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DIN L-ART HELWA

National Trust of Malta

**VIGILO**



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# VIGILO

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With this 40th Edition of Vigilo, *Din l-Art Helwa* would like to thank editor Joe Azzopardi and proof reader Judy Falzon for their work in producing Vigilo and *Din l-Art Helwa*'s Newsletter year after year. We are indebted to them for their voluntary work to record for posterity the work of our organisation in words and in pictures making Vigilo an important collectible item of Melitensia. We would also like to thank all those who contribute to its contents and to the many DLH volunteers who make our story possible.

Simone Mizzi  
Executive President

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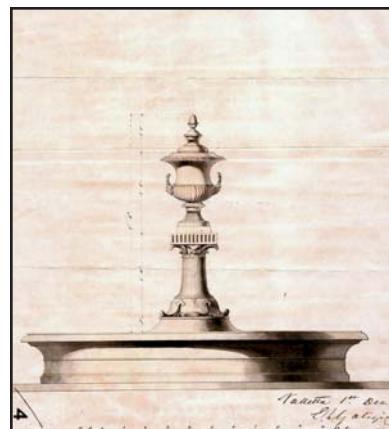
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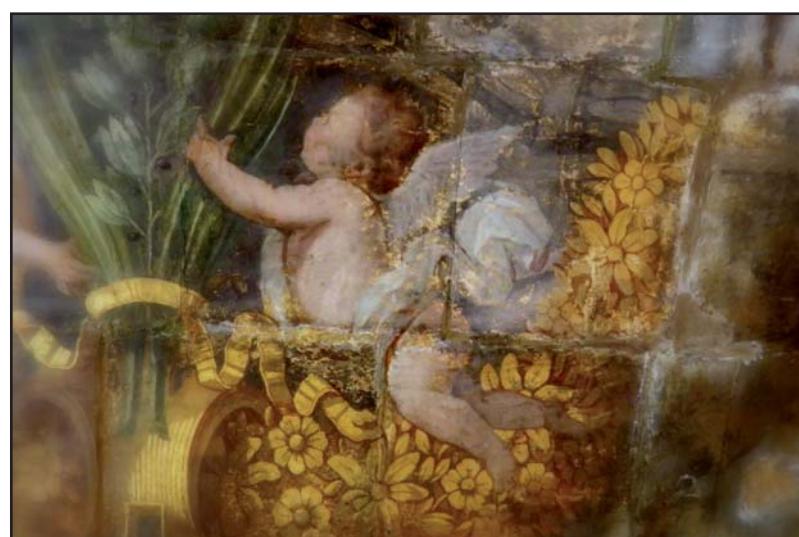
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Victory Church



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The depiction of the  
Assumption  
on the ceiling of  
Our Lady of  
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# The Main Guard and its Murals

Denis A Darmanin



The present building known as the Main Guard was originally built in 1603 by Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt as the *Corpo di Guardia del Palazzo* and abuts the Order's Chancellery or *Cancelleria*. Located in what was then known as *Piazza San Giorgio* (St George's Square) facing the Grand Master's Palace, now the Palace of the President of Malta, the building served as the quarters for the *Corpo di Guardia d'Onore dell Gran Maestro*, the Grand Master's Bodyguard or – to use the name by which they are more commonly known – the *Guardia della Piazza*.

The Chancellery building is on the right, where Archbishop Street meets the Square, and is where the Order's archives were held. Above the doorway of what is now the *Istituto Italiano di Cultura* (the Italian Cultural Institute) is a plaque with a Latin inscription commemorating Grand Master Wignacourt's transfer of the Chancellery from the Palace into this building in 1604. The main hall of the building is particularly renowned for its ornate entrance, with a bust of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena above the door and the fresco that adorns its vaulted ceiling reputed to have been painted by Niccolo' Nasoni of Siena while he was living in Malta between 1723 and 1725. The Chancellery was subsequently used by the British Council, incorporating the Garrison Library and after Independence in 1964 it became the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the Commonwealth and eventually the Italian Cultural Institute in 1974.

The Main Guard and Chancellery building

opposite:

The Main Guard

British Royal Coat of Arms over the Main Guard portico



In 1830, the building in the left-hand corner, where Old Theatre Street meets the Square, was converted for use as a bank – 'Joseph Scicluna et fils' – which in 1926 became 'Scicluna's Bank' and since 1973 a branch of the Bank of Valletta. The rear of the entire block runs along Strait Street, better known to British sailors and soldiers as 'The Gut'. The famous 'Egyptian Queen Music Hall' or the 'Gippo' as they called it, also occupied part of the building on Old Theatre Street.

Until the early years of British rule, a fountain built by Grand Master Wignacourt in 1615 was located in the middle of the square, as part of the water system constructed to bring water into Valletta from the area around Rabat. At each end of the façade is a fountain, part of the legacy of Grand Master de Rohan. These fountains have defied time and war and are still functioning.

The saga of the surrender of Malta by the Order in 1798 to Napoleon Bonaparte and his Army of the Orient en route to Egypt is well known. In just a few weeks, the Maltese rebelled against the French garrison under General Belgrand de Vaubois. Seeking Britain's help, the Maltese insurgents laid siege to the capital and other strongholds for two eventful years, until the French surrendered on 5 September 1800.

The Treaty of Amiens of 1802 stipulated that Malta be returned to the Order of St John, but under Sicilian protection. However, the British were very well aware of Malta's value as a military and naval base and Britain had long sought to establish itself in the Mediterranean Sea and to defeat and deter Russia from expanding its influence into the region. Tsar Paul I was declared *de facto* Grand Master of the Order of St John after the capitulation and eviction of the Order from Malta and the death of the last Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch zu Bolheim. With its fine natural harbours and its location in the centre of the Mediterranean, Malta was Britain's finest foothold.

One of the earliest buildings to be occupied by the British in Valletta was the Grand Master's Palace, which later became the Governor's Palace. Eventually, the Treaty of Paris of 1814 decreed Malta to be a British Crown colony and with the presence of a strong garrison, the need arose for a building to house soldiers required to guard the Governor and Palace and from where *Reveille* and *Sunset* are officially sounded. The building across the square from the Palace was strategically located and was soon occupied to become 'The Main Guard'. During that same year, a neo-classical colonnaded portico was erected on the façade of the Main Guard, enclosing the main entrance. By 1815, a stone sculpture of the British Royal Coat of Arms with lion and unicorn supporters had been placed in the centre of the terrace, probably the design of Captain George Whitmore, RE and possibly sculptured by Vincenzo Dimech, who also executed the Royal Arms above Neptune's

Courtyard in the Palace, above the gate of the old University in St Paul's Street, the old Marina Gate and on *Porta Reale*, all installed as a result of Governor Maitland's Proclamation No. VI of 1814.

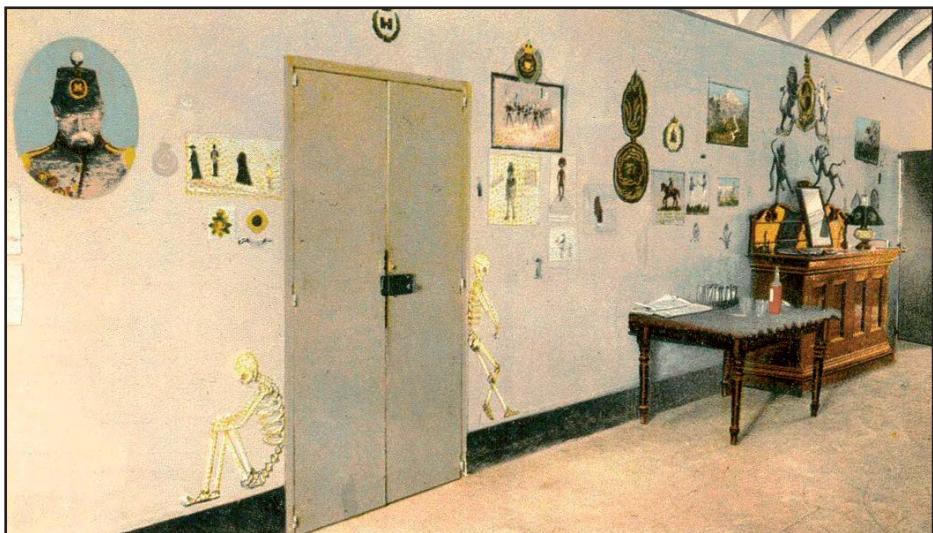
An inscription in Latin on the plinth below the Royal Coat of Arms, attributed to a Maltese priest, records the wish of the Maltese to see their islands placed under the care of Britain and Malta declared as part of Europe by King George III.

MAGNÆ ET INVICTÆ BRITANNIAE  
MELITENSIMUM AMOR ET EUROPAE  
VOX  
HAS INSULAS CONFIRMAT A.D. 1814

Translation:

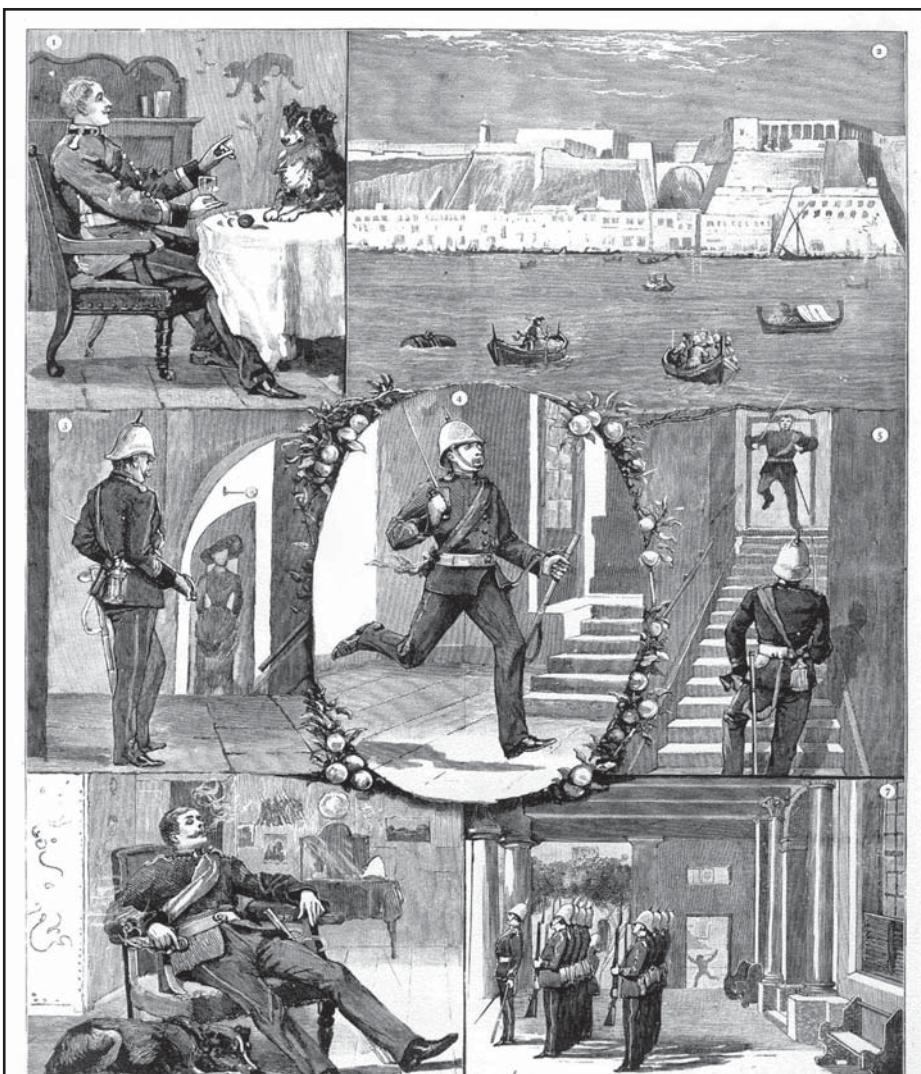
*'These islands are granted to the great and invincible Britain by consent of Europe and by the love of the Maltese'.*

Whether "confirmat" belongs to the original text or was altered during a later restoration is still being debated.



Old postcard showing a section of wall of the Officers' Mess at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

Lithograph showing an Officer's daily routine when on duty at the Main Guard,  
Illustrated London Times



1. Dinner.—2. Crossing to Valetta from Verdala.—3. The Stairway, Looking Down.—4. 'There Goes that Bell'.—5. Up the Staircase to the Officers' Room.—6. On Guard.—7. The Guard 'Turned Out' to the Governor-General Salute.

WITH THE MAIN GUARD AT THE PALACE, VALETTA, MALTA.

It is interesting to note that in an engraving depicting the *Burning of Letters Patents* by the Nobles of Malta on Bastille Day 1798, above the main portal of the Main Guard, is a plaque with an inscription, which was then covered by the portico.

The Guard Room proper was located on the lower floor, where a Quarter Guard was always present, with sentries pacing in front of the portico at regular intervals. The Guard was mounted at *Reveille* and dismounted at *Sunset*, but was called out when the Governor was entering or leaving the Palace, when the Archbishop of Malta passed in his carriage or for visits by distinguished personages. The British converted the large upstairs hall into an Officers' Mess next to which was also the Duty Officer's Quarters. Until the late 19th century, a lantern hung below the Royal Coat of Arms, which was replaced by a clock that probably then controlled the exact time by which all events in the square were held.

St George's Square, or Palace Square as many called it, was the scene of countless parades, manifestations and other military and civilian activities, including the spilling of Maltese blood during the *Sette Giugno* 1919 "bread" riots". During the 160 or so years of its occupancy by the British Army, the walls of the Officers' Mess became a monument to many of the British regiments stationed to garrison the island, or even in transit. The soldiers soon began to paint badges, caricatures and other testimonials associated with their presence in Malta or particular to their regiment. Being so many, it is impossible to list them all in this article. One unfortunate Sergeant Major even lost his long-cherished moustache, which ended up being pasted to one of these walls. Even the Indian Expeditionary Force in Malta in 1878 left a memento of their stay here, with a mural depicting an Indian trooper.

Apart from a coloured postcard that dates to around the end of the 19th century, there is no other contemporary

photographic record. Some of the caricatures can be vaguely seen in the background of the illustration entitled *The Main Guard, Valletta, Malta 1885* that originally featured in *The Illustrated London News*, based on engravings from sketches by Lt. A.W. Crawford M'Fall of the 2nd South Yorkshire Regiment. The next and more detailed record is an unpublished book by Lt Colonel R H Melville Lee.

In 1971, the last troops to occupy the Main Guard were elements of the King's Own Malta Regiment and when the Regiment was disbanded, the building was closed and all military activities ended. The British Council also vacated the section it had occupied. A few years later, the Main Guard was ceded to become the Libyan Cultural Centre and the Royal Coat of Arms was hidden by a box-like sign. Most of the decorated portals were removed and the walls of the Officers' Mess were covered by panels attached to wooden scantlings fixed to its walls.

In the early 1990s, the Libyans were requested to vacate the building which was required to serve as the Office of the Attorney General. The box structure was removed from the Royal Coat of Arms, which were later restored. Panels and boards were also removed, but since the wooden strips were fixed directly to the walls and doorways had been altered, the murals had suffered much damage.

Some years ago, an unnamed sketchbook was placed on an Internet auction site. It featured a number of pages of watercolour illustrations and caricatures and loose pencil drawings. Some of the scenes were of Malta and two particular caricatures are identical to two on the Main Guard's wall, one of which is a marching Maltese policeman wearing a 'Bobby's helmet' complete with badge. It's a pity that I could never learn to whom the sketch book had belonged.



Although when the Attorney General began using the building, the murals were covered by thick curtains to eliminate damage by light, the deterioration was quite evident, as sections of plaster had chipped, possibly when doorways were widened, and raw concrete was found to have been earlier applied to door jambs. Unfortunately, although there have been numerous restoration projects of other historical murals, those at the Main Guard have been by-passed and have been forgotten since the building was vacated by the military. It is believed that some of these murals were last 'restored' by the famous Maltese artist Envin Cremona in around 1942, when he was serving in the Royal Engineers, but I have yet to locate any official documentation of this.

Due to its historical and architectural importance, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority scheduled the Chancellery and the Main Guard building as Grade 1 National Monuments as per Government Notice No. 276/08 in the Government Gazette dated 28 March, 2008.



Section of wall of the Officers' Mess during the fixing of the wooden scantlings

Left:

Caricatures including one of the 27<sup>th</sup> (Inniskilling) Regiment of Foot (c1840-1881) and concrete on door jamb

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