

# The Admiralty Dockyard and wooden artefacts at Cospicua

by Dr Simon Mercieca

**T**HE TOWN of Cospicua (Bormla) has a long-standing affiliation with the sea. The sea has given this city its past cultural glory and its fading social wealth. The periods of belligerency in the Mediterranean in the 19th and 20th century were a godsend to many people living in the Cottonera area as they increased the British Naval activity and this in turn, created jobs which guaranteed revenue to many of the family breadwinners through contractual employment.

Yet, in Cospicua, as was the case with the other three harbour cities, the demarcation between war and peace was not clear-cut. While today we are witnessing small groups of people on our bastions peacefully protesting against the arrival of NATO warships, the people living in this area, every evening, used to go onto their home roofs to watch the arrival or departure of warships in the Grand Harbour.

The presence of these ships meant work for a number of people, from ship chandlers to coal stevedores, from harbour boat rowers to thousands of other craftsmen who worked in the area, not to mention the enormous workforce at the Admiralty Dockyard. Many of the latter employees hailed from or lived in Cottonera and its environs.

A few weeks ago, on the initiative of the archpriest of Cospicua, Canon Joe Mifsud, a project was initiated to restore wooden artefacts that once belonged to one of the many confraternities of Cospicua; the Confraternity dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary. Fortunately, Cospicua lost very few artefacts in enemy air-raids during World War II. The parish church was spared the heavy bombings that ravaged the surrounding areas. However, this does not mean that no damage was caused.

During one of the raids, when some of the neighbouring houses were severely damaged, a bomb

blast damaged some wooden sculptures of the Apostles, as well as large wooden candlesticks, all belonging to the confraternity. These were eventually stored in a room in one of the attics of the church and left lying there for more than half a century. Fr Mifsud took the initiative to restore these artefacts and give them a new lease of life.

On inspecting the damaged objects, the provenance and origins of the material became evident. The wood turned out to be what is locally known as *tal-punent* timber. The equivalent English term is yellow pine. It was a special type of wood that used to be imported into Malta by the Admiralty Dockyard. In fact, the presence of this type of wood primarily dates to the British period.

Yellow pine is a soft wood and considered suitable for the fashioning of masts and spars. Yellow pine also found its way in the fittings of cabins and in other interior areas of ironclad sea vessels. Furthermore, this type of material had another advantage which made it ideal for sculpture work. Besides its softness, a characteristic much sought after by local artists working with wood, yellow pine has no knots, making it ideal material for carving, especially when anything better is lacking.

**I**ndeed, at a time when certain primary materials were scarce in Malta and poverty was rampant, people used any suitable material that came their way to embellish their churches and as a public expression of their beliefs. Hence, these statues are an evocative expression of a popular art. Their austere facial expression reminds one of the medieval ascetic rigour associated with religious wooden sculptures. However, the Romantic Age and the emerging Victorian style had an impact on the artist of these particu-

lar statues; the artistic fashion of the time is discernible in the vibrancy of their carved bodies.

From time to time, the Dockyard discarded unwanted or surplus material and sold it in bulk through public auctions which used to be attended by local agents or wholesalers, with the aim of then retailing what had been purchased to local customers.

My maternal grandfather was one of the wholesalers who operated in Malta during the early 20th century, who had also tried his luck in these Dockyard auctions. He hailed from Cospicua and he occasionally was one of the bidders at these auctions in pre-war years. The stratagems behind these bids were so complex that they are still being recounted by the members of my family with a sense of pride for the astuteness involved. Once a lot was secured, the buyer had to be sure that he had internal support from the dockyard workers, for this could enhance his profits. On the other hand, if the situation turned sour, one could end up seriously out of pocket. It was not in the buyer's interest to transfer at one go all the material bought to the warehouse.

In my grandfather's case, his warehouses were situated in the area of *Porto Nuovo*, in Marsa. Once he secured a bid, he adopted the unwritten practice of transporting the acquired lots gradually over a number of days. In the meantime, with the help of Dockyard employees, the material bought at auction would slowly increase in the days following the auction by the addition of new stuff. Thus the stock of discarded material continued to accumulate with new discarded material until it was completely carried away. In return, the purchaser tipped the supportive employees for their 'benevolent' actions.

Unfortunately for my grandfa-



ANOTHER wooden statue awaiting restoration. It is the upper part of the statue of the Apostle Andrew.



A PROFILE of one of the dismembered wooden statues – the statue representing St Peter

ther, his business endeavours with Dockyard surpluses proved to be an unprofitable business, at least, during the turbulent Thirties. From my grandfather's point of view, this business was not as lucrative as he had assumed it to be, to the extent that he insisted he made losses from such an enterprise.

Whatever the case, I think that he expected too much from such a business enterprise. My grandfather was a staunch Nationalist supporter, and on a local level, after moving from Cospicua to Paola, he became an active canvasser for a PN candidate in the 1932 election. This gentleman, was a medical doctor, Dr Paolo Schembri, affectionately known as *ic-Cimbla*, who contested the fifth division, then comprising Paola and

Tarxien.

Considering the political climate of the time, my grandfather should not have expected to make a large profit from the surpluses of the Admiralty Dockyard. At the time the Dockyard was considered fertile political ground for the Nationalists' staunchest political opponents, the pro-British Constitutionalists led by Lord Strickland. My grandfather's political naiveté overshadowed his business acumen and he thought he could do good business with the Admiralty Dockyard, even though he was a staunch supporter of the anti-British Nationalists.

As it happens, the material used for the making of these candlesticks and the wooden statues or *Appostli*, as they are called in Maltese (that is, the wooden statues representing the figures of apostles that used to adorn the high altar), is the type of material that used to be discarded or purposefully bought from the Admiralty Dockyard.

Most probably, in the case of these statues, the wooden planks were either donated by the Admiralty Dockyard directly to the church or given to the church by members of the confraternity. If the latter is correct, then one cannot discard the possibility that these planks could have been discreetly stolen from the yard with the covert support of the supervising authorities or indirectly bought from local wholesalers after an auction.

It is very probable that when the timber was acquired, it was 20 feet long, four feet wide and about five inches thick. If so, it had to be sawn to the length of four feet and afterwards, the sawn pieces were glued together to create a body for these carvings. All in all, two planks were needed to make these six statues.

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THE BACK of one of the wooden statues hallmarked by the British Admiralty sign

Other planks were required for the candlesticks. Here the same process was used to create the framework of the candlesticks.

The Imperial authorities took the necessary precautions to forestall theft. As was the case in the past with stationery belonging to our local civil service which used to carry the hallmark GM, anything belonging to the Admiralty or the British Services was marked, and this included the yellow pine wood imported by the Admiralty Dockyard.

In fact, it was thanks to one of these marks that the provenance of the wood used for these artefacts was established, with the result that these signs helped date these wooden statues to the late 19th and early 20th century. The so-called *tal-Punent* is very easily recognised. The yellow pine of the Admiralty Dockyard carried the distinctive mark, known as *sieg it-tigiega*, or 'hen's foot'.

Both Erin Serracino-Inglott and Gużè Aquilina in the *Miklem* and the *Maltese-English Dictionary* respectively mention the use of another Maltese term for this type of wood – *sieg ir-regina* ('the Queen's foot'). The phrase has Victorian origins. When Queen Victoria ascended the throne, this type of material, as well as many other objects which belonged to the British Crown, began to be identified as belonging to the 'Queen'.

It seems that the Maltese craftsmen and journeymen first came into contact with this particular hallmark during Queen Victoria's reign, hence the nickname. This factor helped to date these statues.

Meanwhile, the association of the particular hallmark used on the yellow pine with an animal was due to the peculiar form of the printed mark. It had the appearance of three linear marks, angulated to look like a hen's foot.

Due to decades of neglect, the silver gilding on the statues cracked and eventually fell off. Even the undercoating gesso dissolved because these statues had been exposed to rain for all this time. As a result of these adverse climatic conditions, the glued planks that formed the body of these carved apostles came apart. Following this disjoining, the concealed marks hidden on the surface of the planks came to the surface and thus the hidden story of these statues was exposed.

The advice of the leading maritime expert Joseph Muscat was sought by the parish priest of Cospicua. He has already said what needs to be done to protect these old statues from further damage. A competent and skilled ex-dockyard worker, Mr Muscat, who had been a highly skilled carpenter (he ended his career as foreman at the Admiralty's Boat House) with vast experience in the handling of this type of material, has already been contacted to undertake the first interventions on these figures. He kindly agreed to restore the planks of these figures.

Thus, the story of these statues, made of wood once belonging to the Admiralty Dockyard, has turned full circle.

They deserve to be restored as they are good examples of sculptured wood. The initiative of the archpriest, Fr Mifsud, to have these

past expressions of popular culture and faith restored is to be commended. The art treasures of Cospicua are not only the silver artefacts or the church's painted ceilings. The various examples of craftsmanship in wood need to be preserved and treasured.

Perhaps, one day, these hidden gems will find their pride of place in a parish museum instead of being discarded.



WOODEN artefacts awaiting restoration

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