

THIRTY YEARS TO BUILD A PROTESTANT CHURCH

by
Arthur Bonnici

On getting a foothold in Malta, Great Britain assured the people that She would protect the Catholic Religion in the Island (1). As a Protestant Country, however, Great Britain would not let her Protestant subjects spiritually unprotected.

At the beginning, the number of English residents in Malta was very scanty and, consequently, for the time being there was little place for any religious problem. The few Protestants who inhabited the Island used the chapel in the Governor's Palace at Valletta as their place of worship. For a short time, they entertained the hope of using one of the bigger Catholic churches in Valletta (2).

As a matter of fact, in January 1814, Sir Thomas Maitland, the first Governor of Malta, asked Earl Bathurst, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, whether the Church of St. John should be turned into an English [Protestant] Church; but he freely expressed the view that it would be inexpedient to insist upon that measure. He deemed it more advisable to appropriate the Jesuit church, "not far from St. John's and nearly as large" (3). Earl Bathurst wisely replied that the Governor should not appropriate any church which was used by the Catholic inhabitants. He should rather have the Magisterial Chapel in the Pa'ace enlarged (4).

The Marquis of Hastings, who succeeded Maitland in 1824, adverting to the necessity of giving employment to the working class and of affording a suitable place of worship for the Protestant residents in Malta, revealed his intention to the Secretary of State to build a church. He was granted from Home the authority to proceed with his proposal. But considerable difficulty was met with in finding a fitting site within the City of Valletta. At one time, it was decided to erect the church at

1. Arth. Bonnici, "Britain's Assurances to protect the R.C. Religion in Malta," *Melita Theologica*, Vol. XII (1960), pp.45-49.
2. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1803-16, f.186r — Maitland to Bathurst, 27.i.1814. W. Jowett of the Church Missionary Society in a letter to his mother, dated 11.xii.1815, wrote: "It is said that when the present Governor [Maitland] remonstrated upon the want of a Church for the English, Ministers at home told him to take possession of St. John's church, as belonging to the Order, to which the Governor sent this prudent answer, that they must send him some troops first" (C.M.S. *Archives* ME 2/20). I owe this information to the V.Rev. Mgr. Prof. C. Sant.
3. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, f.186v.
4. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1830, f.146r — Hankey to Ponsonby, 3.ii.1830.

the West end of Strada Reale (Kingsway) (5). The idea was abandoned as it required a considerable sum of money for the purchase of property and the clearance of the spot for the intended building (6).

Subsequently, the Governor decided to build the new church in the open space, near the Lower Baracca, adjacent to the Great Prison, once known as the *Bagni degli Schiavi*. Plans and estimates, drawn by Colonel Whitmore, were forwarded by the local Chief Secretary, Sir Richard Plasket, to the Secretary of State. The estimates were £5,045 for a small church, £7,280 for a bigger one. The Home Secretary preferred a small church. Work started: an angle of the Prison and an adjacent house were pulled down (7).

In a later period, another plan with new estimates was sent by the new local Secretary, Sir Frederick Hankey, to the Home Under-Secretary Hay. In reply, the latter expressed Lord Bathurst's regrets that the estimate (£7,625.1.7½) exceeded by nearly one half the former estimate. But since the work had already started it was deemed advisable to carry on with it. The Secretary required only explanations with regard to the increase in the estimate. Sir Frederick gave such explanations in a letter dated 26th September 1825 (8).

On the 20th October following, Sir Manley Power, the Officer Administering the Government in the absence of the Governor, was obliged to suspend the works, because he found that not even the second estimates would cover the expense; nay other £3,000 were required, once the foundation was wrongly calculated at a depth of 5 feet, and it was found out that in most places it went down to a depth of 20 feet (9).

A ground plan and elevation together with amended estimates, drawn by the Chief Mason (Capo Mastro) Sa'vatore Scerri, were transmitted to London. Lord Bathurst ordered that all arrangements connected with that plan should be suspended until further orders. The Governor abided with this Order; he restored the angle of the Prisons and rebuilt the dwelling house, which had been pulled down (10).

After that definitive suspension, Lord Hastings again entertained the idea of appropriating the Jesuit Church. He applied to Archbishop Mattei, who replied that he could not directly sanction such an appropriation for

5. Very likely the Governor meant "North end" instead of "West end", somewhere near St. Elmo.

6. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1830, ff.246r-247r.

7. R.M.L., *loc. cit.*, f.247. The premises, known also as *the Old Prison*, were destroyed during World War II. and Government flats were built on that site.

8. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1822-25, ff.179-190, — Hankey to Hay, 26.ix.1825.

9. R.M.L., *loc. cit.*, ff.201-5, — Hankey to Hay, 12.xi.1825 and Report by Assist. Director of Govt. Works, 7.xi.1825.

10. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1826, f.9r — Hankey to Hay, 8.i.1826.

Protestant worship; but since the church, formerly belonging to the Order, had become Government property, the latter were at liberty to act as they pleased. The idea, however, was met with difficulties "on account of the number of Catholics buried in that Church and the numerous private altars erected in it", the proprietors of which would have had to be indemnified, had the church been turned to Protestant service. The Governor reported this to the Under-Secretary while he was in London and the project was definitely given up. That church was granted instead for the Catholic soldiers' religious services (11).

A third catholic church, St. James's, was almost simultaneously proposed with St. John's and the Jesuit Church as a place for Protestant worship. "This church, in which no Catholics were buried," Hankey stated, "could easily be desecrated by removing the consecrated stone". Lord Hastings visited the church; but he discarded it too, as being too small (12).

By the year 1826, the Protestants used to hold their meetings not only in the Magisterial Chapel, but also in private houses. The members of the Bible Society used to hold religious functions in a house at Valletta; other Protestants had a chapel at Cospicua. In their services, the Ministers used to read a chapter from the Bible and comment on it, explaining the Protestant Doctrine. The Congregation then sang some hymns of David and were dismissed (13).

Later on, the Governor applied to the Bishop of London for help to build a church by the grant of a sum of money from funds applicable to such purposes, placed in the hands of that Bishop and other Commissioners by Parliament. But this could not be complied with consistently with the tenor of the grant by Parliament (14).

For three consecutive years the question was shelved. Various alterations were made in the Palace Chapel, which, however, was generally considered inadequate to the wants of the Protestant residents. Yet, no one of these ever made any complaint in writing (15).

In the year 1829, a Memorandum was handed by the Bishop of London to the Duke of Wellington, then British Prime Minister, censoring Sir Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby, Governor since 1826, for his behaviour with the Protestant residents in Malta and charging him with a bias towards the Roman Catholic inhabitants. The Secretary of State transmitted the Memorandum to the Governor asking him to give an explana-

11. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1830, ff.239r-248v — Hankey to Ponsonby, 3.ii.1830.

12. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, f.249r

13. A.A.M., *Corrispondenza* 1826, f.615, Archbp's Promemoria to Cardinal Secr. of State.

14. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1830, f.249v.

15. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, f.237. — Ponsonby to Murray, 6.ii.1830.

tion as soon as possible of all the facts and circumstances mentioned in it (16).

Sir Frederick reported that, since he assumed the government of the Islands, his anxious wish had been to prevent, by every means in his power, anything like a collision of opinion upon religious subjects, and he flattered himself that his endeavour had proved successful. He regretted the contents of the Memorandum. The first charge was that, in spite of the lapse of 30 years of British Government, the English residents still complained of the want of a church, and, in spite of the Governor's power to appropriate the Jesuit church for Protestant worship, that church had recently been granted for the sole use of the Roman Catholic soldiers, "thus giving occasion for remarks upon the indifference of the English to their National Religion." In answer to that charge the Governor enclosed a report drawn by Sir Frederick Hankey, the Chief Secretary, detailing all that had passed on the question of a Protestant church during Maitland's and Hastings's governorships. He added that he saw great objection to converting any Roman Catholic church into a place of Protestant Worship. He denied the allegation that the Jesuit church had been *recently* and *solely* given in use to Roman Catholic soldiers, because English soldiers started using that church prior to his arrival in Malta and Catholic inhabitants constantly attended the services performed therein by other priests. He also remarked that, inadequate though the Magisterial Chapel was, no individual had ever complained in writing that he could not be accommodated in it. The Governor concluded that it was his intention to submit for His Lordship's consideration a plan for providing a place of Protestant worship. The plan, however, was attended with difficulties, which could be more easily explained in conversation than in correspondence. The Governor was shortly to leave for London (17).

With the beginning of the year 1836, Lt. Colonel Sir George Cardew, who administered the Government in the absence of Sir Frederick Ponsonby from the Island, ventured to revive this matter, alleging that the Governor would have done the same, had he been present in Malta at the end of the year just passed. He reported to Lord Glenelg, the Secretary of State, that the Palace Chapel was manifestly unfitting and inadequate as a place of worship. He transmitted to him a copy of a letter from Mr. Mc Kenzie, the Director of Works and Repairs in Malta, containing the general outline of a plan of a new Church. The site he suggested was the

16. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, f.237 — Ponsonby to Murray, 6.ii.1830.

17. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, f.237v sqq.

spot on which formerly stood the Auberge of the English Langue (18). He proposed that the Church should be bomb-proof, and suggested that the expenses amounting to £32,000 or thereabout should be supplied from the reserved revenues in the Local Treasury. The Governor, present in London, could supply the Secretary of State with any authoritative information on the subject (19). The thing, however, stopped there.

The question was again raised in the following year by the Church Missionary Society. The Committee of that Society in London, persuaded that their Religion was suffering from the sore need of church accomodation, resolved to build a church in Valletta at their expense, to be their property and at their sole disposal. They communicated with Lord Glenelg about this matter, and the Secretary of State showed himself favourable to that undertaking (20).

Subsequently, they asked their Agent in Malta, Mr. C.F. Schleinz, to select a suitable site and to ask the Local Government to aid this undertaking indirectly by freely granting the site chosen, which should be "in a good position and of sufficient extent". Mr. Schleinz approached the Governor and, in the interview, he made his proposal, adding that he had no wish to interfere with the interests of the Chaplain to Government, the Rev. Mr. Cleugh, and that he thought it might be so contrived as to make the new Church serve also for the latter's Congregation (21).

After the interview, Mr. Schleinz requested the Governor in writing to "be pleased in his earnest wish to promote the moral and religious welfare of these Islands", to take into consideration the demand of the Church Missionary Society and to favour him with directions regarding the same." The site proposed was the Market-place (22).

The Governor referred the correspondence to Lord Glenelg, stating that, although the proposal of the Society would, on the one hand, save the Government the sum of money needed for building a church, on the other hand, it would raise several difficulties. The proposal, as a matter of fact, implied the removal of the Market and its building in another place. This entailed an expense nearly, if not quite, equal to that of building a new church. If the church were to be built on a site of private

18. Very likely Mr. McKenzie meant the Maison Shelley, which had belonged to the English Knight Sir James Shelley, later Prior of England, who bequeathed the house to the Assembly of the Conventual Chaplains with the express reservation that, should the Knights of England return to the bosom of Mother Church and if the English Langue were re-established, the premises were to serve as an Auberge for the English Knights (V.F. Denaro, "Still more Houses in Valletta", *M.H.* Vol. III, (1962) No. 3, p.54).

19. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1836 I, ff.53-55 — Cardew to Glenelg, 7.i.1836.

20. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1837, ff.183-9 — Bouverie to Glenelg, 16.iii.1837.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.* — Schleinz to Hankey, 11.iii.1837.

property, the appropriation of the site and its clearance would cost as much, if not more than the removal of the Market. Besides, it was feared that, if the proposal were acceded to, the Government would be prevented at any future time from building themselves their own church; while, if the Government too built another church, the Protestant population in the Island would not be able to furnish two Congregations, and the church of the Establishment would soon be abandoned. Moreover, it was extremely dangerous to allow the building of a church by the Missionary Society "in a place where people are so entirely Catholic and where the Government stands so solemnly pledged to maintain and protect that Religion, unless the new Church expressly stipulated with the Government to prevent all attempts at conversion of the Maltese to the Protestant Faith, or to attack the Religion and the Customs of the Roman Church, or to preach except in the English language" (23).

The Governor finally remarked that, if the Secretary of State acceded to the proposal, he should do so "under such safeguards as might effectually prevent all interferences with the Established Religion of the Country". But he did not fail to request the authorization for the building of an adequate church at an estimate of three thousand or four thousand pounds, when there would be sufficient money in the local Treasury (24).

Later on, the latter suggestion seemed to have worried not little the Governor. As a matter of fact, he wrote again to the Secretary of State informing him that, in making that suggestion, he had overlooked a question of considerable importance, that is, whether the use of the revenues of these Islands, whose population is so entirely Catholic, for the mentioned purpose would give rise to complaints, which possibly he would like to avoid. One should not lose sight of the fact that the British Government contributed nothing towards the support of the Catholic Clergy and the local Exchequer was already charged with the payment of £300 per year to the Governor's Civil Chaplain. The funds should be nominally furnished from England and thus avoid a great deal of jealousy and discontent among the Maltese Population (25). He said "nominally", because the surplus revenue of the Malta Treasury went to the Military Chest.

Lord Glenelg reiterated the proposal to appropriate a Catholic church in the hands of the Government and adopt it for Protestant worship. The Governor enclosed an estimate of the seating capacity of St. James's Church, remarking that beside the inadequateness of the church, the appropriation would entail the necessity of employing a curator or an

23. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, ff.189-190 — Bouverie to Glenelg, 16.iii.1837.

24. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, ff.190-1.

25. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, ff.390-1 — Bouverie to Glenelg, 26.v.1837; ff.477-9, 26.vii.1837.

additional clergyman, which meant a further expense (26).

Early in 1838, Sir Henry Frederick Bouverie proposed a site at the bottom of Merchants Street for the building of a new church with or without a steeple. This site, however, was not accepted, because of its distance from the Quarters of Porta Reale (Kingsgate) and Floriana (27).

The idea of fitting up a Protestant church in some Government building had not been given up. Bouverie submitted to Earl Glenelg another plan of a chapel to be fitted up in the Auberge d'Italie, which would have afforded ample accommodation at a small cost of approximately £1,400. The Secretary of State approved the plan and gave orders to proceed with the work. Those orders were, however, countermanded and the Governor approved of the use of the Auberge as a Civil Arsenal (28). The chance of converting a part of it into a chapel was thus lost.

By that time the Governor had been given to understand that, if a meeting of the Protestant residents and other interested people were called, a considerable sum would be subscribed for the purpose. The Governor strongly believed that Queen Adelaide, who had just arrived in Malta to spend winter here, would take a prominent part in such subscription, the Church Missionary Society and the Society for the Preservation of Christian Knowledge would each subscribe a considerable sum; but he doubted as to the amount of the Protestant residents' subscription (29).

On Christmas Day 1838, Bouverie asked Earl Glenelg whether he approved of the summoning of such public meeting, and, if eventually a fair sum were prescribed, whether the remaining sum would be furnished from England, in order to build a church to which the garrison could be admitted as in Gibraltar, because "a considerable scandal was caused by the Regiments having no place of worship, but a large room fitted up and appropriated for the use of the Valletta Primary Schools" (30).

Acquainted with this affair, the Queen Dowager wrote to her dearest niece, Queen Victoria, asking her to take some steps in that direction. But the Queen seemed to have adopted the *non possumus* attitude (31). In her religious zeal, Queen Adelaide expressed her determination to supply all the funds required. The Governor could not but exult and express his admiration and gratitude on this gracious and most beneficent determination of Her Majesty. Another motive for Bouverie's joy was

26. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, ff. 478r-479r.

27. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1838, ff.21-22 — Bouverie to Glenelg, 10.i.1838.

28. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, f.572 — Bouverie to Glenelg, 25.xii.1838.

29. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, ff.572r-574r.

30. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, ff.573r-4v.

31. Letters of Queen Victoria, Vol.I., quoted by A.V. Laferla, *British Malta* (ed. 1945), p.177.

the consideration that the building of the new Church was going to give employment to our "fellow Christians", the Maltese population, at a time when very considerable distress was felt for the high price of every article of food. Hence he wrote that everybody in Malta "English and Maltese people, Protestants and Catholic subjects could rejoice and join in prayer to Almighty God for the restoration of Her Majesty's health and the long enjoyment of a life fraught with benefit to so many" (32).

On the part of the Government, Bouverie offered free of charge the site of Piazza Celsi (now Independence Square), on which the German Auberge once stood. At that time the premises were partly rented by Sir John Soddart, the Chief-Justice, and partly used as a Mill and Bakery of the Mediterranean Fleet. The Governor immediately gave orders to pull down the building and clear the site at the Government's expense according to Her Majesty's desire (33). The *Portafoglio Maltese* remarked that the Government could have selected another site: there was no need of demolishing premises which rendered an annual revenue to the Local Treasury.

The Church was "to contain 1,000 persons and was to be used also by the Garrison with separate services and with sittings for the families of the Officers and the soldiers' wives and children, as well as for such of the Officers and Seamen of the Fleet, as may choose to attend the regular service." A Protestant school was to be built under it. The expense was estimated from £6,000 to £8,000. The Church was to be entirely under Government control, as if it had been built by them (34).

By the way, let us not fail to note that Archbishop Caruana informed the Holy Father of the project and the Cardinal Secretary of State, instructed him to use all his prudence and wisdom to impede the implementation of the Project. The spirit of Ecumenism had to start more than 100 years later (35).

On March 20, 1839, Queen Adelaide laid the foundation-stone of the new Church, in the presence of the Governor, H.M.'s suite, Naval and Military Officers in full dress and all the Protestant inhabitants of the Island. The Service was performed by the Army Chaplain Mr. Le Mesurier. On the same day the Governor informed the Marquis of Normanby, the new Secretary of State, of the ceremony solemnly performed to the

32. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1839, ff.13-14 — Bouverie to Glenelg, 6.i.1839.

33. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, ff.14v-15v.

34. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, ff.15v-16r.

35. A.A.M., *Corrispondenza* 1838-40, f. 841 — Card. Lambruschini to Bp. Caruana 12.ii.1839.

singing of psalms, a royal salute and the playing of the National Anthem (36).

After the laying of the foundation-stone, the Queen Dowager returned to England. Some time after, the Architect in charge proved to be unequal to the work entrusted to him. It was feared that the part already built would have to be pulled down (37). After a short suspension, the work was entrusted to another Architect, Mr. Scamp, by whom it was completed, after some modifications of the original plan (38).

When the Church was approaching its completion, George Tomlison, Bishop of Gibraltar, informed Governor Stuart that the Queen intended raising the church to a Cathedral within his jurisdiction, with an accomodation for a Parochial Church. In April 1844, the Governor transmitted him a correspondence from Lord Stanley, the Secretary of State, and Earl Lowe stating that the new Church had been placed in the hands and under the protection of the Queen's Government with the view of being consecrated and used for Divine Service and that H.M.'s Government did not accede to the Royal Foundress's wishes to raise it to the dignity of a Cathedral Church (39).

The church was furnished with an organ and other things necessary by a voluntary subscription of £800 (40). On the 1st of November, 1844, the new Church was consecrated by the Lord Bishop of Gibraltar and given the title of "*The Collegiate Anglican Church of St. Paul*". It then opened every working day at 8.00 a.m. for the morning prayers. Sermons were preached every Sunday, at morning, afternoon and evening services, with full attendance (41).

This is in brief the story of the beginning of the first Protestant Church in Malta.

36. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, f.123 — Bouverie to Glenelg, 20.iii.1839; A.V. Laferla, *loc.cit.*; II *Portafoglio Maltese*, 23.iii.1839.

37. Life and Letters of R.C. Sconce, Vol.II., pp.130,163, quoted by A.V. Laferla, 1.cit.

38. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1843-44, f.15 — Bouverie to Stanley, 13.ii.1843.

39. R.M.L., *loc.cit.*, ff.165 sqq. — Bp. of Gibraltar to Stuart, 22.vii.1843; ff.322sqq., 29.v.1844.

40. *Ibid.*;

41. R.M.L., *Despatches* 1845-46, f.76v, Stuart to Stanley, 31.iii.1845.