

# Victoria: 125 Years of City Status

## 1887 – 10 June 2012

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### Introduction

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1887, as the British Empire at large was celebrating the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, the ancient town of Rabat at the very heart of Gozo was officially declared a city and its name changed to Victoria (Bezzina, 1988: 13).

### Gozo Under The British

As part of the Maltese archipelago, Gozo had become officially part of the British Empire when



Queen Victoria monument in Valletta.

Malta was proclaimed a Crown Colony in 1813 marking a new stage in Britain's Mediterranean policy (Williams, 1988: 37). Gozo has its own particular history during the British period since it was mostly under the British that the people of Gozo came to conclude the proceedings leading to the erection of the diocese of Gozo. The establishment of an independent diocese for Gozo and Comino had been first unsuccessfully requested on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 1798 and in December 1836 the Gozitans tried again (Bezzina, 1988: 60). However the bishops of Malta were against such a decision. The wish of the Gozitans could only become true if they had influential people on their side; such people were Sir Adrian Dingli, an eminent Gozitan lawyer and Father Pietro Pace, one of the future bishops of Gozo. After a great amount of work had been done and with the approval of the British authorities in Malta, Gozo was given its own independent diocese when on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 1864, Pope Pius IX, now blessed, created Gozo and Comino a separate diocese directly subject to the Holy See (Bezzina, 1988: 61).

### Towards Obtaining City-Status

The very same two gentlemen who had struggled to make Gozo a diocese in its own right were also the mind-sets behind the awarding of city-status to the town of Gozo; this was to further enhance the prestige of the second-largest island of the Maltese archipelago which interestingly enough had temporary independence under the short French rule of 1798-1800 (De Bono, 1988: 45). Sir Adrian Dingli, who has been described as 'one of the ablest and worthiest sons of Malta' and was the son of Sir Paul Dingli, President of the Court of Appeal had been elected Member for Gozo in the Council of Government in 1849. He enjoyed the favours of the British so much that in 1863 he went to Turin to negotiate with Count Cavour a Treaty



Queen Victoria of Great Britain.

of Extradition between Malta and the newly-created Kingdom of Italy (Macmillan, 1915: 391). Dingli had influential friends in Rome amongst them Cardinal Antonelli who was Secretary of State to Pope Pius IX and in 1880 he was raised to the highest judicial office by being created Chief Justice of Malta. Father Pietro Pace, who also hailed from Gozo, was noted for his erudition; in 1877 when he was only 46 years of age he was consecrated Bishop of Gozo at Rome by Cardinal Howard (Macmillan, 1915: 394). After the death of Mgr. Scicluna, he became Bishop of Malta. Dingli and Pace were the two distinguished personalities who made negotiations with the Crown in order to have Gozo's town awarded the status of a city.

### **Queen Victoria's Background**

In 1887, the British Empire began to prepare for the celebrations of the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Princess Victoria Alexandrina was born in Kensington Palace, London on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 1819, the daughter of Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and the fourth son of King George III and Princess Victoria Leiningen of Saxe-Coburg.

When her uncle William IV became king, she became the heir presumptive and at his death with legitimate issue on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1837, she became automatically the next Queen of England. She was crowned Queen at Westminster Abbey on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1838 (Strong, 2005: 372). Queen Victoria was the longest-reigning British monarch; at her death on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 1901 she had ruled longer than any previous British monarch and she could also count more people as her subjects than any ruler ever (Ashley, 1998: 687-692). It was therefore a great honour for the ancient Gozitan town of Rabat to have conferred upon it on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1887 the status of a city by such an illustrious monarch who besides being Queen of Great Britain and Ireland as well as Empress of India was also the head of an empire 'on which the sun never set' and which comprised a quarter of the world's population.

A fountain with an inscription in Cathedral Square at the Citadel in Victoria records the event (Gauci, 1969: 25); besides the coat-of-arms of Gozo's town features in its upper part the initials V.R. for 'Victoria Regina'. The people of Gozo presented



Triq ir-Repubblika, the main street in Victoria.

to the British sovereign a piece of Gozitan lace in order to express their appreciation for having their town given city-status (Laferla, 1938: 169). It would be more than timely to have a statue of Queen Victoria erected in a prominent place in Victoria, ideally in Independence Square, in order to duly commemorate this glorious event in the annals of the history of Gozo.

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