The Admiralty Dockyard and wooden artefacts at Cospicua

by Dr Simon Mercieca

The town of Cospicua (also known as Marsamxett and Floriana) has a long-standing affiliation with the sea. The town has given this city its past cultural glory and its facing social wealth. The periods of beligerency 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 Navy workforce. In this 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 maritime cities, the demarcation between war and peace was not clear-cut. While today we are witnessing small groups of people on our beaches peacefully protesting against the arrival of NATO warships, the people living in this area, every evening, used to go to their home roof 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 local craftsmen to thousands of other craftsmen who worked in the area, to mention the enormous workforce at the Admiralty Dockyard. Many of the latter were bailed from or lived in Cottonera and its environs.

A few weeks ago, on the initiative of the archipriest of Cospicua, Canon Joe Mifsud, a project was initiated to restore wooden artefacts that once were found in Cottonera. One of the bidders at these auctions, who had also tried his luck in these auctions which used to be held by local agents or wholesalers, with his help, to the extent that he insisted he had internal support from the dockyard workers, was able to enhance his profits. On the other hand, if the situation turned sour, one could end up sorely out of pocket. It was not in the buyer's interest to transfer at one go all the material bought in the warehouse.

In my grandfather's case, his warehouses were situated in the area of Pope Nuncio, in Malta. Once he secured a bid, he adopted the unwise 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 had completely carried away. In return, the purchaser tipped the supplier of the materials for the services he rendered.

Unfortunately for my grandfather, his business endeavours with Dockyard surprises 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, in the extent that he missed the magic of profits.

Whatever the case, I think that he expected too much from such a business. 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 Sciambi, affectionately known as il-Cimba, who contested the fifth division then comprising Paola and Cospicua.

ANOTHER wooden statue awaiting restoration. It is the upper part of the statue of the Apostle Andrew.
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 the so-called extinct date these wooden statues to the late 19th and early 20th century. The so-called hallmark is a small rectangle. The yellow pine used for the statues carries the distinctive mark, known as *sign a stregga* (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, arranged 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 quickly disintegrated. The planks of 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 archeologist, 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.