

# LEINSTER REGIMENT ASSOCIATION

## A year in Gozo

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**I**n the Regimental History Lt.Col Whitton writes, as a subaltern, a not very complementary view of the arrival, in 1894, of the 2nd Battalion at the small island of Gozo four miles from the north-east coast of Malta. *“An uninviting station at first glance ... not a single tree and without a single blade of grass ... all the inhabitants were peasants, priests, fisher folk or grog-shop keepers ... English<sup>1</sup> was neither spoken nor understood by a single soul except for a charming (local) priest Father Magri ... compared to Malta, Gozo was practically a penal settlement”* We cannot know why Whitton gave such a poor opinion and it would not be fair to conjecture; however my subsequent research into other contemporary accounts do not lend support to Whitton’s view.

The 2nd Battalion were to occupy a local fortress called Fort Chambray that had been originally built in 1761 back in the days of Knight’s Templar occupation. The original concept for the fortress was to be a fortified town built overlooking the landing stage in Mgarr the principle harbour at Gozo; but although the defences were built the project of building the town was never completed. Fort Chambray held a commanding view of the approach to Gozo from Malta being situated high

in 1800 the fort was occupied by British forces but was not formally transferred to the British Government as a barracks until the 1st January 1829. With its high position exposed to a cooling sea breeze the fort quickly became established as a place for soldiers requiring convalescence. Good use was made of the fort following the cholera outbreaks of 1837, 1850 and 1865 and by many of the British forces who suffered from ‘Malta Fever’ that also claimed many lives<sup>2</sup>. Listed as requiring a garrison strength of five hundred men (five companies) a succession of regiments had occupied Fort Chambray and in November 1894 it was the turn of the 2nd Leinsters under the command of Lieut. Col Adrian Woods who relieved the Connaught Rangers. Strength upon arrival was 562 officers and men, and by January 1895 this had increased to 1,008.

Accommodation in the fort was restricted, with a two storey barrack block having four rooms, 20 x 100 feet (6 x 30 metres) on each floor designated to accommodate 250 men, initially about half the single men of the battalion. Along side each barrack room was accommodation for six NCOs and three staff sergeants. A long two-storey building had recently been built to serve as married quarters for accompanied soldiers. A small area of the building had been set aside as quarters for the senior officers but the remainder of the battalion, including its junior officers, were under canvas on the hard rocky ground around the fort. The officers were able to relax in their Officers

*Fort Chambray high on Ras et Tafal viewed approaching from Malta (Photo 2003)*



on a hill known as Ras et Tafal, the major features of the defences however were to protect the fort in the event of an attack and subsequent siege from the landward side. Following the arrival of the British

Mess in what Whitton described as a *“passable native house with a fair garden”*. Within the walls of the Fort was a compact hospital of four wards capable of accommodating 20 men. Other features of the

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Main entrance to Fort Chambray

Photo 2003

fort included a bomb-proof powder magazine on the seaward side of the grounds. Regiments stationed at the fort were very popular in Gozo because they generated trade for the local market and with not much to do on the quiet island the soldiers were often employed in assisting the local population with their construction endeavours; a ready source of labour. Regimental bands were particularly popular especially as they gave public performances on the local fete days, and there were many of those! One reported example<sup>3</sup> was the parish feast of 'Our Lady of Loreto' held in Ghajnsielem, a village referred to by the troops as "Chain Selem", when on September 15, 1895 the bandsmen were hosted with 'wine, beer biscuits and cigars' by the 'grateful parishioners'<sup>4</sup>. The battalion spent some twelve uneventful months in Fort Chambray, departing for their next 'posting' to Bermuda in November 1895.

So why was the period of the "Gozo posting" interesting? Much depends upon your point of view of course, for me my initial interest started because my grandfather and grandmother were part of the contingent who occupied the married quarters. That was sufficient to make me want to go and take a look, especially as one of my father's elder sisters, Mary E Dickson was born and baptised<sup>5</sup> in 1895 within Fort Chambray<sup>6</sup> However the thrust of this article and the driver for my current interest now follows.

Fort Chambray was handed back, by the British, to the Gozo authorities in 1934 when the barrack block was turned into a hospital for Mental Diseases and remained in use under the name of "Sacred Heart Hospital" until 1983. Also in 1937 another part of the fort was developed as a leprosy unit called "St Bartholomew Hospital" and remained in use until 1956. In 1979 work commenced to convert the former married quarters into a tourist development of self contained apartments whilst other facilities, such as restaurant and bar together with a new access road, were developed. In 1983 the remaining patients in "Sacred Heart Hospital" were transferred to

'other more appropriate facilities' and the whole area remained open to the public as "a holiday park" regularly frequented by the people in the area. In 1992 the Fort together with its property was sold by the authorities to a private Monaco based developer and access to the Fort for the public was stopped. In 2004 a local Gozo businessman lawyer<sup>7</sup> bought out the then developer by acquiring fifty-one percent of the shares leaving the Maltese Authorities forty-nine percent of Fort Chambray Ltd.

Permission to develop the Fort and surrounding area into an exclusive holiday complex was given in the early 1990's, and on 1st July 1991, as part of the preparations for the development, the cemetery inside the Fort was cleared of graves and human remains. Without going into the detail of the (locally resisted) development, its progress is important from a Leinster Regiment historical aspect in that buried within Fort Chambray were the remains of a number of Leinster soldiers and their families, all who appeared to succumb to 'Malta Fever', though one infant died shortly after birth.

There were originally three cemeteries associated with Fort Chambray, all commencing from around 1800. The three included a Protestant burial ground within the Fort itself close by the old military hospital and doctor's quarters, and two in the dry moat ditches outside the wall. There had also been a Cholera burial ground but that had long since 'disappeared'. Of the two burial grounds outside the wall one was a dedicated burial place for Roman Catholics on the left of the main entrance to the Fort and one for 'others' on the right of the main entrance. My interest then is what happened to these departed soldiers and perhaps more importantly for the Leinster Regimental archives what happened to the remains of the Leinster Soldiers?

My initial research identified that a newspaper, *The Times of Malta*, on the 18th January 1993, printed a letter from the Managing Director of Fort Chambray Ltd., regarding the cemetery. An extract is reproduced below. "In so far as the removal of the remains of members of the British Forces (and others) is concerned, the whole exercise was carried out as follows: Each single grave was first of all opened and the remains carefully put away, each in a separate container

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and later re-interred in the cemetery of Santa Maria, near Xewkija in the presence of the Reverend Canon Philip Cousins, Dean of St. Paul's Anglican Pro-Cathedral in Valletta in representation of the Church of England and Father Zerafa, the parish priest of Ghajnsielem". Further research identified that a Roger de Giorgio supervised the transfer and that the contents of each grave was placed in a wooden box lined with plastic and the reinterred in the cemetery of St Mary. At that time the different tomb stones were set aside for permanent retention in a secluded part of the Fort within a yard adjacent to the old barrack block, for future identification awaiting a more permanent location. The final part of the plan was that one of the former cemeteries' was to be re-established and that the remains were to be returned to Fort Chambray, reunited with their headstones<sup>8</sup> and reburied within the landward fortifications. Amongst the identified remains were the following from the Leinsters.

- Walter GOLL, aged 24 years, Private, 2nd Battalion, Leinster Regiment Died 30th June 1896,
- E.C. LAWN, aged 21 years 3 months, Private, H Company, 2nd Battalion, Leinster Regiment Died 30th July 1895
- Emma Mary SHORT, aged 25 years, the wife of Corporal Michael J. Short, 2nd Battalion, Leinster Regiment Died 7th May 1895.
- Gwendolyn Grace DAVIDSON, daughter of Captain T.S.C. Davidson, Leinster Regiment. Born 4 May 1895 Died 19 May 1895. (Age 15 days)
- P. MURPHY, aged 27 years, Sergeant, F Company,



The old Roman Catholic burial ground at Fort Chambray now being used as an area to grow tomatoes

2nd Battalion, Leinster Regiment, died 23rd September 1895

Whilst on business in Malta in 2002, I made a visit to Fort Chambray to see where the 2nd battalion had been stationed and discovered that the project development had been 'on hold' for a number of years and the site had to all intents been 'mothballed' Walking around the outside of the walls of the fort, which were part overgrown and part being used as 'allotments' I chanced upon the Catholic burial ground, which had been turned into a plot for growing tomatoes. I took the details of some of those interred from a number of headstones that were positioned against the wall but unfortunately, the headstones of the Leinster burials were no longer intact and only markers were found for four persons.



The burial marker for Pte. James Nelson, the original tomb stone having been 'lost'.



Headstone for Pte Lyons of the Connaught Rangers

- Pte Nicolas LOUTH, "G Company" 2 Bn Leinster Regiment, who died in Gozo on August 7th 1895, aged 24 years.
- Pte James NELSON. "G Company" 2 Bn Leinster Regiment, who died in Gozo on September 25th 1895, aged 25 years.
- Pte Thomas CLANCY, 4034, "A Company" 2 Bn Leinster Regiment, who died in Gozo on June 3rd 1895, aged 20 years.

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- Sarah SHEIL, beloved wife of Sergeant Patrick SHEIL, 2 Bn Leinster Regiment, who died in Gozo on April 6th 1895, aged 21 years.

Although I had spoken with the security guard when I first arrived my presence on the premises was unauthorised, so I was not able to do much more than note the names for future reference. However I committed myself to a return visit under more favourable circumstances. These occurred the following year when, by then, I had been successful in contacting the developers of the fort with the assistance of a mutual business acquaintance who resided on Gozo. I had also been successful in contacting the archivist for Gozo, Father Joseph Bezzina, so believed that I was in good shape to discover more about what had happened. I set myself a number of goals to achieve.

1. Had the remains been re-interred and if so where?
2. If the remains had been re-interred did they have individual resting places or was there a common grave?
3. What had happened to the burials in the Roman Catholic cemetery?
4. Why were the names I found on headstones different to those originally reported?

My next action was to visit the church of Santa Maria, near Xewkija a village close to the fort, to discover that it had no attached cemetery. Fortunately times had changed since 1895 and I already knew that English was spoken and understood by all the inhabitants so after a little driving around I found the cemetery of St Mary. After a discussion with the groundsman in charge of the cemetery I was directed to grave number 3 (*Parti-ta-li-Ingglizi, remains*) to discover an uninspiring set of slabs in an enclosed area with no description. So back to the head groundsman who gave me access to the burial register that enabled me to identify that the remains of fifty-three persons had been interred, eleven of whom were unknown..

My first two goals had been achieved in that I had located the remains and they had not been interred in individual burial places. Furthermore, ten years after the approval of the original plan, the project to move the remains back to Fort Chambray had not taken place. This tale now takes an unexpected twist because whilst I had located four of the Leinster names originally reported as being re-interred, the names identified on the burial register did not include any of the Leinster names I had previously identified on the markers in the Roman Catholic Cemetery, or that of Sergeant Murphy. Further investigations revealed that all the identified records of the reinterment refer only to the transfer of the

remains from the Protestant cemetery and I could find no reference to any transfer from the Roman Catholic cemetery. This was important enough to seek further help and make an appointment with the Gozo archivist Father Bezzina in Victoria, the main town of Gozo. My discovery came as somewhat of a surprise to Father Bezzina and what happened next and what happened to the graves of Sergeant Murphy, Privates Louth, Nelson and Clancy and the wife of Sergeant Sheil will be another story.

## (Endnotes)

1 *Use of English:* Although Maltese was the first language and Italian the second language, English was in use and understood by the civil authorities in Malta. When Whitton refers to the use of English he may have been focused on his personal experience with the local inhabitants. However, an alternative to be considered is that after fifty years of successive British Army regiments trading with the local inhabitants in the nearby markets, some of the Gozitans understood English and used it when they wished to. My own research at the Malta Public Record Office clearly identified English to be in use by many, but by only a few of the indigenous farmers. Another point that supports a knowledge of English by the local Gozitans was that non-catholic members of the Regiment were known to 'skip' church-parade on Sundays and play a local game 'bocci' in Apparition Square in the nearby village of Ghajnsielem. (Eng. Bocce a ball game played on dirt courts approximately 20 to 30 metres in length and unlike lawn bowls, bocce balls are spherical and have no inbuilt bias)

2 *Malta Fever:* The cause of "Malta Fever", a mysterious complaint which sometimes resembled typhoid fever and at other times malaria, was not discovered until an investigation by the Malta Fever Commission during 1904-1906 and led by Lieut Colonel Sir David Bruce (RAMC) traced the infection to Maltese goat's milk. The cause was identified as *Micrococcus melitensis* and the illness reclassified as "brucellosis". Bruce was rewarded with a knighthood in 1908.

3 *Ghajnsielem:* Grace and Glory: Malta, People, Places & Events, A.E. Abela, Public Record Office Gozo.

4 *Op cit*

5 *Mary E Dickson:* In the register of baptisms the entry is Mary E Dickson 109th Regiment, one of six baptisms in the regiment that year.

6 *Mary E Dickson:* Being born in Gozo was later to prove to be a difficulty for my aunt when much later she immigrated to the USA. Despite my grandfather being British/Irish and a retired officer of the British Army, the USA authorities classified my aunt as being of Maltese birth and origin. Of course being of good Irish stock, she easily got around that by travelling first to Canada where entry was not a problem, then crossing over from Canada into the USA.

7 *Source:* Malta Today, July 18 2004

8 *Source:* Brigadier Samut- Tagliaferro, President of the National Museum Association of Malta.