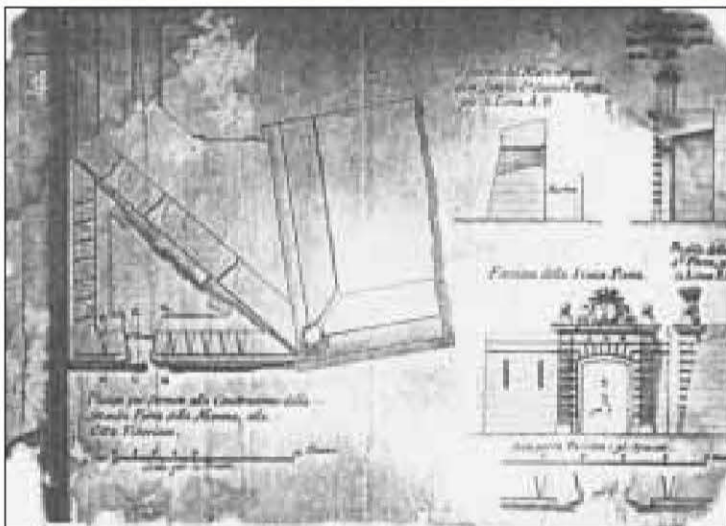


200 years ago

# Huge explosion rocks Vittoriosa, 180 killed



TWO scenes of the explosion site today. The serrated edge of the demolished fortifications can still be easily traced.



PIANTA per servire alla Costruzione della Seconda Porta della Marina alla Città Vittoriosa, Malta, 1727, showing the gate and part of the fortifications destroyed by the explosion of 1806

**A**T 6.15 a.m. on Friday, July 18, 1806, a terrible explosion shook the walled city of Vittoriosa and terrified its inhabitants as well as those of Cospicua, Senglea and surrounding towns and villages.

The gunpowder magazine located on the Vittoriosa waterside by Galleys Creek and that adjacent to *Porta della Marina* were totally destroyed when 370 barrels of gunpowder and some 1,600 artillery shells and grenades belonging to the British troops stationed in Malta exploded. Some of the walls, stores and houses, including the Barracks Master's residence, were destroyed and all that remained were piles of stones and debris. The magazine itself, which was housed in a bastion rising from the sea opposite and similar in shape to the bastion of *il-Macina* on the Senglea side was literally pulverised.

News of the blast spread quickly and was given wide coverage in the international press, even in the United States; the *Columbian Sentinel* of November 6, 1806, carried a front page report, albeit with some different statistics.

Initially, casualties were estimated at 180 dead and 300 wounded; mostly soldiers and Maltese who lived in this area. Among the British soldiers who were killed in the blast were 14 from the Royal Regiment of Artillery, three of the 39th (East Middlesex) Regiment of Foot and 23 from the 2nd Maltese Provincial Battalion of Infantry or, as it was better known, the *Reggimento Gatt*, after its commander, Count de Gatto.

At the time of the explosion, the band of the 39th (East Middlesex) Regiment of Foot was rehearsing and playing *God Save the King* in a nearby building. Two of its members died instantly, many were injured and one died of his wounds.

Two small vessels berthed nearby were sunk while the man-of-war *Madras*, also moored in the creek at some distance, was struck by large stones that rained down after the explosion, one of them striking the gunner on deck and breaking his thigh.

One of the buildings destroyed by the explosion, possibly a casemate, was the merchandise store of a certain Mr Woodhouse and his brother, who lost 250 pipes worth nearly \$700 and numerous aged wine casks which burst with the impact.

A total of 853 sacks of body fragments were recovered. Among the British civilians killed and the

by Denis A. Darmanin

first to be found were John Roscoe, Margaret and William White and their three children; Elizabeth, 10, Thomas, five, and baby May. Also Henry Cowley and his three children, Louisa, Philip and Henry aged seven, six and three respectively.

The Maltese casualties recorded included Salvatore Zahra, 17, son of Giuseppe of Cospicua; Giuseppe 'tal-Mascu', 28, of Zabbar and married in Cospicua; Giuseppe Pulo, 12, son of Paolo of Vittoriosa; the daughter of Francesco Marmarà; Catarina Xicluna 'tat-Tuppan'; Giuseppe Darmanin, son of the late Mario of Zabbar and residing in Cospicua; Giuseppe of Zabbar; Giacchino Schembri, 28; Michael Gatt, 52, fisherman; an unknown baker and Giuseppe, the Maltese servant of the Barracks Master.

**T**he hot summer weather hindered the recovery of the dead, especially when all excavations were by hand and the authorities reported to Commander-in-Chief, Sir Alexander Ball, of their fear of a possible epidemic outbreak. Besides, there was also the danger of any other live charges still buried beneath the debris and which could cause a larger disaster.

At the time, burials were made in churches, so many of the remains were taken to the parish church of St Lawrence and the Annunciation church of the Dominican Priory in Vittoriosa. Some are documented as having even been taken as far as the church of St Publius in Floriana.

The underground graveyard beneath St Lawrence church at Vittoriosa could not take the large number of corpses. So the parish priest, Don Giovanni Busuttill, authorised improvised burials in a plot of land which the Vittoriosa parish owned near Fort San Salvatore, along the Cottonera Bastions. This was eventually transformed as the years went by into the present-day St Lawrence Cemetery. The search and recovery of bodies from the wreckage was considered concluded by October 11, 1806.

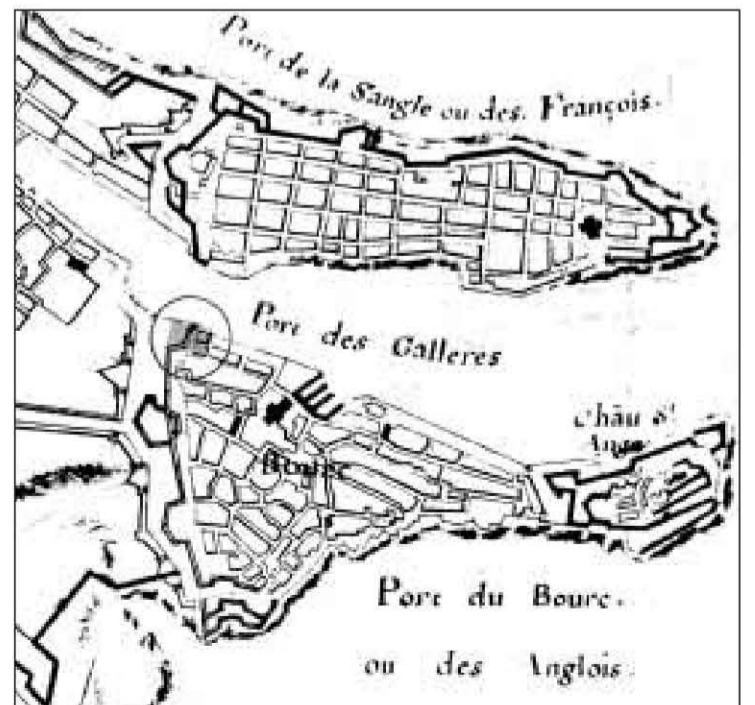
A court of inquiry was established to investigate the cause of this explosion. Sabotage was not excluded, considering the mixed sentiments that still existed towards the Order of St John, the Russian Tsar and even for Napoleon.

The court's first meeting was held in Valletta and was presided over by Major-General Patrick Wauchope, while its members were Brigadier-General Christopher Tilson, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Phillips and Arthur Brooke of the 44th (East Essex) Regiment of Foot, Lieutenant Colonel John P. Dalrymple of the Maltese Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Dickens, Royal Engineers, and Major Boyd Horsburgh of the 39th (East Middlesex) Regiment of Foot.

First to be called was Lieutenant Colonel Bentham, Commanding Officer of the Royal Artillery in Malta. He related how he had ordered Captain Gamble, the Commanding Officer, Royal Artillery, of the Cottonera District, to unload some boxes of shells from the powder stores at Vittoriosa. This task required each shell to be opened and the powder



THE GUNPOWDER stores at Rinella Bay which were built instead of the Vittoriosa magazine



18TH CENTURY MAP of the Galley Creek and Vittoriosa Wharf, indicating the area of the 1806 explosion

inside removed to enable safe transport for powder and shells to British troops in Sicily, as ordered by the Ordnance Commission.

Sergeant Robert Anson from the Ordnance Laboratory was sent to supervise and instruct how the work was to be performed. Bombardier Anderson, the Garrison Gunner, was in charge of unloading, with strict instructions on the necessary care to be taken when extracting the shells from their crates and at a safe distance from the stores. When Captain Gamble was asked what he believed caused the explosion, he simply replied that Bombardier Anderson did not obey his orders.

Gunner John Rowland, who conveyed Captain Gamble's precise orders to Bombardier Anderson on July 16, also gave evidence. Next was Gunner Robert Cressy, one of the men unloading the shells, who had realised that the work would be safer if taken outside the stores.

Having protested to Anderson about this, he was scolded and told to concentrate on his own work. Gunner Cressy was followed by Sergeant (Laboratory) Anson who related how he was ordered to go to Vittoriosa by Lt-Col. Bentham and to show Bdr Anderson the method to dismantle the shells. He also stated that the Bombardier was a very stubborn person.

The court's findings read: "Upon the reports of Lieut-Colonel Bentham and Captain Gamble it appears that the powder magazine in Vittoriosa in which the operation of unloading the shells was carrying on blew up on the morning of the 18th instant by which melancholy event the whole of the working party consisting of the Garrison Gunner, one non-commissioned officer and 12 gunners perished. The courts therefore are precluded from all means of obtaining any further evidence on the subject".

As Civil Commissioner, Sir Alexander Ball set up an investigating committee made up of Pietro Paolo Sceberras Bologna, Marquis Giuseppe Vincenzo Testaferrata, Gregorio Mattei, and George Noble to enquire into the cause of the explosion and to cater for a programme of relief for the victims.

A detailed report, written in Italian and dated October 12, gives accurate details of the daily finds of bodies recovered and their names if they were able to be identified, but also a gruesome list of the body parts. Livestock, poultry, cats and dogs are also included in the daily accounts.

The damages were estimated to total some £34,000 which Ball requested from the British Exchequer, as the accident was caused by the explosion of a Royal Magazine, due to the negligence of persons in the King's employment. Eighteen months later, the Secretary of War, Lord Castlereagh, argued that persons who inhabit a fortress must be subject to the risks connected with it!

The merchant community had "begun a subscription of £20 to go towards the poor sufferers" and it seems that certain scrap, material salvaged and items lifted during the recovery were sold to boost the funds.

Some of the text in the report is quite illegible but it can be clearly established that three containers or barges used for collecting odd waste from the disaster site and dumping it out at sea, were purchased by Giacomo Campanello, while Andrea Briffa purchased a quantity of old metal, broken wooden beams and other timber. In July 1811, the government finally agreed to pay to the "very poorest sufferers" a compensation of two-thirds of their losses, and to the others, a half.

The area of the 1806 tragedy at Vittoriosa remained derelict for some time and came to be known to the locals as '*I-Imġarrat*', the destroyed site. The gunpowder

magazine was never rebuilt although a number of dwellings were erected on the site and the top of the bastions were converted into small gardens. A garden of sorts, which came to be known as Garden Reach was also set up to give access to Birgu Wharf.

A new powder magazine was built by the British outside the fortifications and inside Grand Harbour at Rinella Bay (the magazines today house the headquarters of the Sea Cadets and of the Royal Marines Cadets, Malta).

The area was subjected to further changes when in 1812 William Brey, the Admiralty's Master Shipwright, started excavating the ditch area by the sea to build a dock.

However, due to Brey's sudden death in 1813, the problem with the heavily fissured rock, the outbreak of cholera and the Peace Treaty of 1815 after the fall of

Napoleon, the project was abandoned. Instead three arched slipways were built.

The area was again reshaped during the 1840s with the opening of Admiralty Gate and a bridge-road to facilitate access to the new Naval Bakery which was under construction on the site of the Order's Arsenal. Severe damage was caused by Axis bombs during World War II due to its proximity to No. 1 Dock and to the Royal Navy establishments at Fort St Angelo. Further restructuring took place with the demolition of the naval facilities at the wharf and the opening of Triq 31 ta' Marzu 1979.

#### Acknowledgements

The author, who is a committee member of the Vittoriosa Historical and Cultural Society, is grateful to Lorenzo Zahra and Alan Keighley for their help in compiling the historical material.

## Commemoration by Vittoriosa Historical and Cultural Society

TO mark the second centenary of the 1806 explosion at Vittoriosa, and to honour the memory of those who lost their lives, the Vittoriosa Historical and Cultural Society is organising a commemoration at St Lawrence Cemetery in Vittoriosa, where most of the victims are buried.

This is being held tomorrow at 6 p.m. The archpriest of Vittoriosa, Canon Charles Caruana, will say Mass at the cemetery chapel. Then, after a short address by the vice-president, Paul Attard, a commemorative marble tablet will be unveiled, and the *Last Post* will be played.

Everyone is invited.