first time in its history, conferred the MD honoris causa,

on four of the foremost British surgeons of the time and who had served in the Malta war hospitals since their establishment in 1915. These were Colonel- Surgeons Charles Ballance, William Thorburn, Archibald Garrod and Howard Tooth.(55) The part that Malta played in the hospitalisation of the war wounded was officially recognised by the British Government, and Governor Field Marshal Lord Methuen, addressing the Council of Government in December 1917, said; "I also desire to record my grateful recognition of the sympathetic hospitality which the people of Malta and Gozo have extended to the sick and wounded that had been brought here during the war".(56)

After the end of the war, the British authorities decided that they no longer required the Sacra Infermeria for their General Hospital, and it was handed over to the Civil Government on December 22nd, 1919.

said; " All the men of the Valletta District are provided with sleeping bags at Headquarters, and comfortable sanitary arrangements as well as recreation rooms and canteen facilities".(58) The old Infermeria chapel, which was built in 1712 by Grand Master Perellos and later desecrated, was re-consecrated by Bishop Portelli in December for the celebration of divine service. "A gymnasium has been fitted up which, apart from the Police, was also used by Boy Scouts and Lyceum students.... and a section has been set aside as an armoury."(59) The room in the upper floor, which had been decorated with the coat-of-arms of the Grand Hospitallers of the Order, was converted into an Officers' Mess. The Police Headquarters remained at the Sacra Infermeria until June 1940, when on the outbreak of the war with Italy, it moved to a safer place outside Valletta, the Bugeja Institute, Santa Venera.



A gaping hole in the side wall of the Main Ward caused by an aerial torpedo in April 1942.

The patients were transferred to Mtarfa Hospital, which, though in use for some time, was only officially opened in June 1920.(57)

The permanent closing down of the Valletta Military Hospital marked the end of an era, and the Sacra Infermeria of the Knights of St. John ceased functioning as a Hospital after exactly 345 years of uninterrupted service to the sick and wounded.

The Sacra Infermeria now changed its role completely, although it retained its function in the service to the public. In August 1920, the Police Department, which had previously been housed in a large private house in Old Bakery Street, Valletta, moved in, and the Infermeria became now known as the Police Depot, or merely the Depot. The official Police Annual Report for 1920

In spite of the terrible ordeal which Valletta and the Harbour towns went through during the whole of World War II, many of the inhabitants of the capital refused to leave the City. They were housed mainly in the Old Railway Tunnel and in the basements of the Infermeria, which were also used as air raid shelters. During World War II the Infermeria was hit seven times by German bombers between February 1941 and July 1943. In the first attack in February 1941, the German Air Force tried a new bombing technique, by which a powerful mine suspended from a parachute was made to explode a few feet above ground level. The large amount of explosive contained in a comparatively thin shell produced a devastating blasting effect,(60) and in this particular attack, the Central School and the surrounding buildings only a few yards from the Infermeria, were completely de-

stroyed and the Infermeria itself badly shattered. During this same raid, the Nibbia Chapel, which was the chapel of the Cemetery of the Infermeria, the Anatomical Theatre and the Chapel of Bones were destroyed.(61) In April and May of 1942, it received several direct hits, and part of the roof and the massive side walls of the famous Long Ward collapsed. An aerial torpedo smashed through one of its walls.

In October 1941, the Sacra Infermeria was re-named Command Fair, (62) and began to be used for the entertainment of troops. Theatre and cinema shows, boxing competitions,(63) and supplies of NAAFI food and drinks were provided for the troops in a small canteen. The building was subsequently named Command Hall and used also for drama and live shows and such famous actors as Sir Noel Coward (64) and Gracie Fields mounted its stage. The Rediffusion studios, after having been blitzed out of their temporary premises in Valletta, were transferred to two small rooms in the Sacra Infermeria in May 1941,(65) from where the famous signals 'Air Raid Warning' and 'Raiders Passed' were broadcast live for thousands of times. I myself remember taking part in a children's programme at Christmas in 1942.

At the end of the War, the Long Ward was taken over by the Education Department, also as a Theatre, and named The Knightshall,(66) with a large separate hall as a Children's Theatre.(67)

During the post-war reconstruction years, evictees from the Mandragg area were temporarily housed at the Infermeria,(68) and for a time, a hall at the lower end of St.Paul Street was used as Parcel Post Office.(69) The Long Ward was later adapted as an Examination Hall, and I am sure a considerable number of readers of this article still remember their GCSE ordeal at the Knightshall. For a time it was also used as a counting hall in General Elections.

In 1978/79 the Sacra Infermeria was converted into the Mediterranean Conference Centre. But that is another story.....

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Michael Ellul graduated as architect from the (Royal) University of Malta in 1952, and in History of Architecture and Architectural Restoration from the University of Rome in 1967. In 1971 he was elected Fellow of the Royal Historical Society of London. Between 1967 and 1987, Mr.Ellul was Head of the Antiquities Section of the Ministry of Works until his retirement that year.

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