

# Trade Winds

Victor Wickman

*They that go down to the sea in ships, doing business in  
The great waters: these have seen the works of the Lord, and  
His wonders in the deep....  
They were troubled, and reeled like a drunken men, and  
All their wisdom was swallowed up.  
And they cried to the Lord in their affliction: and He brought  
Them out of their distress.  
And He turned the storm into a breeze: and its waves  
Were still.  
And they revived because they were still: and He brought  
Them in the heaven which they wished for.*

Psalm 107

The walled City of Senglea has a history of many moods. Everyone may be traced in the Maltese national character. This piece of land almost washed by the watery of Grand Harbour, shared with her younger and bigger sister, the leadership in Maltese maritime trade. The sea knows no favourites her wealth is reserved for those who have the wisdom to learn its moods and the courage to beat blows and the will to persist through good and bad times in its rugged service. Because as an old seaman used to say, *'The sea sometimes is sick, but it never dies'*.

It is not the intention to go through the history of maritime Senglea or to record her ships and seafarers, but an outline of her maritime heritage, particularly during the presence of the British. The ties between Senglea and the sea go back well before the British Period. But as it is said that trade follows the flag the British opened a new pattern of maritime trade. During the first half of the 19th century new ships were built and the Island had a fleet of sailing ships ranging from small schooners and *speronare* of all sizes to brigs, barks and full rigged ships and several were employed on foreign trade.

Before the British presence, the Maltese were already well seasoned in shipbuilding and the art of navigation. The Maltese *Portolani* were a source of information to all navigators. The most important include those compiled by Lorenzo Mifsud and Antonio Borg. Their work was even published in Bellini's *'Mediterranean Atlas'* of 1771.

British-men-of-war came to grief on shores and reefs. Some ships became a total loss, others suffered serious injuries. Some of these dangerous spots to navigators were well known to Maltese pilots, HMS *Culloden* armed with 74 guns captained by Thomas Troubridge struck a reef near the Island of Aboukir. She suffered serious damage and failed to take part in the Battle of the Nile in August 1798. This reef was known to both Mifsud and Borg. The frigate HMS *Bacchante* stayed many hours on a shore near Corfu and was refloated after her guns were thrown overboard. This shore was well known by Borg. In March 1808 the 18 gun armed HMS *Electra* was lost off Augusta, Sicily again on a bank known to the Maltese pilots. In Maltese waters HMS *Alexander* of 74 guns suffered severe damage on the extensive reef off Marsaxlokk in 1799. This reef was also recorded by Maltese pilots. The work by Lorenzo Mifsud was recorded as *'Primo pilota sulla capitana delle Sacra Religione Gerusolmitana di Malta'*.

Although the Maltese knew all about the sea and ships they had little experience on organized maritime trade. As the saying goes that trade follows the flag with the presence of the British, and a number of English merchants who settled in Malta. Some of them were already connected with ships and banking so their presence here opened a new chapter in the history of the Maltese maritime trade. Some leading names were Joseph Slythe, James C. Bell with Rose and Duckworth. The first was connected with the establishment of the Commercial Rooms in Merchants Street in Valletta. Slythe's Commercial Rooms were the forerunners of the present day Chamber of Commerce, his partner in trade Samuel Christian helped him in the project. They had shares in some ships and for a time they had residence in Senglea.

Rose had connections with the British Members of Parliament. He prepared reports on the British trade in the Mediterranean with Malta as a hub for transshipment of English cargoes as well as the development of Maltese maritime trade. Duckworth was a merchant and had shares in ships and acted as agent for Lloyds of London. The agency was acquired by O.F. Gollcher and Sons late in the 19th century.

Ships bearing 'Malta' on their graceful counter stern were all owned by Maltese ship owners or English merchants residing in Malta. The Island was no port of convenience but although wearing the British merchant ensign occasionally the local ship owner faced problems due to the British Navigation Laws. The English Laws hampered the expansion of the colonial trade.

All the institutions connected with maritime trade, the Customs House, the Chamber of Commerce, bankers and shipping agents were all housed in Valletta but on the other side there was another activity. Merchantmen were allocated in the Three Cities particularly in Senglea and Master Mariners hailed also from the City. Captains sometimes were also shareholders in the ships they commanded and ship owners approved this policy because they knew that their ship was well looked after and furthermore the Master always kept his eye open for the best freight on the market.

Between 1812 and 1850 merchants and ship owners from Senglea has a big share as for shipping is concerned. According to a document in the bank of B. Tagliaferro and Sons are recorded a number of ships owned or partly owned by Senglean merchants. Below is a list showing some of the ships:

NAME	TYPE	TONNAGE
<i>L' Europeo</i>	brig	199
<i>San Francesco</i>	brig	177
<i>Due Fratelli</i>	brig	164
<i>Rob Roy</i>	brig	267
<i>Vittoria</i>	brig-schooner	186
<i>Orient</i>	bark	279
<i>Salvatore</i>	bark	251
<i>Tre Sorelle</i>	bark	237
<i>Venus</i>	bark	300
<i>Glory</i>	ship	263

These ships were employed on various trade routes, all gainfully engaged according to seasoned cargoes of their owners or on charter to other merchants. The Maltese Fleet was divided into three categories:

- (a) Single ship owner
- (b) Owner or owners of various ships

The Tagliaferro family and the *Società di Navigazione Maltese* operated various ships

- (c) The Master owned ship

Some of the leading families from Senglea engaged in the maritime scene included Debarro, Depasquale, Mattei, Dedomenico, German, Mirabita and Biagio Tagliaferro. Leading the list was Biagio Tagliaferro (1777-1862) who came from Liguria as a Ship Master. Like so many from that region Biagio was already well trained in navigation and in maritime affairs. Early in the British presence he saw the opportunities offered by the Port of Valletta. By 1812 he was already well anchored in Malta's maritime affairs. Like so many others who settled in faraway lands Biagio became part of Malta's maritime history – his fleet of sailing ships were employed in lifting all sorts of goods, a leader in the grain trade and a successful merchant banker. In Senglea he resided in St. Joseph Street but as his business expanded he moved to one of the large houses in St. Paul Street in Valletta. The roof of his house commanded a panorama of the Grand Harbour from the mouth of the harbour to the creeks and the inner waters of the port. From his roof Biagio waited for the arrival from faraway lands, his heavily burdened ships with shortened sail and towed to their berths by half a dozen *dghajjes tal-pass*, a sight which gives great pleasure to any ship owner.

The Tagliaferro story is one of success it ranks with the histories of the great trading houses of London, Amsterdam or Hamburg. Biagio's sons went into steam and in 1882 had new steamers built in English shipyards. It was a time when so many Greek ship owners moved to London and started the respected '*London Greeks*'. Tagliaferro did likewise and in 1886 Alfredo Tagliaferro represented the family business in the city.

The office of the family business at St. John Square in Valletta recorded the fortunes and ventures of the house that Biagio built. Models of ships and a comprehensive display of paintings depicting his ships, works by the Maltese marine artist Nicholas Cammilleri (his works rank with the ship portraits by Roux Marseilles), De Simone and a few by foreign artists adorned the walls of the office.

The trading routes of the Maltese sailing ships covered all the Mediterranean with regular sailings to the Black Sea Ports of Odessa, Tagaurog and Berdiausk. Tagliaferro had strong ties with the Port of Odessa. Near the Customs House they had a large depot consisting of various warehouses for the goods they handled, yards and chandlery service providing stores to their ships and the many vessels they represented. There was also a residence for the family representative. For some time Simone who was one of Biagio's sons was in charge of the trading post.

The Tagliaferro ships and vessels owned by other Maltese ship owners sailed to other routes well outside the Mediterranean mainly with grain. Back home they lifted general cargoes from coal to manufactured goods some even ventured across the Atlantic to America. The voyage of the brig *Urano* was praised and honoured by the Chamber of Commerce.

The waters below the walls of Senglea looking towards Corradino saw great changes when the Port of Valletta became Britain's premier naval base in the Mediterranean. The Admiralty acquired all the wharves below the walls of Senglea and gradually came under naval control. This was a sad blow to the commercial community of Senglea although the presence of the navy provided another source of business. Previously this area was a hub of commercial activity and merchantmen of all shapes and sizes occupied the berths alongside the wharves emptying their holds of cargoes from remote ports. *Burdnara* with their horse drawn cargo and drays rumbled over the flagstones wharves as bales and barrels were weighed argued with the stevedores while in the offices nearby scratching quills noted up profits from freights on the completed voyage. The crews of the *Società dei Crivellatori di Malta* under the leadership of their superior were busy with grain cargoes while in another part of the quay weighers of the *Compagnia dei Misuratori* weighed and tallied sacks of grain. The grain cargoes are transferred to the stores of the Customs House or the warehouses of the importers.

All along the wharves were a number of small traders providing stores to Ship Masters ranging from provisions to sails and all needs required onboard. Voyage repairs were also carried out alongside. There were builders of small crafts ranging from short sea traders to the lateen rigged Gozo boats and some of these Gozitan traders lasted over a century.

Through the years the shipyards of Giuseppe Camilleri and Lorenzo German turned out a steady stream of ships for Malta's merchant fleet. These master builders built ships of all shapes and sizes, well built and suitable for any route particularly the grain trade. Sometimes they had these ships on all stages of construction on the slips while others units were being fitted out alongside the wharf.

The names of the Maltese merchantmen make interesting reading. The names *Providenza* or *Speranza* illustrated the faith the merchant venture had in his new building. The partnership between two brothers or two cousins produced *Due Frarelli* and *Due Cugini*. The list also included names of saints, Grand Masters to Governors and well known characters in classical mythology. They did not fall in the category 'built by the mile and cut by the yard'. Each had its own identity; figureheads adorned the bows of the ships according to the taste of the owners.

The merchantmen built under the walls of Senglea cannot be compared with clippers built by the American Donald McKay as far as speed is concerned. However some Maltese ships under the command of able masters made fast passages. The bark *Wignacourt* of 350 tons built in 1844 was credited with fast passages from Odessa to Malta. The *Wignacourt* was not the largest locally built ship but she was beautiful with well proportioned lines. The portrait by Nicholas Cammilleri shows the thorough bred wearing her full suite of canvas fully spread in the element for which she was created.

During the romantic days of sailing ships, the brig was the backbone of the Maltese merchant fleet. This trim vessel was born in the sight of the walls of Senglea. Many years ago Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) the noted English author and statesman wrote, 'A wise merchant never adventures all his goods in one ship'. The Maltese merchant and ship owner were of the same opinion. They preferred building two brigs rather than a larger vessel. Both the small ships and the big bark faced the same perils at sea. More sail required more sailors, after all they reasoned that 'a small ship is easy to run and easy to fill'. In the middle of the 19th century Maltese ships were manned as follows:

Full rigged ships	16
Bark	14
Brig	11
<i>Speronare</i>	6 to 9 and according to tonnage

Many of the master mariners came from Senglea, he was a man with years of seafaring, experienced in both ship handling and ship husbandry and went to sea very early in life when he was twelve. Then advanced to the rank of ship's clerk, keeping the ship's log book and helping the master dealing with freight rates. This job resembled the 'super cargo' carried in British and American sailing ships. Sometimes he was a relative of the owner so he had a specific interest in the running of the ship. The master instructed him in navigation and after his time at sea attended ashore instructions in navigation and ship handling. In Senglea there retired Ship Masters who offered instruction in navigation. Certificates of competency were issued in Malta, some also set for the examination of the Board of Trade of England.

Besides his abilities in navigation the duties of the Ship Master also included his abilities as a manager of the vessel. After unloading his cargo in a far away port the Master with the aid of the brokers looked after freights in the market. In the Port of Odessa Maltese ship owners had reliable brokers but the final decision rested with the Master.

Shipping companies and individual ship owners were no philanthropists; they looked after every penny they spent. Their business was competitive; the Master accepted cargoes offered in the market without informing his owners, thus saving money spent on messages sent via the telegraph companies since the charges were exorbitant. In September 1864 according to receipts issued by the Mediterranean Extension Telegraph Company the charges were as follows:

Malta – London	20 words	£0-19s-06d
Malta – Taganrog	30 words	£2-05s-05d
Malta – Marseilles	18 words	£0-15s-10d

Tradition, desire to see the world, love of adventure and the social position of the Ship Master's calling were partly responsible for Senglean youths going to sea. Growing up in a maritime city, youths belonging to seafaring families cannot resist the lure. Old Senglea residents remembered Ship Masters all masters in sail and were a breed of their own. They could be recognized by the way they dressed and their behavior. On the other hand the ship owners, traders and others connected with maritime trade were part of the City's elite. The Tagliaferro family according to documents in the bank used to buy their requirements from the best fashion houses of Valletta including *La Ville de Lyon* (P. Girard) of 104 St. John Square, not far from the bank operated by the family.

Members belonging to Senglea seafaring families settled in remote lands far away from the Mediterranean they knew so well. The naval histories of many South American navies were built by a long list of former officers serving in the Royal Navy, to mention a few Lord Cochrane, Brown and King. Our countryman the Senglea born Coronel de Marina Juan Battista Azopardo (1772-18480) was one of the founders of the Argentine Navy. Known in Argentina as the *Primer Combate Naval Argentino*, Azopardo had been honoured in many ways for his exploits. In 1947 a monument by the sculptor Carlos de la Carcova was inaugurated in the City of San Nicolas. Several naval units carried the name Azopardo since 1885, furthermore in Buenos Aires a street is named after Juan Battista; this street lies very close to other streets named after heroes of the Argentine Navy.

The end of the shipbuilding yards situated along French Creek and the closure of the commercial wharves under the walls of the City did not end the ties between Senglea and maritime trade. The naval arsenal and the presence of a large number of British warships opened a new pattern of business. Many youths joined the Royal navy, many of them taking part in naval engagements during the two world wars, including Jutland between 31 May and 1 June 1916.

Several naval officers serving in the station built up friendships with the *barklori* and *gadrajja* from the City, a friendship which lasted for many years, some of them after retirement continued visiting the Island and meeting their *dghajnsamen*. Some of them still enjoying old age while others navigated to a safer haven and no longer with us. The latest to leave us Rear Admiral Nigel Cecil loved and respected by all who knew him.

During the presence of the Royal Navy the arrival of naval units in Grand Harbour especially a whole flotilla of destroyers or frigates provided a spectacle as they were maneuvered to their berths in Dockyard Creek. Those on the bridge knew that their handling of their ships was being observed by many, both from the flag deck of HMS *St. Angelo* and the fleet flagship at her berth. An old English resident recorded a very nice and humane story which showed the ties between the Royal Navy and the City.

A flotilla of destroyers from the China Station was on her way back home and called at Malta. After all the units were secured to their berths, Captain D who knew every watering hole along the Senglea waterfront, with his binoculars viewed the whole area. He noticed that both the door and the name-board of the pub Black Cat were in a bad state and needed attention. He reasoned that the owners were doing little business since there was a reduction in the Mediterranean Fleet. The captain ordered some men to go ashore and give a facelift to the Black Cat (some sources disagree about the name of the pub).

The *dghajsamen* and his boat featured both in so many works of artists as well as in photographs. He was recorded in some cartoons in a comic way. The best of them all were four cartoons that appeared in 'The Graphic' Christmas issue of 1893 under the heading 'A Maltese Tragedy: the Adventure of the Rival Agents and the Boatmen'. The cartoons were the work of Phil May. The boatman and his craft appeared in the photographs of Richard Ellis, Agius, the Grand Studio and they are still featured in the colourful postcards on sale these days.

The gondola has vanished from our waters and was used by the Governor, the Captain of the Dockyard and the Customs House. A few were built for the *dghajsamen*. The Governor's gondola was manned by three boatmen plus a coxswain and they were in naval uniform.

The *dghajsaman* from Senglea was both expert boat handler but also a keen businessman. It was his policy to look after a new arrival on the station especially midshipmen. He knew so well they were tomorrow's officers so it was an investment. Going through the letters received by Toni Camilleri known as *il-Kukla* and Spiro Mercieca is a record of officers who served on the station; commanders and captains, some who attained flag rank and a few who rose to First Sea Lords.

There are many stories on how our *dghajsamen* acquired information on ships commissioning at Portsmouth or Chatham for this station. According to Admiral Sir Derek Holland Martin, still remembered here as Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, when years before was at the Admiralty in London. Letters from Maltese *dghajsamen* were addressed to captains offering their *dghajsa* services long before their captains were informed of their appointment! Nobody knew how such information was acquired by our *dghajsamen*.

Although the boatman had such good relations with the British sailor sometimes an enemy cropped up. The battleship HMS *Alexandra* was one of the most popular ships on this station; displaced 9490 tons, rigged as a bark and had a steam engine. She was actually named *Superb* but since she was launched by the Princess of Wales, later Queen Alexandra, the battleship was renamed *Alexandra*. For a long time she was the fastest battleship of the Royal Navy to obtain 15 knots. For many years served as fleet flagship, for a time flew the flag of the Duke of Edinburgh.

When cruising in the eastern Mediterranean, the captain was presented with a little bear. Named *Bruin*, the bear became the mascot of the ship, loved by all on board. In fact it had the run of the whole ship, even access to the quarter deck. The bear disliked the day when the *Alexandra* discharged her guns on the Island of Filfla.

The bear also disliked the sight of any *dghajsa* and when a number of boats were alongside the battleship, Bruin quietly slipped into the water and attacked every boat capsizing each craft and the boatmen ending in the water. Nobody knows how this animosity developed between the two sides. Perhaps when *Bruin* was younger, the bear in a joking way scratched a freshly painted *dghajsa* the boatman proud of his craft attacked the bear with one of his oars. The behavior of the boatman led the bear to hate all boatmen and their craft. Bruin had a tragic end as the bear was lost at sea while the *Alexandra* was on passage from Malta to Gibraltar.

For many naval personnel, the Senglea waterfront was known as 'the Barbary Coast'. Occasionally some trouble developed when there was the presence of foreign sailors. The area became 'out of bounds' for all British sailors but Senglea also had entertainment places. Malta had few technical schools. The Malta Railway offered apprenticeships followed by Tagliaferro and the Marquis Scicluna when both went

into steam. For many years the Dockyard Technical College supported the Malta dockyard with a steady stream of apprentices; they were employed in the yard in the various shops. Some joined some British engineering companies or dockyards where they continued their instructions. Those who went to sea sat for the certificates as Chief Engineer of the British Board of Trade. A few became surveyors serving with leading classification societies. The motto of the Dockyard Technical College was 'Seek Perfection'.

The naval authorities were worried that in the cities near Grand Harbour there was a shortage of decent places for the seamen. Gradually these places known as 'rests' were established around the Three Cities; officially these places were known as 'Naval Church Institutions'. The Senglea branch opened its doors in 1892 at Nr. 7 St. Michael Street. The institute offered full facilities, seventeen beds, a library, a reading room as well as a piano room and a chapel. Religious services were held every Sunday however the chapel was opened everyday for any guest seeking a quiet place. The rooms of the 'rest' were fitted out and were maintained by ships serving in the Mediterranean including the battleships *Collingwood* and *Edinburgh* as well as the battle-cruiser *Australia*.

Another institution established in Senglea was the Naval and Military Society. The members met in St. Joseph Street and meetings were held monthly. The society was opened to all naval and military officers and Dockyard officers. The speakers were experts in their own fields. They dealt with every subject connected with the art of warfare; naval and military strategy to naval policy, marine engineering and all the new technical gadgets offered by marine engineering firms. Gunnery and shipbuilding were the subjects often dealt with. A leading figure during the society's meeting was always the Chief Constructor at the Malta Dockyard. This post was a senior berth in the Corps of Naval Construction. Normally after his deployment in Malta he was appointed to a similar position at Portsmouth or to still higher position at the Admiralty.

Senglea's old shellbacks recounting their experience at sea in the shade of the *gardjola* remembered the ships and the masters they knew. They argued about many things from fellow shipmates to perilous passages; but after all their final agreement was that ships were all the same. A well run ship depended on her master and crew; it was so during the days of sail and still applied to the steam driven ship. Through the years the City of Senglea provided many seafaring families serving in merchant ships and in the Royal Navy. There were instances when some of the ships never returned to their home town – missing at sea. Just to mention two leading maritime families, the Azopardi and De Maria; there were many who toiled in silence and saw the dangers of the sea in good and bad times – the *gardjola* heard their yarns

Senglea Point and the *gardjola* witnessed the history of the Grand Harbour from the wind driven ships to the transition period from sail to steam, except during the dark days of the last German War – the symbols of hearing and seeing sculptured on the *gardjola* that through the years observed in silence everything which was happening down below. The ear recognized the sound of any ship steaming on her way to Malta although the smoke coming from the tall funnels of the coal fired ships annoyed the eye; it admired the ships – the largest moveable manmade structures. Their strength and size and ability to endure the elements, the excitement of a ship in motion to her berth the lure of the sea and his faraway destinations are impossible to describe.

The bonanza of the Crimean War (1855-56), the waters of the Grand Harbour dominated by the *gardjola* saw many important foreign sailing ships and steamers. The list included the historic *Great Britain*, the world's first large steam-propelled with a screw designed by the great Victorian engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806-1859). Today the restored *Great Britain* is a museum ship in Bristol in the same dock where she was built in 1843. This ship played an important role in maritime history and in British shipbuilding from wood to iron and from paddles to propellers.

The Crimean War brought to our shores some of the best ships operated by leading British and French shipping companies. The list included the Cunard Steamship Companies, Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company and the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company of London. The ties between the Royal Mail Company lasted for more than a century. During the Great War the liners of the company served as hospital ships in the Mediterranean and to commemorate the service of the company, in 1918 the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty ordered the Blue Ensign and Geneva Flag worn by the Company's *Saint Margaret of Scotland* to be deposited in the chapel of Bighi Naval Hospital.

The ties with the Company continued during the last war and in 1939 the liner *Alexandra* of 22,181 tons arrived in the Dockyard for conversion to an Armed Merchant Cruiser. The walls of Senglea saw the



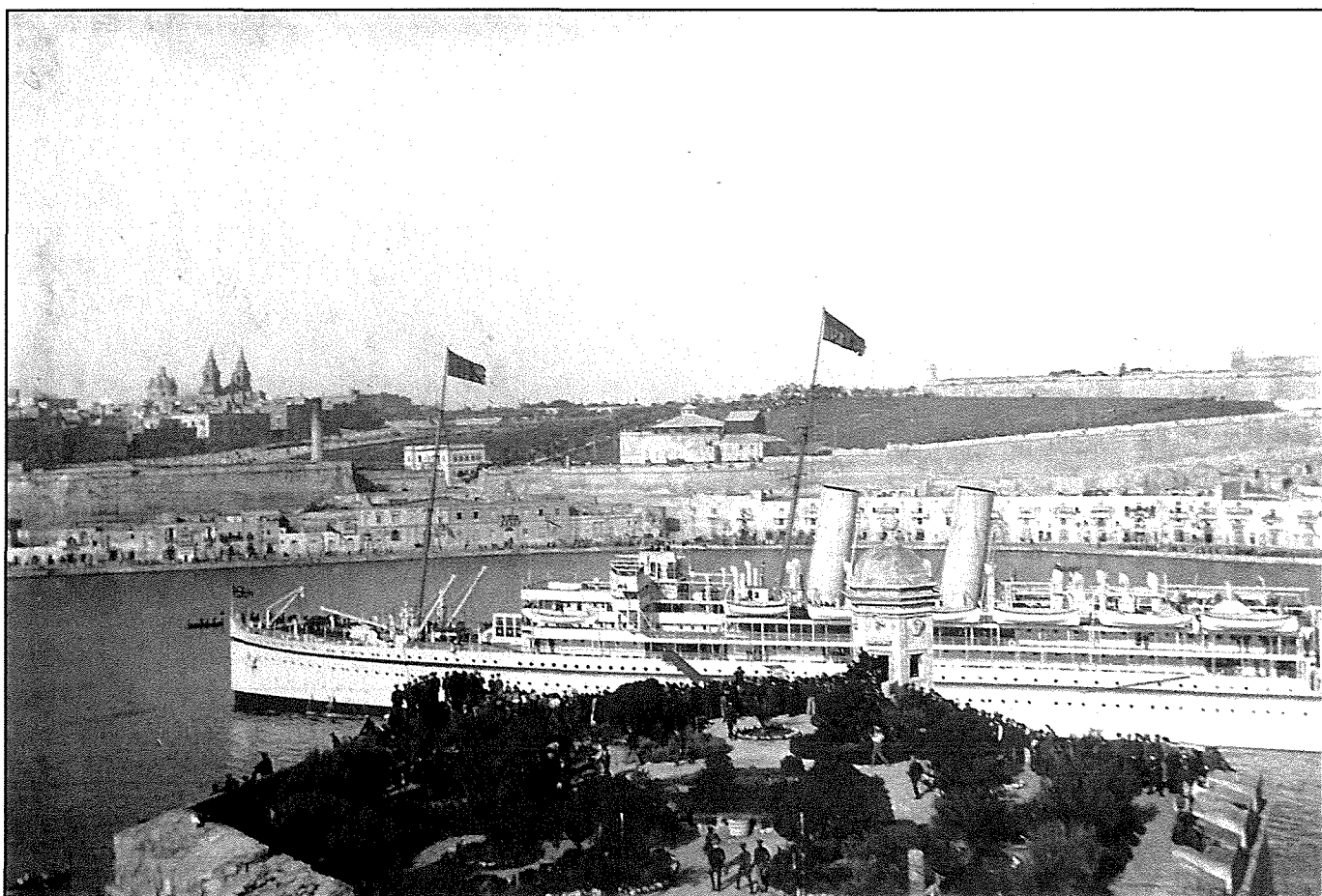
ship being transformed; the mainmast stepped down and one of the funnels removed while the guns were fitted on her strengthened decks. Later in March 1942 the motor-ship Pampas (Convoy MW10) loaded with provisions and military stores arrived from Alexandria and passed in front of *il-Ponta tal-Isla* on her way to *Ras Hanzir* – the same waters that later became her grave.

The rocky *Ponta* knew the constructors German and Camilleri with their friends, the directors of the *Società di Navigazione Maltese* and other ship owners. Tagliaferro and Azopardi seeing off their latest new buildings being towed by some half a dozen *dghajsas* from the wharves under the walls of Senglea to the entrance of Grand Harbour; her new sails spread and started her maiden voyage. Some navigated to the Parish Church and in front of the Altar dedicated to St. Francis of Paola, patron saint of all seafarers, in the silence uttered a prayer placing their ship under his protection and best of luck to the craft and all who sail in her.

Sometimes the eye observed scenes of sadness, one of these instances followed the loss of the battleship *Victoria* in June 1893, after seeing their ship off seamen from Senglea perished with their ship. The daily arrival of the sick and wounded during the Great War also saddened the Grand Harbour scene.

But there were also joyful moments, on the top of the list, the arrival of the British monarchs. King Edward VII and his consort Queen Alexandra visited Malta on various occasions. The Queen used to take pictures with her own camera and in 1908 the Daily Telegraph of London published a book entitled '*Queen Alexandra's Christmas Gift-Book' Photography From My Camera* and the proceeds were all for charity. The publication was in the format of an album featured photographs of prominent persons she met and views of the places she visited. From all her Malta pictures she selected only one taken from the bridge of the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert* showing Senglea Point with the dominant *gardjola* and a crowd below to the water's edge.

For a long time the band of the City was known as the *Queen's Own Band* named after Queen Alexandra (1841-1925) regarded as one of the most beautiful and intelligent women of her time.



*Il-Jott Irjali Medina ghaddej minn quddiem Il-Ponta tal-Isla bir-Re George V u r-Reġina Mary f'Jannar 1912.*  
*The Royal Yacht Medina passing Senglea Point carrying King George V and Queen Mary in January 1912.*

*Photo Victor Wickman*