

# THE GOZO BOAT

EXTINCTION OF A BREED

by ANGELO DOUGALL

A few days ago, while I was at the Valletta National Library, I overheard a British gentleman enquiring if there is any information available about the Gozo Boat. He was of course, referring to the Dghajsa tal-Latini, as it is known to the Maltese, also known as Dghajsa t'Ghawdex. No need to comment on the reply the tourist got; perhaps he should have made his enquiries at one of the many maritime museums in Europe; there is also a model, complete with rigging at the Gozo Museum.

What is certain is, that not one fully rigged Gozo boat has survived the onslaught of 'modern progress'. Not one has been preserved in all its glory for all to see. It is indeed pathetic that future generations have to search overseas for information about our native boat, as for example at the Horniman Museum of Man, South London, to see a good, one-tenth model, perfect on all details of rigging and construction. I have also been informed, that just after World War II, some Americans purchased a Gozo Boat and shipped it home; perhaps it would eventually turn up at some museum there.

I believe that only two such boats have survived, but have been altered so much to convert them into fishing trawlers, that they have lost all semblance to the original, proud, Gozo Boats. This native sea craft has been condemned to extinction and oblivion, and there is apparently not enough national pride to preserve one complete boat for exhibition, and save a descendant of a long and ancient line of sea-going craft, which evolved from boats of those pioneer sailors, the Phoenicians, and not enough patriotic conscience to rescue a symbol of this large and important factor of our heritage and folklore, by preserving just one boat to be proud of and admire as a showpiece in a special museum.

It is beyond comprehension how this boat, known to the maritime world as the Gozo Boat, has not stimulated some society in Gozo or Malta, or some individual, or even the government, to save one of the boats. It will be a shame to have to content ourselves with having to go to a foreign country to see one.

Silver models of the Gozo boat were made in great detail, and used to be the prized possession of many a naval man of the past, but nowadays such perfection is rarely attained in these models.

The Gozo boat can now be said to be extinct, gone the same way as the other native sailing boats of the past. It has gone the same way as the felucca, the ferilla and the speronaro, and the dockyard gondola, a sail-less boat.

It used to be a magnificent sight to see the Gozo boat in full sail, and a memorable and cherished experience to travel in one, across the Gozo Channel. In my childhood, it was already becoming rare, but in prewar days was still plying its way, graceful, romantic and picturesque, yet sturdy enough to brave the roughest seas.

Celebrated in paintings, on postage stamps, votive paintings in churches, marine history books, souvenir models, filigree, silverware, classic photographs, postcards, scale models, folklore, literature and song, we simply cannot afford to allow it to vanish forever from its place in our history and heritage. Many countries have preserved their native boats and water craft, fully restored in museums, either through government or private efforts of societies and individuals, interested in preserving their heritage. There is still a slight chance of rescuing one from one or two still in existence, but it is already getting too late to find the shipwrights able to restore a boat to its old standard, with the traditional technical knowhow, and late also to find the old sailors

who can explain the local nautical terms and handling and navigation details.

As one would expect, the introduction of modern craft, the Gozo Boat was doomed, as all other ancient traditional boats, all over the world. However, various countries have done their best to preserve their boats in museums, as part of their heritage. The national prestige in having a museum centred around such a national boat would outweigh cost, apart from revenue generated round such a museum, especially if it were to be set up at Mgarr, Gozo, the home of its builders. It has been found worldwide, that such museums have attracted more tourists than other types of museums. If it were at Mgarr, this museum would be an attraction to those awaiting the ferry, or crossing from one island to the other, and would leave a lasting impression on thousands of visitors to our islands.

I hope that some public outcry would be raised in time to rescue at least one Gozo Boat, fully restore it, and preserve it in a special museum for the future generations to enjoy.

It could be dedicated to the many anonymous seamen and shipwrights as a perpetual memorial to a brave breed of men, who were always ready to keep up communications, transport and trade between the islandss, in all seasons and weather. It would also serve as a lasting tribute to an industry which served as a source of livelihood and a way of life to so many families throughout centuries.

Larger countries have proudly established memorials to ships and boats of past achievements; I think that we can also dedicate a museum to our small, but graceful Gozo boat, for our nation to be proud of. I hope that my appeal would meet the response of Gozitans and Maltese migrants who really have such matters at heart, and very interested in sentimental and old-world symbols. Perhaps even the Government might start the ball rolling for such a project.

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