

Every picture tells a story (1)

Marsamxett in the 1850s



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Imagine Marsamxett in the 1850s: windmills on St Michael's Bastion, Ponsonby's Column, and Marsamxett Gate and Barracks. On the waterfront a baroque gate leads to the quarantine office, consisting of a parlatorio, fumigation rooms and stores; it is an extension of the Lazzaretto establishment on the other side of the harbour. Boats are hauled on the rocky foreshore next to the remains of an old (defensive?) wall.

In the 1850s it was likely that there were people who remembered the failed coup at Marsamxett on Friday January 11, 1799, when the French were besieged in Valletta; it was quite by chance that they learnt of the insurgents' plan to storm the city gates and enter Valletta (success would probably have altered the course of history).

That morning, the arrival of a Genoese polacre with news and supplies so lifted French spirits that General Claude-Henri Belgrand de Vaubois called for a celebration with a noonday gun salute and an evening performance at the Manoel Theatre. The insurgents waiting outside Porte des Bombes believed the salute was the signal to attack; they were quickly rebuffed. The contingent hiding at the fumigation office at Marsamxett was unaware of the morning debacle; they were cold and hungry, and waited in vain for the signal to storm the gate.

At 9pm, while Roussel and Bouvard, officers from the 21st Half-Brigade of Infantry, were rowing back to Fort Manoel after attending the performance at the theatre, they heard noises in the stores. Roussel returned from the fort with seven soldiers who surprised the insurgents, arrested 36 and fired at those who swam for safety. Retribution followed; some 54 men, including Dun Mikiel Xerri, were executed in groups during the following days. By the 1830s, the building was described on maps as the Old Laboratory Barracks.

In the 1850s, the guard room at Marsamxett Gate was manned by a dozen soldiers. About 80 men were accommodated in the overlying barracks, a three-storey building from the time of Grand Master Hugues Loubenx de Verdalle (1582-1595). The complement was reduced by the time

Galton and Sutherland inspected the place in 1862 while on a mission to report on hospital and barrack reform.

The barracks was surrounded by bastions and buildings, including the notorious Manderaggio slum, which prevented all winds, except those originating from the northwest and west, from ventilating the place. Poor drainage also rendered the barracks damp and unhealthy. After being badly damaged during the war, the remaining casemates were used as examination halls entered from Biagio Steps. In 2013, the barracks was converted into the Fortress Interpretation Centre, a highly relevant addition to the attractions of Valletta.

"A period photograph of the column also shows the rapidly expanding town of Sliema with its small church dedicated to Our Lady of Graces and the houses seemingly built on water, Sliema's 'little Venice'"

The junction of Britannia (Melita) and St Andrew's streets was graced with a fine, semi-circular building which overlooked Ponsonby's Column, a Neoclassic memorial to the Governor who was famously 'killed at Waterloo'. The column could be seen from Britannia Street until January 1864 when it was struck by lightning. The plinth was re-erected on St Michael's Bastion. A period photograph of the column also shows the rapidly expanding town of Sliema with its small church dedicated to Our Lady of Graces and the houses seemingly built on water, Sliema's 'little Venice'.

Ponsonby buried his cousin Sir Robert Cavendish Spencer on the flank of St Michael's Bastion. After Sir Robert, a great-uncle of Lady Diana (he was born at Althorp, where she is buried), died aboard HMS Madagascar in 1830, Ponsonby obtained War Office permission to rename the grave site, 'Spencer Bastion'.

In 1862, Galton and Sutherland, and Florence Nightingale drew up plans for a military hospital on St Michael's Bastion, partly on the



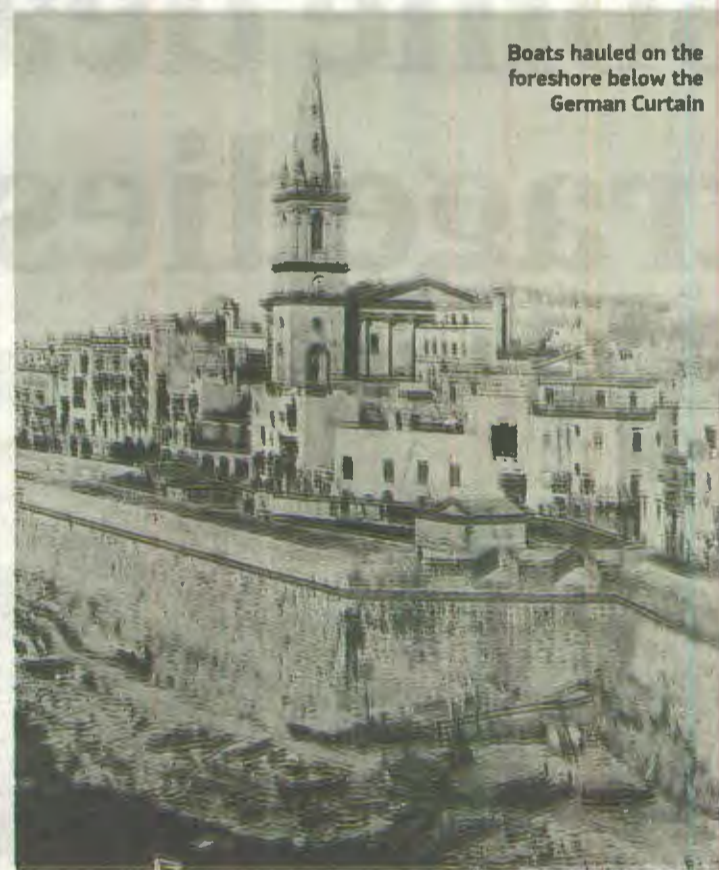
Marsamxett in the 1850s

site of two obsolescent windmills from the time of the Order. A hospital on the exposed site at the highest point of the peninsula was considered superior to the military hospital at the Sacra Infermeria on St Lazarus Bastion in Grand Harbour. The plan was subsequently dropped in favour of the Cottonera Military Hospital at Cospicua. The windmills were demolished by 1899. Before World War II, the area was known as Fuq l-Imtiehen, and the adjacent street, Strada Molino à Vento, it is now Triq l-Imtiehen/Windmill Street.

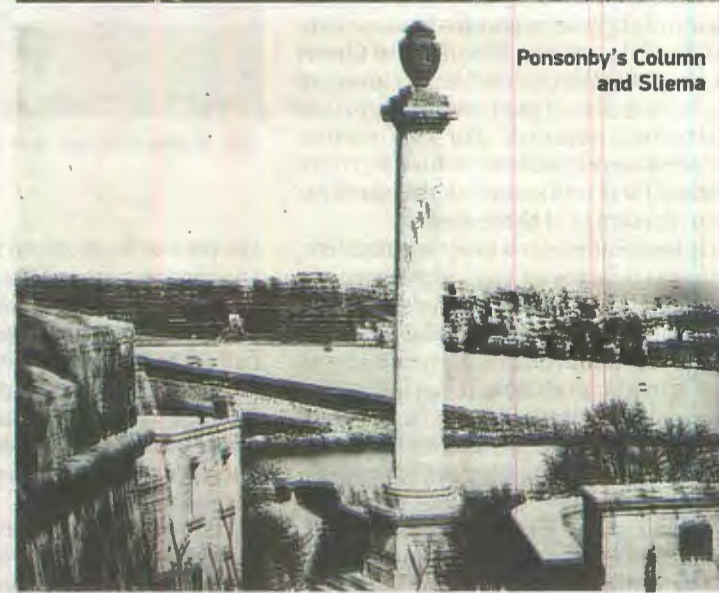
Except for the column and the building of St Paul's Anglican Cathedral in 1844, time stood still for Marsamxett until it became the direct route by sea to Sliema. A steam ferry service started in 1882, much to the consternation of the barklori (from the Italian barcaioli), the boatmen who plied the route with their dghajsas. A new Marine Police Station replaced the old one, which was both an eyesore and an encumbrance.

According to a historical summary presented to E.L. Galizia in 1886 by members of the Malta Exhibition Committee on the occasion of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, other improvements included: "a shed erected close to the spot of landing and embarkation, a shelter for passengers against sun and rain, and the wharf and approach to the old gate had been entirely remodelled; but still, the long and continuous flight of steps, leading from the landing, through the gate, up to Valletta, is a source of great inconvenience to the many people who flock daily to town from the densely inhabited village of Sliema, and to the many passengers landing from the P&O steamers which have their anchorage in the Marsamussetto Harbour.

"With a view to curing this inconvenience a project was made some years ago for erecting a lift for merchandise and passengers against the bastions; it was a private enterprise which was not carried out. A scheme, however, is now talked of for improving this entrance to Valletta, the only one of importance remaining to be



Boats hauled on the foreshore below the German Curtain



Ponsonby's Column and Sliema

remodelled, by constructing a ramp from the landing along the face of the adjoining bastion up to the centre of the German Curtain, to abut in Strada Marsamussetto, thereby allowing vehicles to run up and down this thoroughfare; the realisation of which scheme

will, no doubt, prove of great convenience to the public."

Michael Cassar is an eclectic author whose fascination with his motherland's rich heritage has led to the production of several books and articles.