



Fig. 1
Lithograph by Michele Bellanti
entitled *The New Church –
St Paul's Anglican Cathedral in
Valletta* (detail).
(National Museum of Fine Arts,
Valletta – MUŻA / Courtesy of
Heritage Malta / Photo:
Peter Bartolo Parnis)

William Scamp

An appraisal of his architectural drawings and writings on St Paul's Pro-Cathedral, Valletta

Conrad Thake discusses the history and stresses the importance of this British colonial architectural gem

William Scamp (1801–1872) was an architect in the employment of the British Admiralty. Although his stay in Malta was limited to a three-year period from 1841 to 1844, he was actively involved in three major projects – the construction of the Number One dry-dock in Cospicua, the Naval Bakery in Birgu and St Paul's Pro-Cathedral in Valletta. The last project was a highly prestigious one for the local British colonial government. Works had started prior to Scamp's involvement. However, soon after the beginning of construction works under the supervision of Richard Lankesheer, several worrisome cracks started to appear in various parts of the building fabric. The structure demonstrated serious faults and it was clearly apparent that Lankesheer was not technically competent to handle a project of this scale and importance.

The suspension of all building activities on the new church and dismissal of Lankesheer coincided with the arrival from England of the admiralty architect William Scamp and Captain R.E. Brandreth. Although their first visit was primarily a fact-finding mission related to the Naval Bakery and other dock-related facilities, the two officials were approached by members

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opposite top: Fig. 5
William Scamp, Drawing of the New Church, Valletta – Sketch (exterior) showing the Spire as proposed, taken on the spot.

opposite bottom: Fig. 6
William Scamp, Drawing of the New Church, Valletta – Sketch (interior).

(Wignacourt Collegiate Museum, Rabat / Photos: Joe P. Borg)

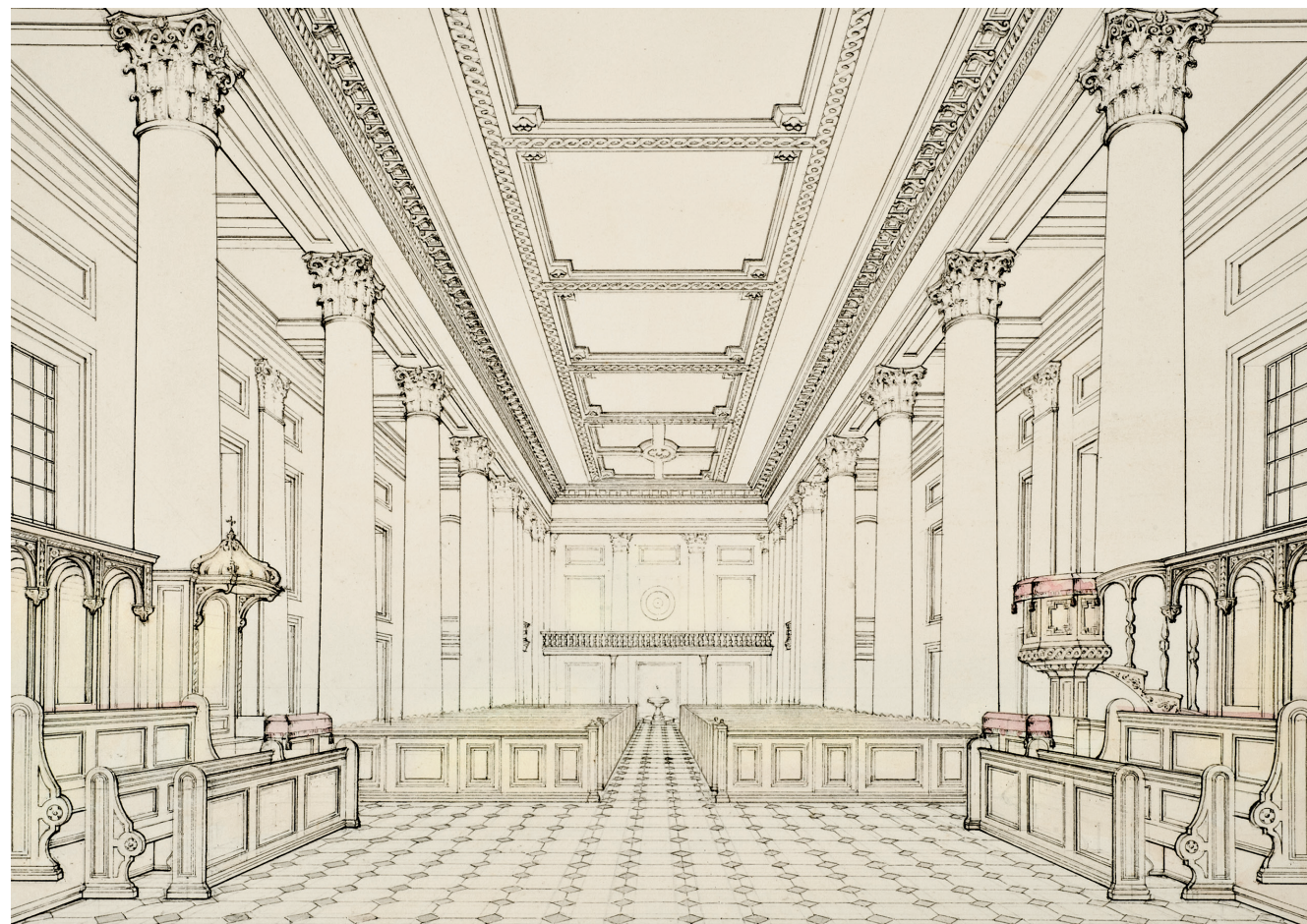
right: Fig. 7
Engraving of William Scamp. The British admiralty architect is depicted with dividers in hand over a plan of the Grand Harbour area with the wording 'Extension Grand Port', for which works he was responsible in the 1860s. Inv. No. MMM/4269. (Malta Maritime Museum, Vittoriosa / Courtesy of Heritage Malta / Photo: Peter Bartolo Parnis)

I have further to remark that in my opinion the Tower in which should be the Vestry room – Bells, Clocks, etc should always in my opinion be detached from the Church – the Vestry room especially – and the disgraceful practice of settling parish disputes, and other matters of business within the Walls of the Sacred Edifice should not be permitted and that the Church should stand alone.²

In fact the tower was built on the rock from the lower terrace at a depth of 35 feet from below the floor of the church. The height of the tower from the level of the lower terrace is 212 feet and the height of the spire is an additional 82 feet. Another major alteration to the plan was the change in location of the High Altar. Scamp's original plans had envisaged the High Altar at the south-west end and four side doors giving the additional benefit of a cooling breeze during the hot summer months. However, the Bishop of Gibraltar, Dr George Tomlinson, in whose diocese St Paul's lay, insisted that a more conventional layout with the altar at the north-east end be adhered to. In response, Scamp conceived a semicircular exedra behind the main doors to accommodate the altar positioned behind the portico end of the church.

In effect, this solution had the undesirable effect that the main entrance to the church could no longer be through the grand portico at the north-east end. The Bishop, during his visit to Malta for his official appointment, was critical of the original design and lamented the fact that 'however, elegant and complete the church will be in its internal and external aspect, viewed separately, it will always present the incongruity of a portico without an entrance, or at best a feigned one, a church without a principal door – an anomaly which is ever to be regretted.'³

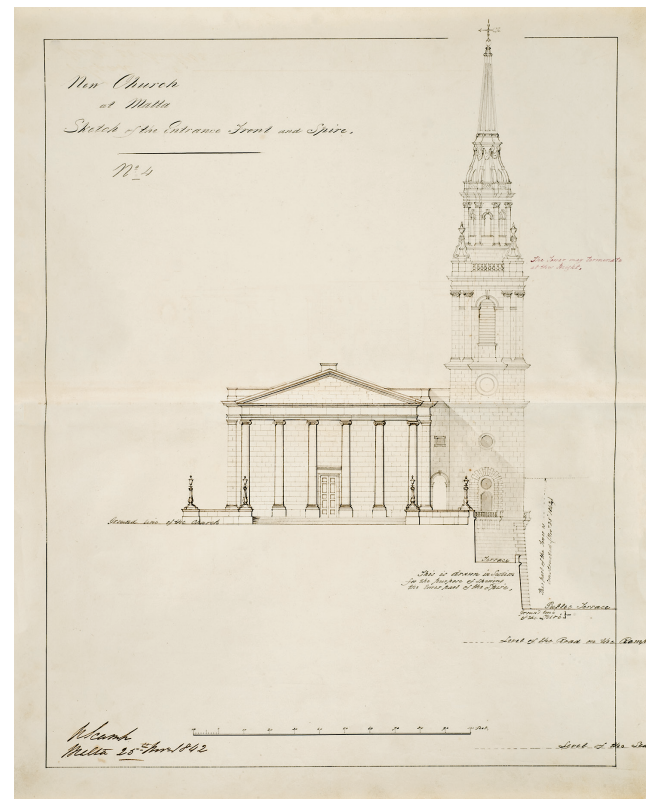
This layout with the altar at the north-east end was retained until the Second World War. During a renewal project implemented in accordance to the ideas of architect W.D. Caroe, the High Altar was transferred back to the south-



west end as originally planned by Scamp. The south-west end was transformed into a choir by the construction of a new stone screen across the nave. The screen incorporated a stone pulpit and a lectern, now in wood and presented as a memorial to Sir Winston Churchill.

The former sanctuary at the north-east end was substituted by the baptistry as the baptismal font was moved from the opposite end of the church. The six engaged pilasters in the exedra wall, originally plain, were fluted and the lower sections decorated with carvings of tulips. The tulips, fluting and capitals of the pilasters were highlighted with gold gilding – interventions that would have been disapproved by Scamp considering his strict puritanical design approach and aversion to surface decoration.⁴

The church accommodated 658 persons at the ground level, and provision was made for special pews for the Governor and the Commander-in-Chief. From the baptistry, at the other end to the choir in front of the altar, are six pairs of freestanding Corinthian columns. Scamp's first priority was to undertake the remedial works to stabilize the defective structure. Scamp meticulously recorded all the plans, purchases of building materials, and weekly salaries of the workforce. These are minutely recorded in two volumes which today are to be found in the archives of the Wignacourt Collegiate Museum in Rabat. From one of the detailed reports prepared by Scamp, he records that



left: Fig. 8
William Scamp, New Church at Malta, Sketch of the Entrance Front and Spire. Signed by William Scamp and dated 25th November 1842. Drawing No. 4.

below: Fig. 9
William Scamp, New Church at Malta, Elevation, Entrance Front, to Design B. Drawing No. VII.

opposite: Fig. 10:
William Scamp, New Church at Malta, Elevation, North Front, Drawing No. IX (detail).

(Wignacourt Collegiate Museum, Rabat / Photos: Joe P. Borg)

nearly at an end – of being able to complete the Church to their satisfaction.’

Scamp was particularly critical of Lankesheer’s original design and also the working habits of the local workmen:

An expense incalculably created by the habitual indolence and incapacity of the Workmen – much of this might have been avoided had the original design been more in accordance with the Customs of the Island. ... experience in other Works have convinced me of the necessity of adapting the Work to the capabilities of people here, – and to avoid as much as possible creating difficulties that the people of this Island are incapable of carrying into effect; – the incapacity of the persons already appointed to conduct this work, I had hopes of being able to counteract by constant personal vigilant attention.⁵

Works resumed with a certain degree of caution as a contemporary chronicler noted that ‘every step he [Scamp] takes discloses a new imperfection in the old work, and the poor man is puzzled everywhere ... what has been used for cement has so little cementing or tenacious property, that it pulverizes under the touch so that snuff would have been quite as useful a material.’⁶

Scamp lamented the fact that local workers were totally unacquainted with the roofing system adopted for the church. He contacted an experienced plasterer in London with a view to getting an estimate for the works to be carried out. He had also considered engaging an Italian contractor for the roof works but his quotation was deemed too expensive. Scamp did not express confidence that this could be done locally for he even suggested the possibility of obtaining the services of Sicilian or Neapolitan contractors.

Although works proceeded steadily, there was a tragic accident on the 29th September 1842 when part of the cornice facing Strada Ponente (West Street) collapsed and killed three local workmen. One specific entry in Scamp’s

the sum of £3000 was expended on the corrective works executed during the period from late November 1841 (when works resumed) to a year later in November 1842. In his report to the Building Committee, Scamp concluded that ‘the building now presents the appearance of Stability. I have examined and strengthened every part that appeared to require it. I have great hopes, now that the difficulties are



NEW CHURCH - VALETTA.

Elevation, North Front.

Nº IX .

The Houses marked A on the General Plan Nº 2, are supposed away.

detailed accounts makes reference to a payment of £15 as compensation to the victims' families. By November 1842, works were well advanced on the external building shell but still considerable work remained to be done on parts of the cornice, the roof, portico and bell tower. The workforce varied in accordance with the stage of construction. At its peak, during the last week of November 1842, it is recorded that there were a total of 173 workmen on site, composed of the following trades; 7 stone setters, 63 stone cutters, 39 stone carriers or labourers, 47 boys, 3 sculptors, 14 carpenters.⁷ Salaries ranged from a mere five to seven pence a day for the boys to three shillings per day earned by the sculptors. Detailed weekly accounts listed not only the salaries of the workforce but also the cost of different materials used including that of stone, lime, pozzolana, lead, nails, oak, tools, sand, rope, boards, beams, paint and chalk. Another challenge was posed in obtaining stone of sufficiently good quality for the columns of the portico. Arrangements were made for good-quality stone to be quarried from the vicinity of St George's Bay and for the British Navy to transport it at a low price to the building site.

The Cathedral's interior

William Scamp was well versed in the nuances of the English Baroque style, particularly the ecclesiastical works of James Gibbs and Nicholas Hawksmoor. The interior of the Valletta cathedral seems to be inspired by Hawksmoor's St Mary Woolnoth Church, London (1716–1727).⁸ Scamp's interior is characterized by a double row of freestanding columns topped by rich Corinthian capitals supporting a cornice and a flat suspended ceiling. The parallels with Hawksmoor's church are clear – the emphasis is on a spacious and well-lit interior, and a composition inspired by clearly articulated architectural elements with sparse surface decoration.

Scamp must have been keen to ensure that the atmosphere within the interior of the cathedral would be distinctly different from that of local Baroque churches. Certainly, there is an aversion to excessive surface decoration and the use of rich materials like polychrome marbles, gold gilding and damasks, qualities so characteristic of local Baroque churches. Instead Scamp sought to evoke an interior which was spacious and well-lit, and where the clarity of the structural elements is not in any way compromised by superfluous and redundant decoration. Scamp's own writings testify to his preference for a purist and rational design approach whilst being conscious of his obligations to working within tight financial constraints:

With the interior works as is the case with almost all Works of this description, various are the opinions with regard to taste, – some would Flute the Columns and Gild the fillets, – others would Gild all the beautiful capitals. – another opinion is in favour of adding other Tablets in the whole of Panels over those already at the Altar, – to these and other recommendations, I have one general answer – 'that the money placed at my disposal, does not justify me in either introducing, – or suggesting the introduction of Work that will create expenses that are absolutely necessary.' –

- 1st The nature of the Material will not admit of flutings to the Columns.
- 2nd To Gild the capitals, or the fillets of the flutes, – without extending the Gilding to the enrichment of the whole of the Ceiling would create an effect of Poverty rather than richness.
- 3rd The Tablets already at the Altar are rich and interesting without departing from the principle by which I have been guided, both to the interior and exterior – *Simplicity*.⁹

'Simplicity' in Scamp's own words was a key factor in providing a dignified place of worship rendered even more

right: Fig. 11
William Scamp, New Church at Malta, Elevation, South Front, Drawing No. VIII.

below: Fig. 12
William Scamp, New Church at Malta, Sketch as it appeared in November 1841. Signed by William Scamp and dated 25th November 1842.

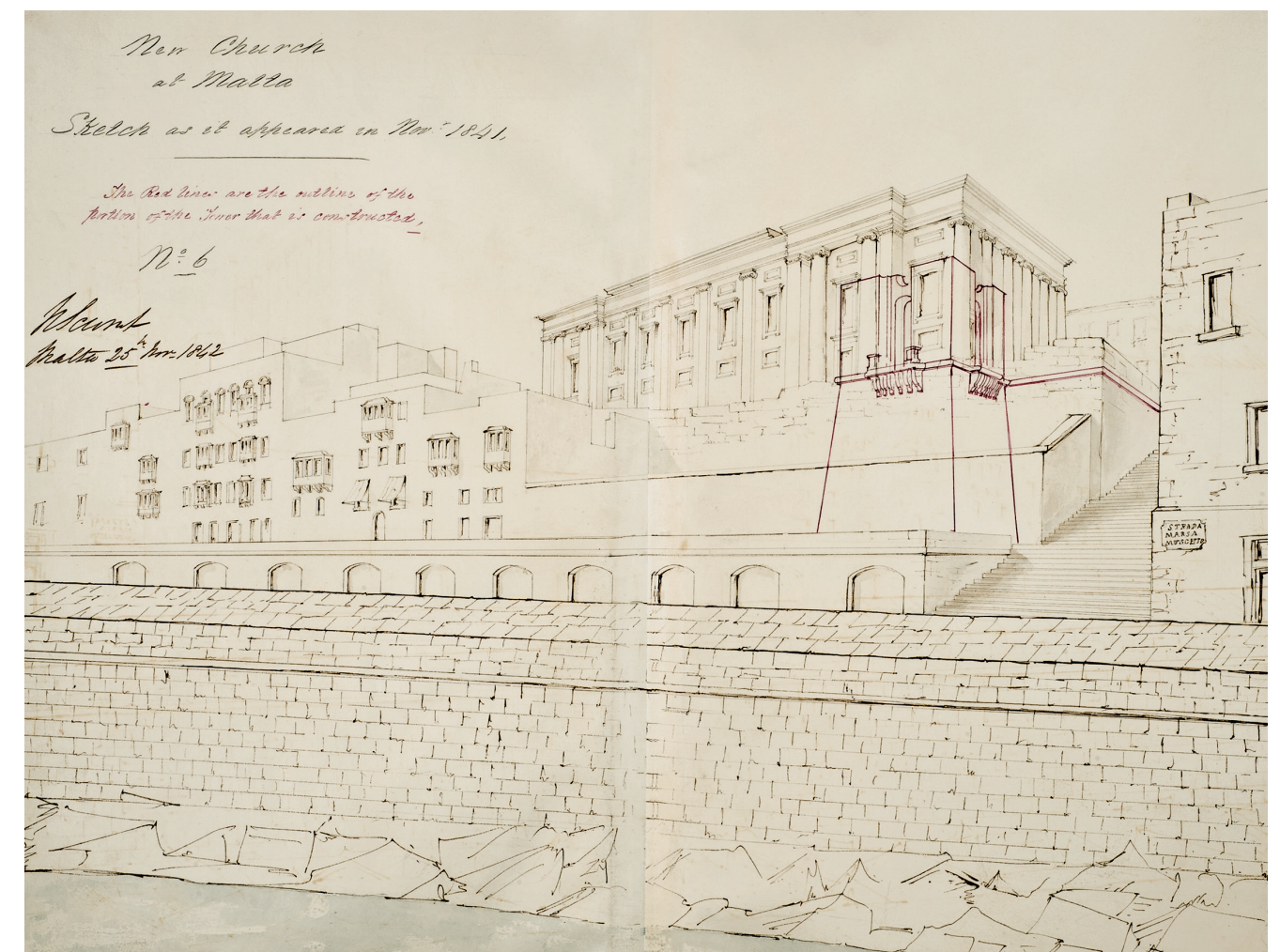
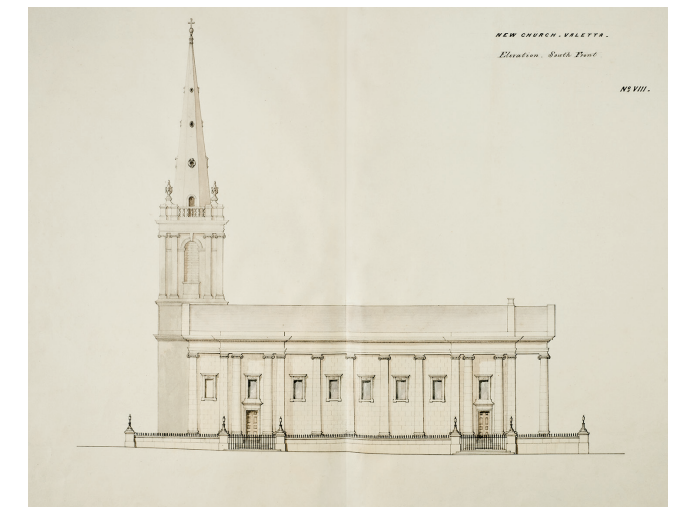
(Wignacourt Collegiate Museum, Rabat / Photos: Joe P. Borg)

relevant as he had inherited a structurally defective building and was duty-bound to adhere to a restricted budget. Scamp appears to have encountered some adverse criticism as to the rather spartan and severe appearance of the church interior. He conceded:

that some disappointment will be created because Carving in Marble has not been introduced to the Altar. I admit that a good effect might be produced by lining the whole

of the Altar with Marble rich in colour and make the capitals White without interfering with the Ceiling, – but to introduce carving on variegated marble would be offensive, and contrary to well understood principles.¹⁰

Scamp paid meticulous attention to the type of materials used and their suitability in relation to the local climate. For example, he was critical of the fact that Slate and Lead were



used in the construction of the roof. He claimed that 'the Slates are questionable as to durability, and Lead is subject to great expansions from excessive heat.'¹¹ The only justification he offered as to why these materials were used was that he found on site a large supply of Lead and Slates and he 'did not think it prudent to abandon this'. He also considered the possibility that awnings would have to be affixed to the parapet walls to protect the lead gutters from the harsh summer heat. He concluded his report by stressing the need for regular maintenance particularly that the 'Gutters and Roof should be carefully examined before every approaching Winter'.¹²

The Cathedral's bell-tower

Scamp's major architectural contribution is the cathedral's bell-tower, which is one of Valletta's main architectural landmarks when the city is viewed from Marsamxett Harbour. The distinctive bell-tower that rises from atop the bastions amidst the cubic massing of the surrounding buildings provides a vertical counterpoise to the sheer mass of the fortifications. The British architectural historian Howard Colvin had in an article entitled 'Victorian Malta' described it in the following terms:

The tower, which is inspired by that of St. Mary-le-Bow, is like its original detached from the main body of the church, and stands in a prominent position on the edge of the Marsamuscetto Harbour, where it forms one of the principal landmarks of Valletta. Scamp, who was wholly responsible for this part of the church, wisely refrained from reproducing the upper portion of Wren's elaborate steeple, and substituted an octagonal stone spire which from a distance might be taken for Gothic, where it not for a series of circular openings framed by scrolls and surmounted by crowns, which provide a subtle link between

Fig. 13
William Scamp, Sketch from Fort Tigne of the City of Valletta showing the Church as seen from the Sea.
(Wignacourt Collegiate Museum, Rabat / Photo: Joe P. Borg)

the native baroque and this alien symbol of Anglican piety. It is above all, this harmonious combination of the Greek revival and the English Renaissance, this hint of the Gothic North with its subtle concession of the baroque South, which raises St Paul's Cathedral to a high position among its ecclesiastical contemporaries, and make it so uniquely appropriate as the seat of an English bishopric in the Mediterranean Seas.¹³

A watercolour drawing by Scamp depicts the skyline of Valletta as viewed from across Marsamxett Harbour. The sketch must have been intended to assess the visual impact that the cathedral and its spire would have on Valletta's skyline. Scamp designed a fine steeple that, as stated by Colvin, attempted to reconcile a Gothic spire abstracted into classical terms with the cubic masses of a Mediterranean maritime city. Consciously or not it was conceived as an Anglican landmark foisted upon a fortified city that was imbued with the spirit of the Baroque. In his design of the tower, Scamp could draw from several precedents of English Baroque architecture; James Gibbs's St Mary-le-Strand, London, and St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, and Sir Christopher Wren's, St Mary-le-Bow (1680) are the more obvious examples.¹⁴ The underlying design concept was that the tower, with its overall height of 64.63 metres (212 feet), had to be divided into a series of distinct components which relate to the surrounding urban context. Basically, it adhered to a tripartite division of a base, shaft and spire. The base, constructed of solid masonry, made up for the difference in level between the lower terrace and the floor level of the church. Its foundations had to be appropriately planned and constructed so as to support the considerable load of the overlying structure. Hence, the square base was larger than that of the shaft. The masonry walls were battered and tapered inwards, and each of the corners was visually reinforced with quoins of alternating long and short rusticated masonry blocks that recalled the facades of



Girolamo Cassar's auberges. The solid base of the tower was reminiscent of the Order's coastal towers and complemented the austere horizontal masses of the city's line of fortifications.

Scamp's original design of the bell-tower and spire, drawn in 1842, is more decorative and ornate. It contains a number of ornate features such as decorative swags between the Ionic capitals and an entablature that is embellished by a series of lion-headed gargoyles. The superstructure as originally conceived by Scamp envisaged a circular lantern that was closely modelled after Wren's St Mary-le-Bow. This was topped by a heavy entablature from which sprang pseudo-Gothic, bowed-buttresses ribs culminating in a pointed spire, surmounted at the apex by a wind vane. In retrospect Scamp's original design for the superstructure appears to be too elaborate and rather over-contrived when compared with the austere spirit that permeated the cathedral's interior. At some point, there was a change of heart. Probably, the shortage of funds warranted a more simplified design that could be executed expeditiously with limited resources and supervision. The spire was changed to a slender octagonal form terminating at the apex into a small ball and cross. A small doorway capped by a pediment was located at the base of the spire and provided access to a balustrade balcony with decorative masonry pedestals defining each individual corner. These pedestals were intended to support stone urns, as indicated in Scamp's drawings. They were however dispensed with presumably due to lack of funds. The plain surface of the spire is relieved by three richly sculpted oculi positioned on each alternate facet and progressively decreasing in size towards the apex.

The bell-tower, with its distinctive spire, became an iconic architectural landmark synonymous with Valletta's

skyline as viewed from Marsamxett Harbour and the Tigne peninsula. It exuded both a sense of dignified *gravitas* and architectural preeminence that diplomatically reminded any visitor that Valletta, albeit conceived as the 'City of the Order', was ultimately an integral part of the British colonial realm. This subtle 'Anglicization' of the Order's fortifications around Valletta can be testified by various interventions during the nineteenth century, such as the placement of Ponsonby's column on St Andrew's Bastion near Hastings Garden (1838), the strategically placed Sir Alexander Ball monument in the Lower Barrakka Gardens (1810), the various Neo-Classical monuments in the Upper Barrakka gardens, and the Msida Bastion Cemetery (1806–1856).

Conclusion

The successful completion of the Anglican cathedral banished the ghosts of the ill-fated start to the project. This was of paramount importance to the credibility of the British colonial authorities. The Collegiate Church of St Paul was formally consecrated by the Bishop of Gibraltar on the 1st November 1844, even though the spire had not yet been completed. On a personal note, William Scamp and his partner Harriet Wynder had a daughter in Malta. She was born on the 11th April 1844, and seven months later was christened as Adelaide Frances Melita in the first baptismal ceremony to be held in the new Anglican cathedral. Upon his return to England in 1845, Scamp was presented with a silver candelabrum 'in grateful remembrance of his services in completing the Collegiate Church of St Paul, at Malta.'¹⁵

This contribution is based on the author's publication *William Scamp (1801-1872): An Architect of the British Admiralty in Malta* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2011).

Notes

- 1 William Scamp, Report and drawings of St Paul Anglican Cathedral, Volume A, Wignacourt Collegiate Museum, Rabat. Refer to Appendix One. Refer to Conrad Thake, *William Scamp (1801-1872): An Architect of the British Admiralty in Malta* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2011), 56-67.
- 2 William Scamp, Report and Plans, Volume B, dated 28 March 1844. Wignacourt Collegiate Museum Archives, Rabat. Refer to Appendix Two. Thake, op. cit., 65.
- 3 Thake, op. cit., 65.
- 4 Ibid., 66.
- 5 William Scamp, Report and Plans, Volume B, dated 28 March 1844, Wignacourt Collegiate Museum Archives, Rabat.
- 6 S.S Burberry, *Life and Letters of R.C. Sconce* (London, 1861), 163.
- 7 Thake, op. cit., 66.
- 8 David Watkin, *English Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, revised edition 2001), 118-119.
- 9 William Scamp, Report and Plans, Volume B, dated 28 March 1844. Wignacourt Collegiate Museum Archives, Rabat. Thake, op. cit., 71.
- 10 William Scamp, *ibid.*
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 H.M. Colvin, 'Victorian Malta', in *The Architectural Review* (June 1946), 179-180.
- 14 Watkin, op. cit., 107-123.
- 15 E.A. Shortland Jones, *St Paul's Pro-Cathedral, Valletta* (Malta: Beck Graphics, 2000), 11. 'This Silver-Gilt Candelabrum was made by Joseph & John Angell, London 1844 and presented to William Scamp, the architect for St Paul's Anglican Cathedral, Valletta by Queen Adelaide in 1845.'

The St Paul's Anglican Pro-Cathedral Restoration Appeal

Recent architectural inspections of St Paul's Anglican Pro-Cathedral have identified severe problems threatening the tower, the spire and the stonework throughout the church.

Parts of the Cathedral are now designated as being in urgent need of repair. Examples include:

- *The roof over the Western tower, which needs to be replaced.*
- *Repairs to corroded stonework, anchoring of cracked stonework, restoration of steps, cleaning and pointing, replacement or anchoring of sheared, dislodged or spoiling masonry blocks and the replacement of stone balustrades.*
- *The replacement of the temporary ceiling with a replica of the original design by the great Victorian architect William Scamp.*

One cannot imagine Valletta's skyline without St Paul's majestic bell-tower and spire, which is why the campaign has been named 'Save Valletta's Skyline'. This Cathedral is indeed one of Malta's most prominent and awe-inspiring landmarks.

The Restoration Appeal Committee, jointly chaired by Sir Martin Laing and Mr Martin Scicluna, is seeking to raise €3,000,000 to preserve St Paul's Anglican Pro-Cathedral, and to provide some funding for the future. This fund will be ring-fenced for restoration work only, and will not be used for running expenses. Details of how to donate to this fund can be found at: savethecathedral.com