

ENGLISH MERCHANTS' INITIAL CONTACTS WITH MALTA: A RECONSIDERATION

by

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An extract from a *Memoriale pro Reformatione Angliae* (1), written by R. P. in 1596, reads as follows:

Equites Melitenses quos nos S. Johannis in Anglia vocamus, vulgo de Malta, cum ob Turcam a nobis longe remotum, non valde utiles Angliae sint, et de castitate quam Deo vovent egregie custodita suspecti, non est quod deinceps recipiantur in Patriam nostram, sed loco eorum instituaturs Ordo novus Equitum Conjugatorum.

The dissolution of the English Langue of the Order of St John of Malta in April 1540, and the confiscation of its entire property, fitted in nicely with the noxious economic pattern of Henry VIII's last years. All later attempts on the part of the Hospitallers at re-establishing the Langue failed (2). However, if in 1596 the re-instatement in England of the allegedly disorderly knights might have been considered a feckless expedient, the arrival in Malta, seventeen years earlier, of the English sailing vessel *Merchant Royal*, master Robert Green (3), had provided a foretaste of the potentiality and significance which the island was gradually to assume to the English merchant. Tradewise, the establishment of the Levant Company in 1581 and its subsequent development (4)

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- A.I.M. = Archives of the Inquisition of Malta
A.O.M. = Archives of the Order of Malta
C.S.P. = Calendar of State Papers
S.P. = State Papers, Public Record Office, London

1. 'Memoriale pro Reformatione Angliae, continens observationes quasdam et concilia quae in primo parlamento vel Nationali Concilio Patriae nostrae postquam ad fidem Catholicam revertatur proponuntur, collectum per R.P. Anno Domini, 1596', C.S.P., *Milan* 1385-1618, p.624.
2. See A. Mifsud, *Knights Hospitallers of the Venerable Tongue of England in Malta* (Malta, 1914), pp.186-213. For the history of the Order of St. John in various parts of the British Isles, see J. Mizzi, 'A Bibliography of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem (1925-1969)', *The Order of St. John in Malta with an exhibition of painting by Mattia Preti Painter and Knight* (Malta, 1970), pp.149-51.
3. See A.P. Vella, *An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy* (Royal University of Malta, Historical Studies, vol. III; 1972), pp.113-15.
4. See M. Epstein, *The Early History of the Levant Company* (London, 1908), and A.C. Wood, *A History of the Levant Company* (London, 1964).

reduced R. P.'s claim of physical remoteness between England and Turkey into a fictitious phenomenon beyond recognition.

In the history of the commercial development of the Mediterranean, Malta has hardly ever been accorded little more than a passing mention, let alone an exclusive appraisal of the role it played in this remarkable process (5). At no time in its long, unstaggered history has this tiny, central Mediterranean island lived a secluded and isolated life. Its wide, deeply forged connexions not only with lands peripheral to the Middle Sea, but with practically the whole of Europe and beyond (6), cannot be simply by-passed. The island's institutions and the islanders' practices and response to contemporary movements and trends in the Mediterranean show how formative an influence these direct links must have been. It is the purpose of this paper to reconsider the initial stages of English merchants' relations with Malta during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Late sixteenth century Malta owed its mark to two important factors. The first was the Order of St John, ensconced there since 1530. Its numerous possessions, priories, commanderies and embassies all over Europe, together with the naval worth and maritime experience of its members — acknowledged by all contemporary European statesmen, not least by the enlightened Richelieu (7) — gave the vulnerable 'white island' (8) prosperity, welfare and security. The achievement of 1565, 'one of the great events of the century' and a symbol of extraordinary determination in the hub of actual Turkish assault, was still a living memory. 'The loss of Malta,' writes Braudel, 'would undoubtedly have been a disaster for Christendom' (9). The second was the island's geographical position. Not far south of Sicily, nor too far north of the Barbary Regencies, equidistant from Gibraltar and Alexandria, Malta lay within the orbit of the central Mediterranean trade routes. It was highly advantageous from the point of view of transportation. On the one hand, in view of the general uncertainties of the Mediterranean situation, relative nearness to coastal sites was attractive and beneficial to shipping in general and to carrying-

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5. For example, F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (2 vols., London 1972); P. Silva, *Il Mediterraneo dall'unità di Roma all'unità d'Italia* (Milano, 1927); A. Tenenti, *Piracy and the Decline of Venice* (London, 1967); A.T. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta: Studies of Malta before the Knights* (London, 1975).
 6. For the history of the Order of St. John's connexions with various countries of Europe and America, See J. Mizzi, 'A Bibliography...', pp.148-60, 192-3.
 7. C.V. Wedgwood, *Richelieu and the French Monarchy* (Pelican edn, Aylesbury, 1974), p.85.
 8. P. Falcone, 'Una Relazione di Malta sulla fine del Cinquecento', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, IV (1933), 28-9.
 9. F. Braudel, *op. cit.*, II, 1014, 1017.

trade in particular. On the other hand, proximity to southern European, Levantine and North African markets cut transport time and costs. Both factors kept the island and its valiant inhabitants in touch with the rest of Europe and the Mediterranean world.

Trade was pivotal to Malta's economy, a major aspect of which was the importation of commodities in which the island was so grimly deficient. With a demographic growth outstripping its food supplies and with the high expectations of a chivalric Order of 'international adventurers', Malta was unable to rely on its own restricted resources (10). It produced a comparatively wide range of goods but hardly ever beyond subsistence level, let alone to supply and trade in commercially produced foodstuffs or manufactured materials. Thus, ever since 1530 the Order in Malta was increasingly dependent on foreign markets, particularly on immediate localities, for commodities, primary and otherwise: notably on Sicily for supplies of wheat, wine, fresh and salted meat, vegetables, oil, sugar, spices, firewood and wax; on Spain and Sicily for draperies; on Venice for construction timber; and on France for metals and munition (11). In times of crisis, when these normal sources of supply failed, the knights of St John, 'the boldest western corsairs', obtained by fair or foul means the necessary provisions from the Levant (12). Limited quantities of cotton, cumin, aloe and beasts of burden were exported to Sicily and elsewhere. Cauliflower seed is said to have found a ready market in France and England (13).

Promotion of securer trade links with commercial centres other than Sicilian stemmed from economic motives as much as from a clear psychological tendency on the part of the Order of St John to offset its

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10. In 1547 the population figure in Malta was about 24,000. A. Mifsud, 'L'approvvigionamento e l'Università di Malta nelle passate Dominazioni', *Archivum Melitense*, III, 5 (1918), 179 n.3. In 1574 it was 29,000. A.P. Vella, 'La Missione di Pietro Dusina a Malta nel 1574', *Melita Historica*, V, 2 (1969), 183. In 1590 it rose to over 32,000. A. Mifsud, 'L'approvvigionamento...', p. 183. By 1614 it had exceeded 41,000. B. Blouet, *The Story of Malta* (London, 1967), pp.89-92. See also, R. Mols, 'Populations in Europe 1500-1700', in C.M. Cipolla (ed.), *The Fontana Economic History of Europe* (6 vols., Glasgow 1974), II, 39.
 11. P. Falcone, 'Una Relazione...', p.40. Before 1530 Malta had already been established as a trading centre. Sicilian, Catalan, Genoese and Venetian ships proceeded to the island for normal business transactions with North Africa. See R. Valentini, 'La sopravvivenza della Universitas Melivetana fino alla cessazione delle infeudazioni dell'isola', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, VII (1935), 33-70. With the Order's arrival in Malta, 'L'approvvigionamento dell'isola non può più gravitare unicamente sulla Sicilia; si sente il bisogno di ampliare il respiro, aprire al traffico vie abbondante.' R. Valentno, 'I Cavalieri di S. Giovanni da Rodi a Malta: Trattative diplomatiche', *Archivum Melitense*, IX, 4 (1935), 176.
 12. A. Mifsud, 'L'approvvigionamento...', pp.185-9.
 13. W. Minchinton, 'Patterns and Structure of Demand 1500-1750', in C.M. Cipolla (ed.), *The Fontana Economic History of Europe*, II, 150.

ties of dependence on the neighbouring island in a subtle attempt at stabilizing its position on a par with other sovereign states. Economic dependence was a powerful weapon in the hands of Spain, Sicily or any other kingdom to subdue the Order's innate ambitions to complete political independence. The last decades of the sixteenth century provided the Order with an occasion to exploit a new dynamic force in the Mediterranean, marking a new phase in Malta's trade pattern and a stage further in the socio-economic development of the island. The Order, remarks one historian, succeeded through the years in 'de-sicilianizing' the islanders and in transforming Malta into an autonomous 'Mediterranean State', promoting a degree of 'national consciousness' never before experienced (14). In its strenuous efforts in search of new markets, the Order found in the English merchant a valuable means of extending to the Protestant north its traditional sources of supply. Its assiduous task of maintaining sound, massive defences on the fortress island and of sustaining frequent naval and military contributions to all European wars against Islam demanded an even more sedulous effort of securing regularly heavy imports of armaments. This was a general phenomenon of sixteenth century Mediterranean; and it was partly to satisfy this 'hunger for armaments' that the English had re-entered the Pillars of Hercules at this time (15). England's wide range of mining and industrial products now lay accessible for direct export to the island by way of individual English merchants and English vessels. When the northerners were particularly active in tapping and monopolizing new centres of Mediterranean trade, Malta, like the rest of Europe, was experiencing serious, accelerating grain shortages, perennial famines, devastating epidemics and an ever present fear of a Turkish assault (16).

The Order lost no opportunity of grasping at the services and expertise in commerce and finance so readily accorded by individual English merchants and seamen. No sooner had the *Merchant Royal* called accidentally at Malta in 1579 for shelter and supplies than Robert Green, her master, was advised to start importing coal and other commodities for the Order (17). The next time he proceeded to Malta — on the *Cordell* in 1580 — he did so in response to a commission by the Grandmaster to import quantities of kerseys, English cloth, lead, tin and copper from

14. R. Valentino, 'I Cavalieri di S. Giovanni...', p.177. See also A.P. Vella, *The University of Malta, A Bicentenary Memorial* (Malta, 1969), passim.

15. F. Braudel, op. cit., I, 622.

16. Royal Malta Library, *Library MS 226*, 'Continuazione dell'Istoria Gierosolimitana faticata dal Commendatore Fra Carlo Micallef', f.80v ff. P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London, 1964), pp.165-70.

17. A. Vella, *An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy*, p.37.

England (18). These items constituted Malta's newly forged trade-link with the north, a link which was to assume bigger proportions during the next century (19). The widespread movement in these commodities was sustained by a universal demand and there was no fear that English shipments of these industrial products would have to return home unsold. What the Order of St John did was to strive for the island's tiny share in this traffic. Through the good offices of Robert Green, we are told, the 'most cordial relations had been instituted between the Order and the English' (20). In January 1580 Thomas Moore, a thirty-seven-year-old Londoner, anchored his English ship in Malta. He promptly offered the Grandmaster his readiness to supply the Order with a host of commodities necessary for the upkeep of the island's fortifications and defence as much as for the everyday use and provision of the Convent. These included draperies, victuals, 'rosetta' (21), charcoal, lead, tin, iron and pikes. The Grandmaster furnished Moore with a safe-conduct, enabling him to travel unhindered, far and wide, to England, Flanders and other western countries and back to Malta (22).

It does not seem implausible to assume that Malta, unlike Venice, had nothing to lose with the arrival of the English in the Mediterranean. It commanded no specific trade route with the eastern portion of the Sea, nor did it enjoy any privileged position there by way of commerce, which the northern intruders would have possibly undermined. It feared no loss of trading monopolies with Levantine colonies, for it had none. The Order's role in the Mediterranean was characterized chiefly by a crusading hostility towards the Turk and by a luxuriant corsairing activity for the enrichment of the Common Treasury in Valletta. Indeed, the English presence in the Mediterranean offered the Knights of Malta and the Maltese corsairs richer prizes and a more convenient and employable booty (23). Even as late as the eighteenth century, when Ottoman power had almost faded out completely, Maltese consuls in the Levant were considered more useful to the Order for the news service they could render of the whereabouts of the Turkish fleet than for the access to any

18. *Ibid.*

19. I owe this point to V. Scerri's unpublished dissertation, *English Commercial Traffic in the Mediterranean with Special Regard to Malta 1650-1700*, Royal University of Malta.

20. A. Vella, *An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy*, pp.38,98.

21. Braudel translates 'carboni di petra rosetta' into 'coal of Newcastle'. *Op.cit.*, I, 623. Our document distinguishes between 'rosetta' and 'carbone di petra'. A.O.M. 439, f.242.

22. *Ibid.*

23. See below.

commercial connexions such centres might have given (24). However, if English merchants' initial contacts with Malta appear to have satisfied the Order's 'hunger for armaments', it cannot be as justifiably held with regards to the other, equally essential commodity — grain. With its traditional sources of grain painfully inadequate to meet the country's needs, the Order had worked itself into a new complex of relations with the English merchant who had himself re-entered the Straits partly in response to the acute, general European grain crisis of the late sixteenth century. To the best of our knowledge, however, no mention of grain supplies have been registered in English shipments to Malta at a time when consignments of this commodity to the Mediterranean were increasing in volume and regularity. This perhaps indicates, on the one hand, that only through indirect means were the English related to Malta's trade in this branch of the economy, and, on the other, that the Order's policy of promoting Ang'lo-Maltese commercial relations was not motivated simply by immediate necessities but rather by long-term and far-reaching politico-economic interests. Nonetheless, the contribution of English merchants and sailors to the island's needs in this field was not altogether slight.

Proceeding from England, via Toulon and Leghorn, the English *Roe*, master Peter Baker, stopped at Malta early in January 1581 on her way to the Levant from where she returned to the island the following April. This 'big ship', whose cargo of 'broken bells' was later sold to local merchants, was well received in Malta (25). During his four-month sojourn on the island, Peter Baker is said to have owned a house and 'servants etc.', and was alleged to have traded widely in lead on which customs dues had not been paid (26). What is more revealing in this context is that he was given five hundred *scudi* for the use the Order was making of his bark to transport grain from Sicily to Malta; 'though this,' remarked the Malta Inquisitor, 'could have been done by Maltese ships' (27). This was an early — possibly the first — example of the use the Order was to make, albeit on remote occasions, of English ships. The northern *bertoni* were suitable for rough seas and fitted the Mediterranean winter season well (28). On the other hand, the galley, which formed the backbone of the

24. V. Mallia-Milanes, 'Malta and Venice in the Eighteenth Century: A Study in Consular Relations', *Studi Veneziani*, XVII (in the press).

25. A. Vella, *An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy*, p.43.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 50 n.

27. Quoted after A. Vella, *ibid.*, pp.48-9.

28. 'Les vaisseaux anglais et flamans sont grands et bien armés.' E. Plantet, *Correspondance des Beys de Tunis et des Consuls de France avec la Cour, 1577-1830*, I (Paris, 1893), p.90. R. Davis, *The Rise of English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1962), p.248 ff.

Order's fleet, was 'often forced', we are told, 'to remain in port during the winter'. Maltese corsairing activity, for example, both in Barbary and in Levantine waters, was normally highest during the summer months. Could not the English *bertoni*, therefore, have supplemented the Order's during the winter season? On 18 October 1657, the Order chartered an English vessel to transport grain from Sicily to Malta. She flew the Religion's flag and was provided, for security purposes, with a knight, sixty soldiers, and a sailor from the Order's galleys (29). Knights of St John and Maltese sailors are also known to have, at times, enrolled on English vessels or mixed with English crews. On 6 June 1604, an English pirate vessel raided the Venetian *Vidala*, a 'small but excellently well armed' vessel, whose crew consisted of 'Englishmen, Turks, Moors and even a Maltese — the pilot' (30). On another occasion, an English 'bertone of 200 butts with over a hundred men on board' plundered the Venetian *Grassa* sometime in October 1604. The English pirate ship was 'flying the standard of Savoy and there were several knights of St John aboard' (31). In this way the knights of St John, excellent seamen by profession, and Maltese sailors, equally well grounded in navigational techniques, joined French, Spanish and Greek pilots in sharing their cartographical skills and geographical knowledge of the Mediterranean with the newcomers from the north (32).

Encounters between English and the Order's vessels in the Mediterranean were not always smooth and cheerful. The former had re-entered the Straits in a double capacity, as pirates and traders. 'They showed themselves to be pirates,' observes Tenenti, 'more ruthless and dangerous than any others, and it is certain that only by such methods did they succeed in gaining the upper hand as merchants' (33). But the knights of St John and the Maltese corsairs, who included among their numbers the worst of the local *mal viventi*, were not less daring and as sinister and abhorrent in their methods. They too had been described 'terrori esse omnibus, timeri a barbaris, formidari a Turcis' (34). These had the moral and financial backing of an organization which was deeply embedded in the entire economic and social structure of the island. The English had hardly ever been included among the Christian subjects of the 'most favoured nations', like the Spaniards, Venetians or Hebrews, whom the

29. A.O.M. 260, f.18.

30. A. Tenenti, op.cit., p.75.

31. *Ibid.*, p.76.

32. See F. Braudel, op. cit., I, 628.

33. A. Tenenti, op. cit., p. 61.

34. A. Bonnici, 'Due secoli di storia Politico-Religiosa di Malta nel fondo Barberini latino della Biblioteca Vaticana', *Melita Historica*, IV, 4 (1967), 233 n.10.

knights and other private corsairs were generally always instructed to spare on their voyages to the Levant and elsewhere (35). Thus, for example, in May 1582, after having carried out one of their usual raids in the Mediterranean, four of the Order's galleys took easy possession of an English ship off the Barbary coast for having declined to salute the Religion's flag. Later, through the intercession of the pope, the ship was restituted to her legitimate owners (36). This was one of the mildest encounters.

Instances of chases of a much more violent nature were not an exception. On 3 March 1583, Fra Hieronimo Avogadro, captain general of the Order's galleys, was about to set sail from Malta to Licata for wheat supplies. He was warned by the Grandmaster that 'news has arrived of the presence of a number of English vessels sailing in that area and which had already been a nuisance to the Order's vessels; in fact, they had already depredated one such vessel.' Avogadro was therefore given definite orders to follow them and 'if they willingly surrender', to 'seize them and lead them here in safety; and if not', to 'fight them as Enemies' until he 'sinks them or burns them' (37). On 4 May of the same year Avogadro, this time about to leave for Barbary, was told that in the neighbourhood of Malgamier Tower he would find an English ship 'engaged in lading iron by night and day'. He was instructed to use diligence at first and not to attempt seizure 'lest this would defeat our purpose'; but 'should she run away' at the appearance of his galley, 'and refuse to haul her sails,' or 'disdain submission,' then, and only then, was he to 'combat and seize her as an enemy vessel' (38). He was instructed to adopt the same course of action with regards to two other English vessels sailing the same waters (39).

These are a few isolated examples of an uninterrupted delivery of

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35. See, for example, Letters Patent to Mattheo di Giorgio, who was to set sail 'con una fregata nelle parti di Levante o dove gli occorrerà per saper et intender i progressi dell'armata turchesca e tornar a darci avviso, al quale habbiamo comandato che per modo veruno no' debbiano offendere ne damnificar Christiani di qualsivoglia Principe et in particolar di Sua Catolica Maestà et Illustrissimo Dominio di Venetia ne manco molestar vassalli di esso Illustrissimo Dominio di Venetia che ancora che fossero caricati di robba di contrabando in qualsivoglia altro vascello etiam di nemici nelli porti e golfo di esso dominio... Datum Melitae Die XII Aprilis 1585.' A.O.M. 442 f. 238v.
36. A.O.M. 96, f. 44v; f. 112. B. Dal Pozzo, *Historia della Sacra Religione Militare di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano detta di Malta* (2 vols., Verona 1703-15), I, 220-1.
37. A.O.M. 440, ff. 267v-8v.
38. A.O.M. 441, f. 245v. A. Mifsud, *Knights Hospitallers...*, p. 242.
39. '...et il medesimo farrete trovando altri duoi vascelli de' Inglesi che c'è nova sono in Tripoli provedendo non sia sacheggiata per potere rendere conto in caso di restituzione, et dandovi l'obedienza et trovando sopra robba di contrabando le marinarete qua.' A.O.M. 441. f. 245r.

instructions which characterized the whole maritime history of the Order of St John for well over two centuries. The Archives of the Order of Malta, particularly the *Bullaria* and the *Marina* sections, provide ample evidence of this practice. Yet, although these instructions bequeath to the historian insight into the Order's code of behaviour in inter-Mediterranean corsairing activity, they give no definite clue to any real piratical operation. Innumerable instances, however, could be cited of actual hostilities between subjects of the two nationalities. Emmanuel Hood, an eighteen-year-old London sailor 'by profession', left England in 1603 on an English bertone, master Robert Eton (Ethen). Sailing along the coast of Portugal, they depredated a tiny vessel laden with Portuguese cloth which they later sold to Tunisian merchants. At Tunis they re-armed their bertone and sailed towards Milo where they preyed upon a boat belonging to a certain Marcantonio Fascia. Soon after, they were pursued, attacked and captured by the knight of Malta, captain Giacomo Vinciguerra (40). In October 1603 a certain Thomas Dionin, also from London, set sail from Tripoli in Barbary on board an English bertone of about 800 salme for a corsairing trip to the Levant. On his way, he seized both a Greek vessel, whose cargo of wool he sold at Coro, and 'barrels of wine' and 'doi petrierj' from a Venetian vessel. Two months later, on her return voyage, the English bertone was reported to have raided and seized a large frigate with grain for Messina. On receiving the news, two of the Order's galleys, the *San Giorgio* and the *San Giacomo*, sailing to Saragossa, went in search of Dionin, some fifteen miles off Cape Passero. 'On seeing that the Maltese galleys were approaching her, the bertone hoisted the Turkish and English flags showing that she was prepared to fight.....; the galleys fired a heavy shot and the bertone was forced to lower her sails; the galleys fell upon her; many of their sailors boarded her and tugged her to Saragossa.' On board the bertone were ten Turks, thirty Englishmen, 'other persons of different nationalities' including two Dutch, and from seven to eight Christian slaves. The pilot was a Sicilian from Trapani. There were also 400 zecchini or scudi, twenty-two heavy pieces of artillery and a quantity of silverware (41).

Another English bertone, *The Pilgrim*, master Bavers, anchored at Malta on the night of 12 September 1603. The next day, Antoine Marte, a French resident in Malta, declared under oath at the Inquisitor's court that the previous night he had sought information about *The Pilgrim*, 'a small bertone of about 700 salme', and was told 'by diverse persons at the Square and on the coast how this bertone [had previously] belonged

40. A.I.M., *Processi* XXIII, Lawsuit 296.

41. A.I.M., *Processi* XXII (2), Lawsuit 213.

to the English and that these, after having taken a larger and better-armed bertone, had quitted her and gave her to certain sailors on board Master Buleggia's *pitacchio*. These had been captured by the same Englishmen' (42). Giovanni Guariard, member of *The Pilgrim's* crew, provides further information: (43)

About eight months ago I was in Barbary in the City of Tunis when this bertone, called The Pilgrim, arrived in harbour conducted by certain Englishmen. Later these Englishmen sold the bertone to another Englishman called Captain Bavers, who fitted out in Tunis to go on a corsairing trip. In the meantime I had enrolled on another English bertone belonging to Captain Olan, from Tunis, to escape to Christianity. Some fifty miles off Cape Passero, we came across this bertone, and our Captain took the mentioned Captain Harvey and his men on board and gave this bertone to four sailors whom we had captured from the *pitacchio* of Captain Simon Buleggia. He handed them letters for the Grandmaster, and bid them, myself and various other sailors, whom we had seized from other vessels, set sail. This is how we came here in the Port of Malta.

There were two letters: one was addressed to the Grandmaster; the other to captain Antonio Buleggia, Simon's brother. Both were written in English by the captain of the 'larger and better-armed bertone', although only a translated version in Italian survives in the Inquisitorial Archives. The first reads like this: (44)

Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Sir —

It is not surprising that I have preyed upon vessels of your Island. It has all happened when, having found myself above [the island of] Sapienza sterning a caramousal, I was encountered by captain Antonio Buleggia who attacked me, seized thirty of my men and took the booty I had. For this reason, having come across his brother [Simon], who was conducting the *pitachio*, I wanted to avenge myself of the wrong I had suffered; and as I met my own brother who was proceeding from England on this bertone and who informed me that our new King (having succeeded the late Queen) had ordered all English corsairs, under penalty of death, to return to their

42. A.I.M., *Processi* XXIII, Lawsuit 297.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*

country, in obedience to my King, I took my brother on board with all his men and set sail for England; I have therefore entrusted these people to conduct this bertone which belongs to my brother. I beg Your Most Illustrious Lordship to give one fourth her value to master Groumet, another fourth to corporal Guerra, and the other half to share equally among the other sailors.

The second letter was highly provocative and defiant, challenging Buleggia 'to go and find him near Gozo where they would fight each other' (45).

One can go on citing similar episodes indefinitely. In 1604, for example, Giacomo Vinciguerra, sailing the Religion's *San Luigi*, had another violent encounter with two English bertones of 5-600 tons each (46). The following year a Maltese bertone, in company with a Savoyard, surprised another English ship 'with a very valuable cargo of kerseys, weapons and cash' (47). In December 1607 a fully armed *pitacchio* belonging to the Order, under the command of Francois de Voisin, attacked and captured an English vessel with a cargo and a number of Turks aboard (48). In 1610 Captain General De La Porte, on learning of the presence of Barbary corsairs infesting the channel between Malta and Sicily, ventured to raid that area. No sooner had he caught sight of a Turkish vessel attacking a Christian ship than he set sail to the latter's rescue. In the struggle that ensued 120 Turkish members of the crew and a number of English renegades managed to survive (49). Such were the rivalries and hard-fought struggles, occasioned, in our case, by the juxtaposition of two of the fiercest Mediterranean corsairs. They are a few examples of desperate valour and determination on the part of individual seamen, sensitive to the rigid destinies of civilized life, to escape or offset the stark limitations of their respective societies. To the ordinary English sailor or merchant making his debut on the Mediterranean stage, such fierce contests for profit were in part fulfilment of his ambitions to bridge the widening gap between wealth and poverty, and which led him through the Straits of Gibraltar. He looked at the Mediterranean world primarily as a ready source of enriching himself. Piracy was one way of achieving this end. The other was peaceful trade.

45. *Ibid.*

46. U. Mori Ubaldini, *La Marina del Sovrano Militare Ordine di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme di Rodi e di Malta* (Roma, 1971), p. 325.

47. A. Tenenti, *op.cit.*, p. 173, n. 25.

48. A. Mifsud, *Knights Hospitallers...*, pp. 244-5.

49. U. Mori Ubaldini, *op.cit.*, p. 335.

On 12 July 1582 Grandmaster Verdalle granted John Keele (Kell) and David Fillie (Fili), who were operating on behalf of Sir Edward Osborne and Richard Staper — 'English merchants of the Noble City of London' —, Letters Patent and safe conduct, allowing them to fit out in Malta, set sail and return 'at their convenience with any goods and merchandise they considered necessary'; and this on three conditions:

1. that they would not carry 'contraband goods' on board their vessels;
2. that they would promptly produce, on request, all necessary 'authentic documents' to justify the legality of their transactions;
3. that they would be covered with a clean bill of health.

Encouraging a regular flow of English traffic with Malta was bound to prove propitious, according to the Grandmaster, 'to the needs of our Religion and to these fortresses'. On the basis of this argument, he was willing to extend to the English merchant all the facilities and concessions that were normally accorded all other foreign traders on the island. English merchants would henceforth be readily supplied with all the provisions and services they would need in harbour and during their sojourn in Malta. They would be allowed to set sail at any time and to any destination they deemed fit; and to buy and sell whatever merchandise they would. Lastly, they were allowed to transport a host of accustomed goods or commodities: gunpowder, arquebusiers, cannon balls, copperplates, tin, steel, iron, flint, masts, kerseys, and heavy linen for sails-making (50). The Grandmaster had availed himself of the Keele-Fillie episode to define the position of the English merchant in relation to the Order of St John and Malta. The English merchant was now 'legally and officially' given access to the Maltese harbours, six years before he was granted similar rights at the port of Marseilles (51).

The presence of a northern trading community in Malta towards the late sixteenth century necessitated the creation of a joint Anglo-Belgian consulate. William Watts, 'an Englishman resident in Malta' (52), was the first in a long, unbroken chain of English consuls on the island (53). The date of his appointment is unknown. There is no trace of it in the *Libri Bullarum*; but a document, dated 15 November 1610, refers to John

50. A.O.M. 440, ff. 256v-7r. Ibid., 441, ff. 252-3. R. Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (Everyman edn, London, 1907), III, pp. 83-4.

51. See F. Braudel, *op.cit.*, I, 628.

52. A.P. Vella, *An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy*, p. 75.

53. See Appendix.

Watts being accredited consul by the Grandmaster 'pro natione Anglica et Belgica' in Malta, to fill the vacancy created by the death of his father William (54). We have so far very little information about William Watts. According to the evidence provided by the legal proceedings in a lawsuit instituted against the English merchant John Lucas in the 1580s (55), it transpires that William Watts, who held in his possession the key of Lucas's residence, was helping notary Guglielmo Briffa compile an inventory of all the things in Lucas's house (56). The Notarial Archives of Malta still await scrutiny by the diligent historian. Here is enormous, wide scope for research in the economic and social history of Malta and the Mediterranean, providing ample virgin material for any doctoral dissertation.

The English consulate appears to have been the first foreign consulate, after the Sicilian, to be established in Malta. A persistent feature of English consulship in Malta was the question of non-recognition from London due to the unusual manner of appointment, discordant with international practice. All foreign consuls in Malta were appointed directly by the Grandmaster, and were therefore answerable to him alone. While this practice kept consu'ar jurisdictional friction in Malta to a minimum, it created grounds for misunderstanding with foreign countries, amply evidenced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (57). The Grandmaster's appointee for the English consulship on the island was never virtually recognized in London. On 30 November 1660 Alphonse Desclaus, 'in hac nostra civitate Valletta domiciliato', was appointed by the Grandmaster to succeed John Jacob Watts in the joint Anglo-Belgian consulate in Malta. Nine years later, Sir Andrew Riccard and nineteen other English merchants petitioned Charles II to appoint Martin Wilkinson, an English resident in Sicily, consul in the islands of Sicily, Malta and Lipary, desiring to promote English trade in the area (58). Were these merchants aware of Desclaus's consulship in Malta? Were they refusing to recognize the Grandmaster's appointee as he was not accredited by their king? Or was Sir Andrew's petition motivated by Desclaus's inefficiency? On the other hand, English merchants trading with Malta during the dawn of the eighteenth century looked at the question from a completely different angle. They believed that 'such

54. A.O.M. 457, f. 275.

55. On John Lucas see A.P. Vella, 'A Sixteenth Century Elizabethan Merchant in Malta', *Melita Historica*, V, 3 (1970), 197-238; id., *An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy*, ch. VII, 'John Lucas: The Elizabethan Merchant', pp. 67-75.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

57. V. Mallia-Milanes, *op.cit.*

58. C.S.P. *Domestic, Charles II, Oct. 1668- Dec. 1669*, p. 590.

Consuls would have more interest with the Great Master than one deputed by the Consul at Messina' (59). Whatever the merits or demerits of such a practice, the English consul in Malta, whether officially recognized or not, must have been performing an important function towards the continuity of Anglo-Maltese commercial relations.

Malta's system of customs-tariff must have proved favourable and unburdensome to English merchants who were accustomed to heavy dues elsewhere. Indeed, very often, English merchants trading with Venetian islands complained about 'the extraordinary charges' which they had to pay in those places 'when they take away currants' (60), and which they were being charged in defiance of the Republic's specific orders 'for the strict observation of the decrees against extortionate charges' (61). Similar complaints were made about the salt-fish trade. Piero Mocenigo, Venetian ambassador to England, writing from London to Venice on 29 March 1669, remarked that severe duties 'are not always lucrative for the Prince'. He pointed out (62) that

Every year a great quantity of salt fish is exported from England for the use of the whole of Italy. The merchants are obliged to pay 9 lire a barrel on entry into the city of Venice, and 18 on leaving it for distribution throughout the whole of the State. They have decided to go to the port of Leghorn where they are less heavily burdened notwithstanding the cost of 12 lire for transport on muleback as far as Bologna. In this way they supply not only the whole of Italy but the State of Your Serenity as well, from which the distribution could be made with so much profit. In this year I find that 4,000 barrels have gone to Venice and 24,000 to Leghorn.

On 9 August 1670 Viscount Falconbridge complained that the duties imposed by Venetian authorities on the salt-fish trade 'are so excessive and out of proportion with those of other places where our merchants are not so heavily charged, that they are persuaded to lade them in those other places, to the serious loss of the Republic' (63). Earlier in the century the situation had not been much happier. The revival in 1602 of Venetian protective legislation and other discriminatory measures

59. S.P. 86, *Foreign, Malta I*, f. 173.

60. C.S.P. *Venetian XXXVI*, 1669-70, p. 83.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

resulted in repelling the foreign merchant (64). Consulage duty in Venice amounted, before 1672, to 15 ducats for 'each ship on its entering the harbour', and was doubled after that date (65).

The tariff system at the port of Malta was comparatively much lighter and simpler. In Malta there were two rates of customs/excise dues. Nationals and Sicilians were subjected to a $3\frac{1}{3}\%$ *ad valorem* duty, while all other foreigners to $6\frac{1}{3}\%$. No distinction was made between imported or exported merchandise. Consulage, too, was much lower in Malta than the rate charged at other foreign ports. On 17 November 1646 John Jacob Watts complained that 'in all parts of the world' English and Dutch vessels were subjected to a consulage duty of a Spanish golden doubloon (*una doppia d'oro di Spagna*), whereas in Malta he was not allowed to charge more than two scudi (*doi scudi di moneta*). On these grounds, he petitioned the Grandmaster to raise such stipend in line with the rest of the world. This was granted a few days later for all English and Dutch ships proceeding to Malta (66).

The Inquisitor of Malta viewed with apprehension the steadily increasing numbers of Protestant English merchants sojourning on the island and their direct contact with the local Catholic trading community. On 24 October 1603, the Papal Secretary of State, Cardinal Borghese, in one of his regular dispatches to the inquisitor, mentioned Richard Plumber, William Smith and other Englishmen — a total of about twelve — reported to have been imprisoned in the notorious dungeons of the Inquisition 'for matters of faith' (67). The inquisitor, Fabricius Verallo, was to have these Englishmen instructed in the Catholic faith, and, later, to have them abjure, in his presence, their alien, unorthodox beliefs. The cardinal explained the methods to be employed on this particular occasion. These proceedings were to be done privately, that is, 'not publicly in church'. The persons concerned were to do 'penance' for their spiritual salvation; but their goods and property were not to be confiscated. On attainment of their liberty, they would be allowed to conduct their own affairs as freely as before (68). On another occasion, the cardinal refers to the names of 124 Englishmen and Scots 'absolved and reconciled' with the Catholic faith (69). Writing to the same cardinal in Rome, on 29

64. D. Sella, 'Crisis and Transformation in Venetian Trade', in B. Pullan (ed.), *Crisis and Change in the Venetian Economy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1968), p. 94 ff.

65. C.S.P. *Venetian XXXVII*, 1671-2, p. 258.

66. A.O.M. 471, f. 271v.

67. A.I.M. *Corrispondenza* 1, f. 165.

68. *Ibid.*

69. A.I.M. *Corrispondenza* 88, f. 94v, Rome, 4 Sept. 1604.

December 1603, Inquisitor Verallo related the Order's confiscation of an English vessel, seized by the Religion's galleys, on the grounds that the former had been depredating wheat-laden boats in Sicilian waters (70). Borghese, 'on the advice of His Holiness', instructed Verallo to use diligence with heretics captured on board foreign vessels, particularly in making them 'aware of their errors and of the heresies they held'. Verallo was advised to act justly within his terms of reference, and never to interfere in matters of confiscation of ships seized at sea and of goods found therein. These instructions, warned Borghese, could serve as a guideline for future reference, lest too much involvement in such matters on the inquisitor's part would render the inquisitorial office odious (71).

However, the permeating and constraining influence exerted by the inquisitor on Maltese society was bound to modify, sooner or later, the 1582 Ordinances governing the regular flow of English traders and sailors into Malta. By the dawn of the seventeenth century the concurrence of the northerners in Malta had shown no signs of abating. Letters-Patent and safe-conduct passes were regularly sought and generously granted (72). Encouraging though this trend was from the point of view of trade, to the Roman Apostolic Delegate on the island this was a matter of serious concern. The Maltese 'Navigation Act' of 1582 had made no distinction between Christian and Protestant merchants. On 2 July 1605,

70. *Ibid.*, f. 91r, Rome, 28 Feb. 1604. In another dispatch of 14 May 1604 Borghese tells Verallo 'che circa quel vascello Inglese preso dalle galere di codesta Religione verso Siragusa ella si regola secondo la lettera scrittale a 29(=28) Febbraio...et osservi quanto in essa se le ordina, et si astenga dalla confiscatione de beni, ma proceda contra essi Inglesi sopra l'heresie da loro tenute, acciò che si riducano alla Santa fede Cattolica...'. *Ibid.*, ff. 91v-2r. See also communication from same to same, dated 28 May 1604. *Ibid.*, f. 93v.

71. *Ibid.*, f. 91r.

72. The 'Lettere Patenti per diversi Inglesi che presero un Vascello dal Porto della Golitta' will serve as an example. They read like this: '...Guglielmo Braon Inglese di età di anni 35 di statura bassa e ripeleta, essendo alli tre di Gennaro prossimo passato capitato in questa nostra Isola di Malta con altra quaranta Inglesi in circa fugiti da dentro il Porto della Golitta e levato un vascello nominato San Giovanni qual ora armato et in ordine per corseggian' e dannifican' alla Xpianità, con haverli tagliate le gomene facendo vela s'adoprono cosj valorosamente che presero detto vascello con quattro Turchi. E perchè desidera ripatriarsi l'i conviene passan' per molti e diversi lochi, Città e paesi stanieri, ne ha perciò humilmente supplicatoli volessimo concedere le nostre lettere patenti... e gli habbiamo benignamente concessi...'. A.O.M. 456, ff. 293v-4r, 16 Feb. 1609. This is followed by a list of other Englishmen who were given similar Letters Patent (*Similis exempta fuit*): Eduardo Chisterman, Joanne Enchip, Lancelot Garnet, Joanne Oldrine, Anandrea Bonet, Joanne Suban, Henrico Singliten, Edoardo Robinson, Christoforo Cocs, Henrico Anfeil, Philippo Comins, Oliviero Granson, Guglielmo Smit, and Joanne Francesco. The names have, of course, been given a horrible Italianized version. *Ibid.*

Cardinal Arigoni wrote to Inquisitor Diotallevi from Rome (73). The Order's Resident Ambassador in Rome, Commendatore Mendes de Vasconcellos — later to succeed to the grandmastership — had earlier drawn Arigoni's attention to the inquisitor's attitude towards a number of English sailors (74). An English vessel, he explained, heavy-laden with arms and other merchandise, had been seized by the Order's galleys as her precious cargo had been judged useful for the island's fortifications. Later, the inquisitor refused to grant the Protestant crew practise before they had accepted reconciliation with the Catholic Church. Such an attitude, Mendes complained to Arigoni, would prove harmful to the Order as it would inevitably promote similar English reprisals. In his communication Cardinal Arigoni referred Diotallevi to the terms of the recently concluded Anglo-Spanish peace treaty of 1604.

According to the terms of peace, which established cordial relations between Philip III's Spain and James I's England, sailors and merchants of both countries were to be accorded mutual facilities in Spanish and English ports. Open trade between the two countries was to be promoted, while English traders were no longer to be ill-treated by the Inquisition for matters of faith, 'unless their conduct occasioned discredit' to the Catholic faith. Since the treaty encompassed all Spanish possessions in Europe, the island of Malta, which owed fealty to the Kingdom of Sicily by the Donation Deed of 1530, was also bound to honour these terms. The inquisitor was therefore instructed from Rome to provide, in previous consultation with the Grandmaster, for the necessary legislation. The 1582 Ordinances were reconfirmed, while other perquisitions were added: (75)

1. Only persons directly involved in Anglo-Maltese trade transactions would be allowed to go aboard English vessels;
2. Knights of St John would be prohibited from mixing with traders professing the Protestant religion;
3. English sailors and traders sojourning in Malta would be disallowed from carrying prohibited literature with them on the island;
4. No Englishmen would be allowed to enter Church during celebration of Mass and other holy services, against severe penalties.

Notwithstanding these revised ordinances and new amendments,

73. A.I.M. *Corrispondenza* 88, ff.96v-7r, Rome, 2 July 1605. *Corrispondenza* 1, f.229, Rome, 7 January 1606.

74. *Ibid.*, *Corrispondenza* 88, ff.96v-7r.

75. *Ibid.*

which were to apply to all Protestant northerners alike — whether English, Flemish or Dutch — each case was treated on its own merits. In a dispatch of 15 November 1608, for example, Cardinal Arigoni felt the need to forewarn Inquisitor Carbonesio 'not to give trouble' to *Capitano Goloardo Inglese Corsaro*, nor 'to molest' any of 'his persons, goods or vessels for eight months, to begin from the day of his arrival in the ports' of Malta, but rather 'to let him enjoy freedom of action and movement on the island, provided that during his stay there he will not utter heresies or commit anything prejudicial or offensive to the Holy Catholic faith' (76). Two years later, the Papal Secretary of State in Rome, this time Cardinal Millino, referred the same inquisitor, Carbonesio, back to these premonitions, which, he said, should guide him in his dealings with 'a number of English corsairs, previously residing in Barbary, but who have presently resolved to return to Christian countries and to be of great service to the Holy Catholic faith to the detriment of the infidels' (77).

Were the 'measures of censorship and prohibition', embodied in the revised ordinances of 1582, necessary to check Protestant merchants from undermining the orthodox religious beliefs of the knights and of the local population? How far were the Order's liberal concessions to the English merchant creating a precedent to the detriment of Catholicism in Malta? If the influx of the northerners in Malta was constituting an 'imminent danger of apostacy' from the Catholic faith — as indeed it was (78) — and causing restlessness on the part of the inquisitor, it was certainly neither the only one, nor the worst, of its kind. There were other sources of subversive, 'erroneous tenets' flooding into Malta. The island's proximity to 'Mohammedan Africa' was one of them. 'Muslims and Hebrews,' writes one historian, 'often proceeded to the island for purposes of trade'

76. *Ibid.*, *Corrispondenza* 1, f. 343.

77. *Ibid.*, *Corrispondenza* 2, f. 91, 24 Sept. 1610. A copy of the same letter is found in *Corrispondenza* 88, ff.171v-2r. Grandmaster Alof de Wignacourt had earlier written to the pope on the case in question: 'Beatissimo Padre, Sarà dato parte alla Santità Vostra dall'Ambasciatore Lomellino d'un negotio che si tratta qua segretamente contro ad Infedeli, et in honore, et beneficio della Christianità, et dall'espeditente, che (con il parere di questo Monsignor Inquisitore) stò per pigliare, per non lasciar perdere la pronta occasione che par che N.S. Iddio ce ne rappresenti. Supplico humilissimamente Vostra Beatitudine, a dargli, come suole per benignità Sua, grata audienza et a conservarmi nella Sua gratia, mentre con la debita humiltà le bacio i Santissimi Piedi, e prego S.B. Maestà che ce la mantenghi lunghi e felicissimj anni. Di Malta li XVI di Agosto MDCX.' *Ibid.*, *Corrispondenza* 2, f. 92.

78. The voluminous, unbound, collections of Inquisitorial proceedings are a sure indication of this trend. See, for example, A.I.M., *Processi* XXIII, Lawsuit 329, 'Processus criminalis cum aburatione de formali Heresi Duodecim Anglorum ad hanc Insulas Accessorum cum bertono Anglo Capitanei Artus pietro. Terminatus 1605.'

(79). By a Papal Brief of 1 October 1530, Clement VII had in fact granted the Order leave to trade freely 'with the Infidel in foodstuffs, that is, grain, fodder, vegetables, wine, oil and other provisions; and to this effect, to sell to the said Infidels' in or outside Malta, 'even in countries of the same Infidels, tin and bronze in small quantities and provided these will not be used for artillery purposes' (80). Another source was the presence in Malta of considerably large numbers of Moslem slaves. The Order was one of the 'big buyers of galley slaves' (81). But there was a wider range of employment for slaves besides the galley oar-bench. They were also 'employed in public works, building and repairing the enormous fortifications, or in the hospital, bakery or workshops of the Order. Others, perhaps more fortunate, worked as servants in the Magisterial Palace, or the Auberges of the Knights' (82). In 1630 there were some three thousand infidel slaves in Malta (83). Their permanent residence on the island and their daily intercourse with all sectors of Maltese society were, potentially, a far greater menace to the Catholic faith than the occasional sojourn on the island of a comparatively limited number of Protestant English traders.

It was no accident that the last two decades of the sixteenth century and the early years of the seventeenth saw the English establish sound and stable contacts with Malta in matters of trade. It was all part of a forceful reconnoitering movement, unparalleled in its amazing drive and persistence. The island lay at the centre of a trading circumference which interconnected a number of newly founded trading corporations run by English merchants. Nor do these initial English contacts with Malta seem to have been inspired by any desire on Elizabeth's part to conspire with the Ottoman Turk to capture the island. The alleged plot does enjoy plausibility in view of Anglo-Spanish rivalry during the last decades of the century. But we still lack absolute and definite evidence. The overwhelming, awe-inspiring labyrinth of fortifications was bound to strike, at first sight, the newcomer from the north. Thomas Angliobin, who had visited Malta in the early 1580s, confessed he 'had not seen anything like it in England' (84). A century later, on 25 February 1684, a certain Joseph Dickenson, writing to Sir Joseph Williamson, declared: (85)

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79. A. Bonnici, 'Aspetti della vita cristiana nell'Isola di Malta verso la metà del seicento', *Maltese Folklore Review*, I, 4 (1974), 315.
80. A.O.M. 221, f. 177.
81. P. Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary* (London, 1970), p. 13.
82. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-70.
83. A. Bonnici, 'Aspetti della vita cristiana...', p. 315 n. 46.
84. A.P. Vella, *An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy*, p. 52.
85. C.S.P. *Domestic, Charles II, Oct. 1, 1683-Apr. 30, 1684*, p. 290.

Since I arrived here [in Malta] I have no news except that some galleys are fitting here to go against the Turks. I can give no account of the place as yet, but it is the strongest place in the world, for the whole city is a fortification in itself and I think, as far as I have been in it, it is impossible to take it.

The documents so meticulously studied and so elegantly published for the first time by Professor Andrew Vella fail, as he himself implies, to wreck the conjectural probability and establish convincingly the reality of such a conspiracy. 'There may or may not,' concludes Vella, 'have been an English plot of one kind or another in the immediate aftermath of the Spanish annexation of Portugal.' And further down he adds, 'The Inquisitor rightly noted that non-fulfilment of anything that was intended prevented production of decisive proof' (86). Through the initiative, efforts and enterprize of individual merchants and seamen, England had gained a permanent footing in the Mediterranean, won an 'increasing trade for herself' and, in Julian Corbett's words, 'inaugurated a new field for the action' of her navy. In Malta the English merchant had discovered a friendly Order and a reliable central Mediterranean market which, albeit its obvious limitations, he was prepared to exploit fully, skilfully and opportunely in the next century. These initial intermittent contacts provided a sign of mutual optimism. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth century marked the first stages of growth and prosperity of Maltese trade.

APPENDIX

List of English Consuls in Malta 1530-1798 *

Name	Date of Appointment
William Watts	Unknown
John Watts	15 November 1610
John Jacob Watts	29 May 1645
Alphonse Desclaus	30 November 1660
Thomas Rutter	26 June 1706
Alexander Young	26 January 1714
John Dodsworth	3 January 1745
Angel Rutter	18 April 1763
William England	29 August 1787

* Source: A.O.M. *Libri Bullarum*.