

Heritage Malta's Endeavours on Industrial Heritage

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2013 is a truly momentous year for Heritage Malta in many ways, including developments in the sphere of industrial heritage. The curatorial arm within the national agency for museums, conservation and cultural heritage grew stronger with the appointment of a curator for the sector. It must be acknowledged, nonetheless, that Heritage Malta and, before 2003, the Museums Department, have long been proactive in this field. Indeed, the creation of the new curatorial post is the crystallization of past endeavours spanning several decades.

Ironically, the initial, and for years on end the only, tangible steps towards an appreciation of sorts of industrial heritage was spearheaded by warfare. Some Austrian and German warheads and equipment captured during World War I were presented to Malta and put on display at the Palace Armoury. Again, a host of mechanical paraphernalia employed in the cruel conflict of World War II was salvaged for posterity, while the Gloster Gladiator Faith, by far the most iconic relic of Malta's epic siege, found its way into the Palace Armoury exhibition. These and other war artefacts were eventually relocated at the National War Museum in 1974. As may be expected however, notwithstanding the fact that most components of this collection represent prime engineering milestones, the War Museum's storyline put little emphasis, if anything at all, on their relevance vis-à-vis technological advancement and industrial activity in general.

A more significant development materialised during the late 1980s. The former Royal Naval Bakery along the Birgu waterfront, Malta's first purposely built Industrial Revolution era building, metamorphosed into Malta's National Maritime Museum. Besides, the restoration of its imposing construction and the preservation of all extant steam powered machinery surviving in situ within the respective subterranean tunnels and channels, the collection amassed in due course and the ensuing permanent display touch upon various elements of industrial heritage. This endeavour is best epitomized by the salvaging of key components of the Grab Hopper Dredger Anadrian, namely the wheel house, gigantic steam powered triple expansion main engine, condenser, boiler front, and diesel and steam powered generators and pumps, all of which have been seamlessly fitted in one of the museum's ground floor spaces. Furthermore, the same machinery can still be run with the help of an electric motor.

Shortly after its inception, Heritage Malta offered its support to the Munxar Local Council in the creation and operation of a visitor experience at the Emergency Underground Flourmill erected during the 1950s at Xlendi, which is perhaps the best preserved Industrial Heritage site on the sister island. More recently, Heritage Malta has been entrusted with the custody of the Victorian steam powered Smithery Workshop at the Malta Shipyards, an extensive collection of archival material from the same shipyards, and a fleet of over ninety buses. Other initiatives include the rescue of several printing presses and related mechanical equipment, as well as the restoration of the wind-powered grinding mechanism at Ta' Kola Windmill in Gozo. The latter entailed a comprehensive research programme and complex preparations, scheduled for completion in 2013.

The new curatorial post in industrial archaeology forms part of the Ethnography Unit. At first glance this may seem somewhat incongruous because industrial heritage often tends to be associated with the physical remains of the history of technology and industry. Heritage Malta, however embraces a more kaleidoscopic perspective. The human, ethnographic dimension is considered central to the way we cherish, present and narrate industrial heritage. For instance, a holistic appreciation of the aforementioned fleet of buses would entail aspects like demographics, education and communal identities besides the technical, aesthetic and organisational facets.

As the national agency for museums, conservation and cultural heritage, Heritage Malta is expected to take advantage of and duly valorise the outstanding industrial patrimony treasured on our shores by setting up a dedicated cultural attraction at the earliest opportunity. While subscribing to this thought, as things stand the Agency would be very hard pressed to set up and operate yet another fully-fledged museum in addition to the ones in existence or in the pipeline. As an interim measure, the site of the former Knights' Armoury at Birgu, which hosted the Harry Stanger International Materials Technology Training College for a few years during the 1970s, is being turned into an open museum storage facility with a focus on industrial heritage. This modest but meaningful project is simply a prelude to a more proactive and outreaching stance.