

Work at Tal Hniena Chapel

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Planning consent has been given now for the renovation of Tal-Hniena Chapel. As you know from previous articles Bishop Dusina reported in 1576 that there were four chapels then in the village of Hal Leu, then the vice parish of Zurrieq. Subsequently the village was added to Qrendi when it became a separate parish from Zurrieq in 1618 (as was the neighbouring Hal Manin) and the village gradually declined to what is now a few farmhouses. Wells in the fields to the south of the chapel are all that remains to show where the village core existed. There is one building near the Chapel of importance, and that is the former summer residence of the Bailiff Johann Wolfgang von Gutenberg (1647-1733), a Knight who commanded the galleys of the Order for a period. Gutenberg was not only wealthy and important, but religious, and gave money and gifts to a number of churches, but in particular to the one on his doorstep – Tal-Hniena.

Like most of the chapels in our neighbourhood Tal-Hniena goes back to the period in which Christianity was being re-established in Malta, in this case it is said that it originated in the thirteenth century. These first chapels were small, like Hal Millieri and the little one next to St. Matthew, and sometimes crudely built, like Tal-Barrani. As the church organisation established itself and Malta became more prosperous and safer under the Knights, once the Great Siege was out of the way, most chapels were rebuilt on grander lines. The seventeenth century saw an explosion of religious building, and Tal-Hniena was no exception. The present chapel was consecrated

in 1650, the porch and annexe being added afterwards.

One might wonder why there was such a fine and expensive chapel built for such a small neighbourhood – for Hal Leu was never more than a couple of dozen or so households, and in 1618 it had been included into the parish of Qrendi. Tal-Hniena was not the original name of the chapel, but about that time it was devoted to the worship of Our Lady of Mercy and became one of the principal shrines in Malta for that cult. It had wealthy local patrons, such as the Camilleris, but received many gifts from elsewhere. Subsequently there was Gutenberg, and Mgr Jacob Canaves, Grand Prior of the Order in 1710 and in 1713 Bishop of Malta, dying in 1721. Tal-Hniena was always something special – Bishop Molina in 1680 declared it the most beautiful church in Malta – and this is attested to by the fine collection of ex-votos, and in our own time by pilgrimages led there by Dun Karm, and by continuing devotions.

Qrendi parish church was being rebuilt also at the same time, being finished five years after Tal-Hniena, in 1655. Traces of this church still exist in the sacristy, but it was found to be inadequate, and after much building



Tal-Hniena Chapel



Statue of Our Lady of Mercy in Tal-Hniena square

work the present fine church, designed by Lorenzo Gafà, was finally completed in 1714. One imagines that there would have been some competition – as also from St. Matthew, rebuilt twice in the seventeenth century, and originally larger than it is today.

However, Tal-Hniena fell into disrepair in our times and its plate was sold to pay for a new tiled floor, and for rendering in cement of the crumbling interior and exterior stonework. This was done in the fashion of the time, but sadly the cement rendering draws up the damp and salts in the stone, and the tiles started to break up. Tal-Hniena was effectively abandoned, and became a dump for surplus church items, such as benches and confessionals. A misguided shooter damaged the windows and birds came in and added their detritus. In due course the ex-votos and seventy oil paintings were removed for safe keeping. The rear wall of the annexe fell in and generally the chapel was in an unhappy state.

The other chapels in Qrendi have all been restored to a decent condition in recent years, but Tal-Hniena was a major project, but one which ‘had’ to be done. Din L-Art Helwa proposed this and agreed with the Church authorities and Archpriest that it had to be undertaken, and the Bank of Valletta kindly agreed to provide

sponsorship. All this took some years to bring forward, and in the meantime urgent repairs to the annexe and exterior were put in hand, and the statue of Our Lady outside was repainted.

The interior is a complex matter and we now have MEPA’s consent to the method statement. The plan is to replace the floor, strip the cement rendering off the walls and replace it with ‘breathing’ plaster; when this is done we could proceed to renovate the various wooden items, which include early pulpits and pews, a confessional and other items. The project would conclude with the mammoth task of restoring and then replacing the seventy paintings and twentytwo ex-votos. The building will need to have electrical and plumbing work to bring it up to present standards and to make it fully functional again as a church and for other appropriate uses. This will take a great deal of money and effort over several years, but to bring Tal-Hniena back to its past magnificence is a very worthwhile and necessary undertaking, and one which all Qrendin will be keen to see. (I just hope I live long enough!)



The palace of Wolfgang von Guttenberg



Sculpture of Our Lady of Mercy facing the palace of Wolfgang von Guttenberg











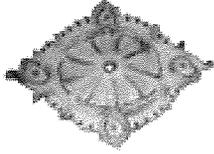
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