

# The Bumboatmen and the Shipchandlers

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The presence of Royal Navy ships in Grand Harbour generated substantial commercial activity within the community of the local boat owners and boatmen. In 1854 there were 300 licensed bumboatmen and in the following year that number increased.<sup>1</sup> Among the countless traditional boats that operated in the confinements of the harbour there was one of the least known humble craft called the bumboat – the locals corrupted the term as ‘bamboo’.<sup>2</sup> These rather small size boats can be described as floating shops packed with an assortment of manufactured articles. Since most of the visiting British warships were secured to buoys and therefore away from the wharves they sought the services of the Maltese boatmen mainly the traditional passenger boat popularly referred to by the officers and sailors as the ‘diso’ as well as the bumboatmen. The task of the bumboatmen ceased in the early twentieth century with the introduction in Malta of NAAFI (Navy, Army, Air Force Institution). In view of this the large number of Maltese bumboatmen experienced hard times resulting in a very low income owing to a stiff competition with NAAFI. In 1921 the British Government set up the NAAFI to run recreational establishments for the Armed Forces and additionally to sell various goods to servicemen and their families.

Long before the NAAFI there was HM *Victualling Yard* called by several locals ‘The Vitlin Yard’ along the Birgu waterfront that stretched from the Naval Bakery, nowadays the Malta Maritime Museum, all way to the bridge that led to the quarter deck. Entrance to HM *Victualling Yard* was through a gate on which at the top is a stone-carved bull’s head signifying a victualling facility. The Commissioners for the Victualling of the Navy or the Victualling Board was the body responsible for the victualling of the ships of the Royal Navy. It managed the enormous operation of supplying naval personnel with enough food, drink and other supplies to keep them fighting fit if necessary for months at a time in any corner of the globe they might be stationed. It existed from 1683 until 1832 when its function was first replaced by the Office of Comptroller of Victualling and Transports until 1869 and then was replaced by the Victualling Department.

Although the Admiralty constantly stocked its warships yet the Maltese tradesmen were called to provide additional supplies. It was taken into consideration the enormous demand by the relatively numerous crews who lived in crammed spaces. There were the bumboatmen and the ship chandlers who catered for the visiting ships. The former sold goods in bulk while the latter sold loose objects. Apart from making available vital provisions the bumboatmen also offered for sale other local handmade objects that attracted the attention of the British crews. In their heyday the bumboats among other items were fully packed with fabric items that consisted of Maltese lace, packages of handkerchiefs, shirts, hats, gloves and other silk pieces. There were also stationary like writing pads, pens, ink, pencils and local postcards. Fine filigree items were also in good demand. Coffee, tea, chocolates, drinks as well as perfume and soap were in the list.

On one occasion a witness before the Committee on Canteen and Victualling Arrangements was reported to claim that the Maltese bumboatmen went as far as to furnish naval officers’ houses free of charge.<sup>3</sup> It can be said that this is a typical example of scratch my back and I scratch yours. The Navy Canteen and Victualling Arrangements was appointed to inquire into the Question of the Canteen and Victualling Arrangements in HM *Fleet*.

In previous times there were a considerable number of ship chandlers whose task was also to provide both commercial and naval visiting ships with food and other essential stores. More often than not the ship chandler would be one of the first persons to make contact with the commanding officer and the purser. A ship chandler would do his very best to make an impression on his customer to ensure future orders by delivering the goods in the shortest time and with competitive prices. Through experience he would know what items to stock and what brand was mostly in demand. The local ship chandlers made use either of the *dghajsa tal-gadraj* or the larger and sturdier *luzzu tal-gadraj* that was usually engaged in fishing or transportation.

1 Malta Blue Book 1854 p. 93

2 Interview with Mr. Joseph Zarb of Senglea on 9 June 2017

3 Carew Anthony, *The Lower Deck of the Royal Navy 1900 -1939*, p. 219

Occasionally Maltese bumboatmen like the owners of the traditional *Dgħajsa tal-Pass* or as referred to by the Admiralty as *diso* were embarked on Royal Navy warships during their routine cruises. Two Maltese bumboatmen joined the crew of the flagship HMS *Victoria* during the Mediterranean summer cruise of 22 June 1893. This cruise ended in tragedy when the flagship collided with HMS *Camperdown* during maneuvers with heavy loss of life including Maltese and Senglean servicemen. Before the *Victoria* went down to the bottom of the sea the men were assembled on the weather deck ready to abandon ship. The two Maltese bumboatmen jumped into the sea before the Master-at-Arms ordered his men to abandon ship.<sup>4</sup>

Lady Anna Brassey (1839-1887) a renowned English writer and philanthropist undertook many sea voyages including the Mediterranean Basin during 1874 and 1878 onboard the mercantile ship *Sunbeam*. On Monday 23 December 1876 the *Sunbeam* entered Malta's Grand Harbour after enduring severe weather conditions. On the day of arrival it was noticed that all the flags were flying half-mast and those onboard made inquiries with their bumboatman but to no avail. Later the crew and passengers were informed that Princess Alice passed away. It seems that the bumboatman was expected to have an answer for every query.<sup>5</sup>

There were several bumboatmen and ship chandlers who lived and operated from Senglea while some others worked for sea-traders from Valletta. Senglean *Salvu Formosa* known as *il-Pa Salv* apart from working with his *dgħajsa tal-pass* (passenger boat) carrying passengers he was a ship chandler. He was employed by a certain individual called *il-Ġgant* from Valletta whose premises were near Fish Market, locally called *il-Pixkerija*. With his green livery *dgħajsa* he supplied provisions to various merchant ships mentioning as example the *Livorno* or *tal-Bajda* as nicknamed by the ship chandler.<sup>6</sup>

A certain Ġanni Pulo nicknamed *il-Lalli* also from Senglea operated as a ship chandler from his premises in Bastion Street near the small gate leading to *il-Ponta*. The flourishing and devoted mercantile community of the locale donated generously to the Church mentioning as an example their financial contributions to assist in the building of the church of the *Portu Salvu*. Ġanni Pulo followed suit for he together with his brothers sponsored the silver gilding of the globe on which stands the statue of Our Lady of Victory affectionately known by the Sengleans as *il-Bambina*.

In Siren Street there was the premises of Benny Vella who occupied himself as a bumboatman. His son Ġużeppi inherited the business and managed it until WWII. As mentioned earlier the local maritime community was devoted and the Vella family was no exception. Benny funded the niche dedicated to Our Lady of Safe Haven that is situated opposite the gate of Point Sally Port leading to Siren Street and also to Senglea Point. A certain Gozitan was to blame for ruining the family business. This individual came to Malta to do business with Vella and agreed to buy £500 worth of blankets with debt. The debtor never returned to settle the bill and taking into account the huge amount of money involved the business of Vella became bankrupt. The family also owned a shop in Two Gated Street near the church dedicated to Our Lady of Safe Haven. The shop supplied provisions for visiting commercial ships and was called the Red Star presumably for one of the shipping companies that was established in Malta.<sup>7</sup>

In this same street there was another bumboatman called Ġanni who also owned a laundry to cater for the sailors. A few metres away there was a shop belonging to Pietru known as *Barabba* who used to buy paint from onboard ships. Within the same area and in front of the *Gardjola* there was a ship chandlery involving three shareholders namely Carmelo Caruana, Sunta Borg and another individual. Amongst their belongings they owned two huge wooden boxes each measuring about 2 metres packed with provisions ready for delivery. It was really hectic to carry the stuff from the premises and then load it on the *dgħajsa* and afterwards it had to be delivered onboard the ship since there were too many steps from the ship chandlery leading down the Point.

Boatman John Micallef residing in Senglea used to ferry with his *dgħajsa tal-pass* Toni Grima known as *il-Felu* (check if Grima) from Kalkara to sell lace to mariners. Toni had his establishment at Floriana at Crucifix Hill. The *dgħajsa* was rowed alongside the ships that were secured to buoys to sell the products. Toni was authorized to board the ships and to deal with the relevant officer. He catered for the Royal Navy warships, troop and passenger ships.

4 Hough Richard, *Admirals in Collision*, Periscope Publishing Limited 1959, re-printed 1973

5 Brassey Annie - *Sunshine and the Storm in the East; or Cruises to Cyprus and Constantinople* – Cambridge University, New York 1888

6 Interview with Ms. Marlene Cordina, daughter of *Salvu Formosa*, on 17 June 2017

7 The late Benny Vella was the grandfather of Mr. Tancred Boldarini interviewed on 15 June 2017

There was also the business of Michele Borg Costanzi who resided in Point Street in the area known as Sqaq il-Bajd. His Ship Chandlery was located in Siren Street above Mermaid's Cave, facing Fort St. Angelo. His storage was in the large cave which became known as l-Ghar ta' Mikelin thus denoting the name of the owner.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after a ship entered harbour and granted pratique the bumboatmen and the ship chandlers were the first to go onboard after obtaining permit from the customs. Generally not more than two bumboatmen were allowed onboard at one time however there was no limit on how many bumboats assembled around a ship. They bought articles at relatively low prices and managed a good profit after selling them.

Nowadays visiting ships berth alongside wharves and consequently these boats were no longer required. Although ships are still taking supplies from our ports yet this is done by means of modern technology and with less physical hardship. In Senglea these types of services provided by the warehouses of the Sengleans in the locality no longer exist.



*Ritratt mehud qabel il-gwerra tal-inhawi maghrufa bhala tas-Sirena b'karatteristiċi partikulari. L-Ingliżi kienu jirreferu ghalha bhala 'Little Venice'.  
A pre-war photo of the area with particular characteristics known as tas-Sirena. The British referred to the place as 'Little Venice'.*

8 Interview with Mr. John Cachia of Senglea on 10 July 2017