





Fig. 1:
Lady Rachel Hamilton-
Gordon Memorial Chapel,
Ta' Braxia Cemetery

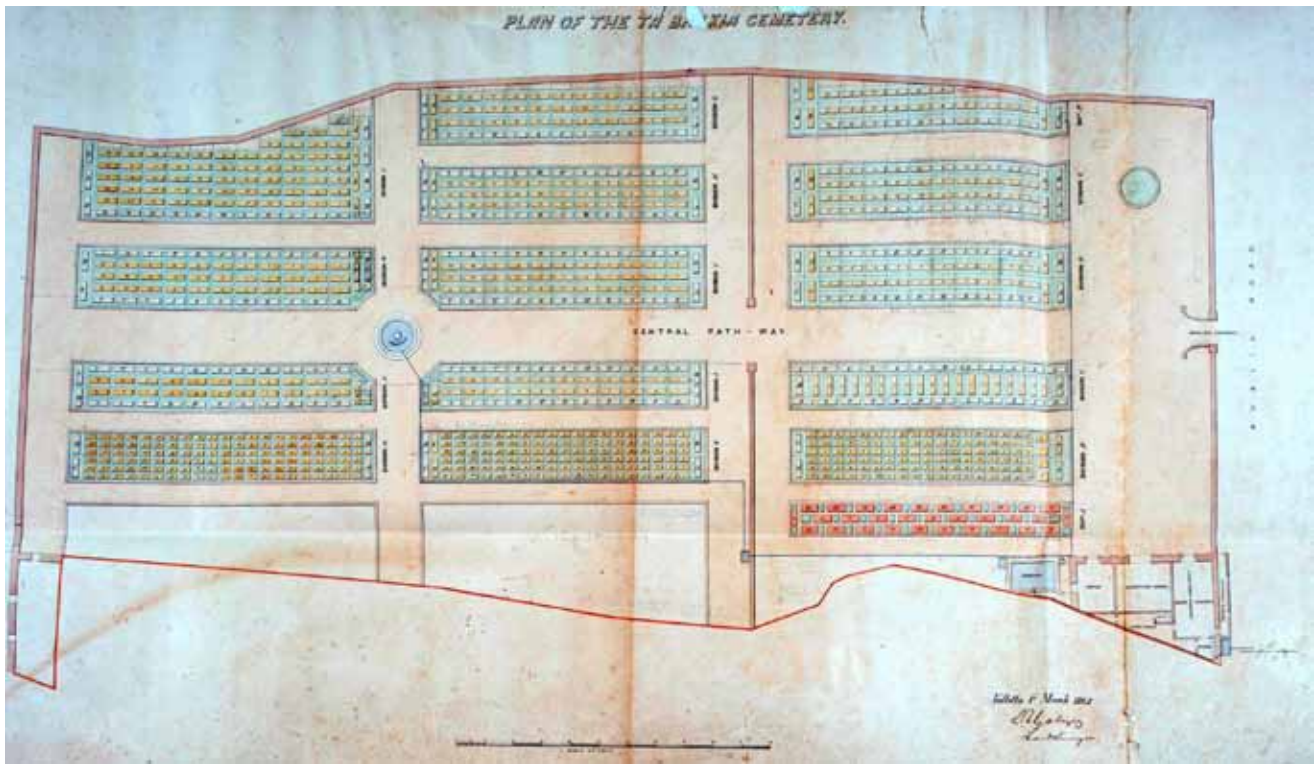
Ta' Braxia Cemetery - An architectural appraisal

Conrad Thake discusses the history of the cemetery, and highlights some of its notable monuments

The introduction of extra-mural cemeteries was a highly controversial issue in mid-nineteenth century Malta. The local church was vehemently opposed to the principle of establishing burial grounds outside the confines of local parishes, and even more so to the principle of multi-faith internment. Plague cemeteries were built outside urban areas but these were many a time neglected and had fallen into a state of disrepair. British servicemen had previously been buried in the Msida Bastion Cemetery, but by 1850 it could no longer accommodate more graves due to its restricted size. A new cemetery had to be planned for those adhering to the Protestant faith and other denominations who could not be buried in Catholic cemeteries.

Ta' Braxia was conceived as an interdenominational cemetery. It was built on a site just outside Porte des Bombes, and was readily accessible given its close proximity to Valletta and the Three Cities. It soon became the island's principal garrison cemetery and the most important burial site for British servicemen during the second half

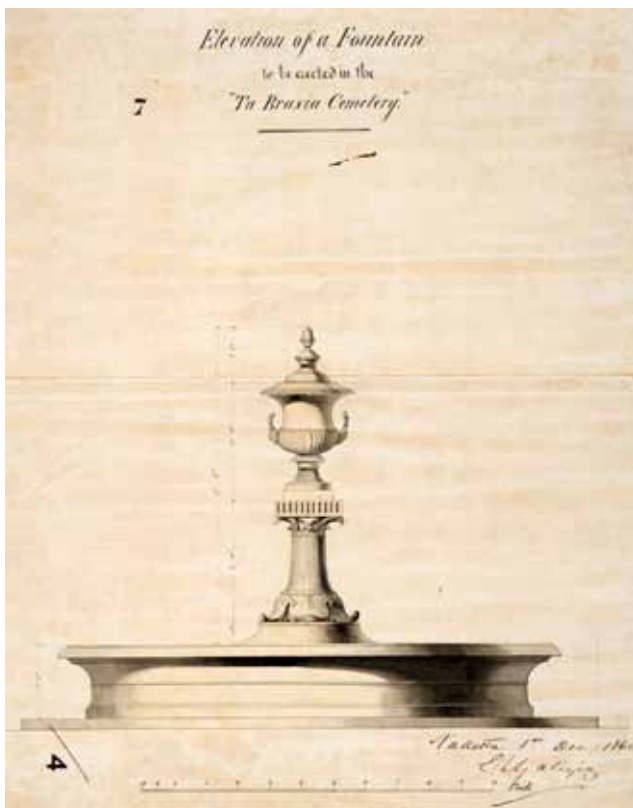
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of the nineteenth century. The site was already partially occupied by a few small cemeteries, including the Plague and Jewish cemeteries that straddled the old San Giuseppe road connecting Porte des Bombes to Marsa. In 1855, works commenced in earnest with the construction of the boundary wall as detailed plans of the new cemetery were presented to the Commanding Royal Engineer. This was necessary as clearance had to be sought from the military authorities to ensure that the cemetery as planned would

not compromise the efficacy of the fortifications and defensive lines in the vicinity.¹

The planning of the cemetery was entrusted to the Maltese architect Emmanuele Luigi Galizia (1830-1907), then still in his mid-twenties and in the employment of the Public Works Department. The plan was based on an orthogonal gridiron layout with a symmetrical disposition (Fig. 2). The main entrance portal was aligned along the central axis. Pedestrian pathways served as dividing elements



opposite top: Fig. 2:
Plan of Ta' Braxia Cemetery,
1862 (Drawing Archives of the
Works Department, Floriana)
(Photo: Joseph Borg, Midsea
Books)

opposite bottom left: Fig. 3:
Design of fountain and water
basin by E.L. Galizia (Drawing
Archives of the Works
Department, Floriana)
(Photo: Joseph Borg, Midsea
Books)

opposite bottom right: Fig. 4:
The fountain and basin at Ta'
Braxia

for the various sectors of graves and burial vaults. The original drawings signed off by Galizia are to be found in the archives of the Public Works Department. There are impeccably drawn details of the overall cemetery plan, the design of the internal gateways and of an elegant fountain adorned with a classical stone urn set on a pedestal within a shallow water basin (Figs. 3-4).

In 1857 the cemetery was inaugurated with the first burials. An administrative committee was set up composed mainly of British clergymen who formulated a set of regulations for burials within this new cemetery. It was decreed that equal status be accorded to all creeds and religions, and all burials were to be subject to the same tariffs. The officiating of religious ceremonies of different denominations would also be permitted. However, the internment of 'all religions without distinction' was misleading as it excluded non-Christians such as Jews and Muslims who had their own dedicated cemeteries. The Anglican Bishop of Gibraltar, also representing the Protestant community in Malta, addressed a letter to the Chief Secretary of State Sir Victor Houlton whereby he requested confirmation as to 'whether the Government has taken the necessary steps to secure the possession or perpetual use of the portion of the ground for the Protestant Community.'²

Ta' Braxia cemetery underwent a number of physical expansions. In 1861 the adjoining Croce della Marsa road had to be altered and widened, and this impinged on an existing Catholic cemetery which had to be desecrated and temporarily relocated close to the plague cemetery. The remodelling of this road permitted the expansion of the Ta' Braxia cemetery. An extension in a southward direction towards the Ta' Duluri church was implemented in 1879. A drawing dated 1880 and signed by Galizia relates to designs of two decorative stone pillars capped by finials (Fig. 5). The two gateways serve as markers that define different sectors within the cemetery (Fig. 6). Finally, another plan dated

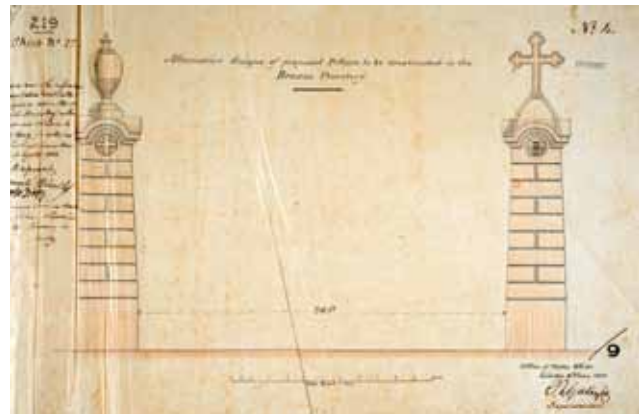
Fig. 5:
Design of gateway pilasters
by architect E.L. Galizia
(Drawing Archives of
the Works Department,
Floriana)
(Photo: Joseph Borg,
Midsea Books)

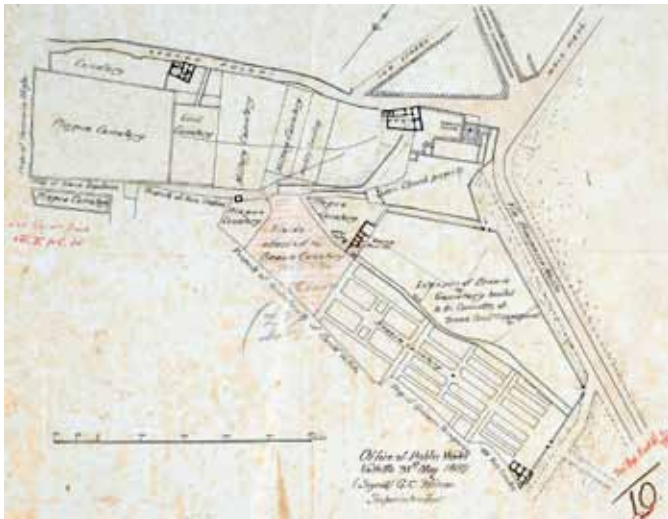
Fig. 6:
Internal gateway, Ta' Braxia
Cemetery

1889 and signed by Prof. G.C. Schinas, then Superintendent of Public Works, delineates a considerable extension occupying land adjoining Princess Melita Street (Fig. 7).

Lady Hamilton-Gordon's Memorial Chapel

A low and continuous battered retaining wall demarcates the transition between the old cemetery and the new addition, which was situated at a lower level. With this last extension the symmetrical layout as originally conceived by Galizia was irretrievably compromised. The new extension did





left: Fig. 7:
Plan of Ta' Braxia Cemetery
and environs signed by G.C.
Schinas, 1889 (Drawing
Archives of the Works
Department, Floriana)
(Photo: Joseph Borg, Midsea
Books)

below: Fig. 8:
Portrait of Architect John
Loughborough Pearson by
Walter William Oules.

however provide an opportunity for the construction of the cemetery's distinctive architectural landmark and iconic point of reference. The Ta' Braxia memorial chapel was commissioned by the then Governor of Ceylon Sir Arthur Hamilton-Gordon (1829-1912), in honour of his wife Lady Rachel Emily Hamilton-Gordon. Arthur Hamilton-Gordon was a Liberal Party politician with a distinguished career as a colonial administrator.³ It was at the end of his governorship of Ceylon, during a transit stop in Malta while en-route to Britain, that his wife Lady Rachel Gordon became too ill to continue travelling. She died soon after and was buried at Ta' Braxia cemetery on 28th January 1889.

Sir Arthur Hamilton-Gordon commissioned one of Britain's leading architects John Loughborough Pearson (1817-1897), to design a memorial chapel for his late wife.⁴ J.L. Pearson was 76 years old when he was entrusted with the commission, and in the twilight years of a distinguished architectural career forged almost exclusively on churches and cathedrals designed in the Neo-Gothic style (Fig. 8). Pearson's work spanned nearly six decades, and historians of Victorian ecclesiastical architecture have described his buildings as demonstrating 'a very high degree of competence and of quiet assurance'.⁵ It is highly improbable that Pearson visited Malta given his advanced age and the relatively minor scale of the project. It is assumed that the design was prepared in his busy London office, and that detailed plans were then dispatched to Malta. It would be reasonable to assume that an experienced Clerk of Works would then have been appointed to ensure that Pearson's plans were followed to the letter.

The foundation stone of the new chapel was laid on 28th May 1893. The chapel is built to a centralized circular plan. It combines a central space with an octagonal drum supporting an egg-shaped dome that rises vertically high above the vaulted ambulatory (Fig. 1). In contrast to the vast majority of his churches, which were expressed in a strictly Neo-Gothic style, the local chapel is a mélange

of Neo-Romanesque architectural elements combined with Neo-Gothic concepts. Malcolm Borg describes the chapel as 'a concoction of Neo-Romanesque and Neo-Gothic architectural decorative elements distributed over a centralised plan'.⁶

The chapel's exterior is replete with elaborate and ornate stone sculptural decoration with its rather ponderous gabled porch affixed to the main entrance portal, a diverse range of geometric stone carvings inset within the circular windows around the chapel's external walls, the triforium or blind arcaded gallery typical of English Gothic churches and medieval-style bifora windows set within ornate hood moulds. Stylistically the exterior combines Neo-Gothic and Romanesque architectural motifs.

In stark contrast, the interiors of many of J.L. Pearson's churches are dominated by their stone or brick vaults, and the

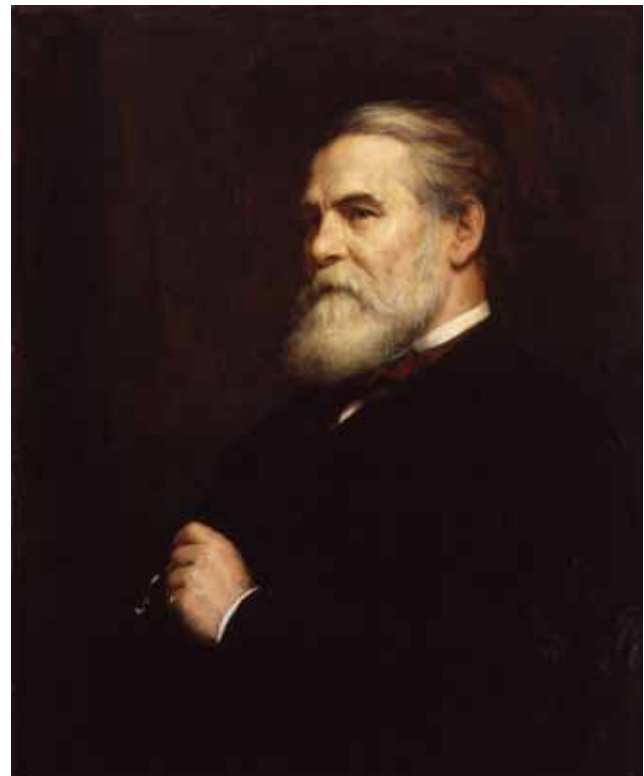


Fig. 9:
Interior view of the
chapel



clear lines and surfaces of the structure. His Ta' Braxia chapel is no exception. The interior elevation of the main central space has a tripartite division comprising a series of pointed arches supported on circular stone columns, a continuous blind triforium gallery, and clerestory windows which permit natural light to flood the interior (Fig. 9). Around the central core, beyond the ring of the rather massive stone columns is an ambulatory roofed at a lower height, with simple quadripartite rib vaults carried on shafts that go right down to the ground level. In this case, the High Victorian attributes of solidity, horizontality and variety of materials are abandoned in favour of elegance, multiplication of thin shafts along

the walls, and the graceful pointed ribs converging in the roof.⁷ The effect is further accentuated by a series of slim lancet windows at the clerestory level. Pearson very rarely employed diagonally placed buttresses and did not advocate architectural elements that were battering or tapering. The overall emphasis was on the vertical dimension, not on the horizontal or on the gradual building up of masses.

The sepulchral tomb of Lady Hamilton-Gordon is set within a gracious Gothic-style stone tabernacle, attached to the external walls of the circular chancel, with its distinctive shallow conical roof. Over the tomb is affixed a bronze plaque bearing the following inscription in Latin:

HOC SACELLUM
IN PIAM UXORIS SUAE MEMORIAM
EXTRUENDUM CURAVIT ARTURUS GORDON
BARO DE STANMORE PRIMO CREATUS
QUINATUS A.D. V KAL. DEC. A.S. MDCCCXXXIX
OBIIT A.D. III KAL. FEB. A.S. MCMXII.⁸

This plaque appears to be a later addition and is strangely more self-laudatory, with only a fleeting reference to Sir Hamilton-Gordon's wife to whom the chapel was dedicated. It could well be that there was another similar plaque with direct references to Lady Hamilton-Gordon, which has over the years gone astray.

Certainly the Ta' Braxia memorial chapel deserves wider recognition, as does the architect, who hardly features in the annals of Maltese architectural history. As the late architect John Phillips stated 'in order to understand fully the work of any architect, it is essential not only to be acquainted with his buildings and the religious and social background of the times in which he worked but also his personality and character. Pearson's natural reserve and reticence make any character study difficult for he shrank from publicity and, for many years, would not even allow the publication of his works in the architectural press: neither did he write books nor deliver lectures.'⁹

below: Fig. 10:
Funerary monument
in the form of a
sarcophagus

right: Fig. 11:
Headstone with
Masonic symbols



It is recorded that when Pearson was designing Truro Cathedral, he is said to have confessed to a friend that he aspired to build a church that would bring people to their knees. In a similar vein, the Ta' Braxia chapel was conceived as a place of worship where the serene and coherent space would be conducive to contemplation and an exaltation of the spiritual dimension.

Funerary Monuments

Ta' Braxia offers a wide and diverse selection of funerary monuments that reflect the eclecticism of the Victorian era. There is a wide spectrum of typologies and styles, ranging from the lavishly ornate sarcophagus-type monument, to the more staid Neo-Classical ones (Fig. 10). A number of monuments have iconographical motifs that allude to past memberships of local masonic lodges. Masonic symbols may appear on both the headstones and tombs. The monuments usually have just one symbol, usually the 'Square and Compass', or may contain a number of

masonic symbols, but not so frequently. Another symbol is the 'All-seeing Eye' or the 'All-seeing Eye of God' which represents the Great Architect of the Universe.¹⁰ The 'Eye of God' enclosed in a triangle represents the Holy Trinity. One particular monument, commemorating A.W. Perham (d.1879), who was a member of the P.M. Union of Malta Lodge, is composed of a triad of stone columns supporting a thick square slab on which a granite cube is placed. One of the cube's sides has an inscribed pentagram (another symbol associated with Freemasonry) within a triangle, while on another side a mallet and hammer are inscribed. Another masonic gravestone depicts a stone carving of Jacob's ladder emerging from an open book inscribed with the 'Square and Compass', and flanked by an Ionic and Corinthian column (Fig. 11). Unlike Catholic cemeteries where masonic symbols are virtually absent, at Ta' Braxia there are several monuments that openly display symbols that explicitly announce past masonic affiliations of those buried there.

Some of the most poignant memorials are to be found in the section reserved for children, infants and still-borns. The memorial of the young Adelaide F.S., daughter of Staff Commander E. Wise of the Royal Navy (1871), who died aged 4, depicts a stone carving of a sleeping putto with its head reclined on a cushion complete with tassels, clenching a cross in one hand (Fig. 12). Whereas this monument has acquired a weathered patina over time, others have deteriorated and eroded beyond recognition. The untimely death of an infant is a tragic and traumatic one for the surviving parents. One cannot but be moved by the sad plight of Lieutenant Tressider of the Royal Engineers, who experienced the great misfortune of burying his three young daughters, Ethel, Gertrude Amy and Rosina at Ta' Braxia.¹¹ No funerary monument irrespective of its artistic merit could ever have healed the emotional wounds inflicted upon him.





Fig. 12:
Sleeping putto
on infant's
grave (Photo:
Daniel Cilia/
Midsea Books)

Notes

- 1 Letter dated 30th June 1855 and addressed to the Chairman of the Committee for the management of the Ta' Braxia Cemetery, CSG 04-26, no. 2984, National Archives, Santo Spirito, Rabat.
- 2 CSG 04-28, no. 4732, 13th June, 1857, National Archives, Santo Spirito, Rabat.
- 3 He had served as governor of Trinidad (1866-1870), Mauritius (1871-1874), Fiji (1875-1880), New Zealand (1880-1882) and Ceylon (1883-1890). He was created 1st Baron Stanmore of Great Stanmore, Middlesex on 21st August 1893.
- 4 John Loughborough Pearson (1817-1897) was born on 5th July 1817, the son of William Pearson, a Durham water-colourist and etcher. As a 14 year old, John was apprenticed to Ignatius Bonomi in Durham, thus beginning a lifetime's career in architecture, and in particular church architecture. He moved to London, and after gaining more experience opened his own practice in 1843. His first major work in the capital was the Church of Holy Trinity, Vauxhall. As his reputation grew, his workload increased. Other churches in the London area included St. Augustine's, Kilburn (1871), St. John's, Red Lion Square (1874), St. Michael's, Croydon (1880), and St John's, Norwood (1881). Cathedrals also came within his influence and he carried out work for Rochester, Bristol, Peterborough and Lincoln Cathedrals as well as Westminster Abbey. Probably his greatest achievement was the design and building of Truro Cathedral in 1880. He designed St. John's Cathedral for Brisbane, Australia in 1888, but construction was delayed and the first phase did not take place until 1906-1910, which was after his death. Apart from church architecture, he was also in demand by wealthy patrons to design stately homes. J.L. Pearson died on 11th December 1897, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. The standard monograph on J.L. Pearson is *John Loughborough Pearson* by Anthony Quiney (Yale University Press, 1979). Refer also to article by David Lloyd in *Seven Victorian Architects*, Jane Fawcett (ed.), (Thames & Hudson, 1976).
- 5 Roger Dixon and Stefan Muthesius, *Victorian Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, second edition 1985, reprinted 2001), 218-221.
- 6 Malcom Borg, *British Colonial Architecture, Malta 1800-1900* (PEG Ltd, 2001), 94.
- 7 Dixon and Muthesius, op. cit., 218-221.
- 8 Translation of the inscription:
'Arthur Gordon created Baron of Stanmore took care to have this grave made in pious memory of his wife. He was born on 27th November of the year of Salvation 1829 and died on 30th January of the year of Salvation 1912.'
Notes: Dates are according to the Roman Calendar, so that the 5th day before the Calends of December is equivalent to 27 November, and the 3rd day before the Calends of February is equivalent to 30th January. A.S. stands for Anno Salutis, the Year of Salvation. I am indebted to Can. John Azzopardi for this translation and explanatory notes.
- 9 <http://btcp.org.uk/who-we-are/st-stephens/the-architect-his-life/>
- 10 James Stevens Curl, *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry* (London: Overlook Press, 1993).
- 11 Rosina Tressider, aged 10 months, born in Malta, was buried on 17th October 1879; Gertrude Amy Tressider, aged 4 years 6 months, born in Malta, was buried on 29th November 1879; Ethel Tressider, aged 9 months, born in Malta, was buried on 30th August 1881. Lieutenant Tressider R.E. together with G.C. Schinas, Ph.D. was instrumental in the planning and implementation of a comprehensive public sewer system for Valletta, Floriana and the Three Cities. website.lincone.net/~stephaniebidmead/tabraxia.htm