

LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY



Ignominious ending for a tramcar at St Thomas Bay.



Car 22 leaves Porte des Bombes for Birkirkara.



Sir Charles Mansfield Clarke inaugurating the tramway on February 23, 1905.

Every picture tells a story (2)

# Malta's love-hate affair with the tramway



MICHAEL CASSAR

hard-working and efficient. The tramway doomed the government-owned railway. An insidious clause gave it a monopoly of electric traction within half a mile of its routes; a subsequent concession awarded by stealth – an extension to Birkirkara up the entrance to the railway station, completed the route.

Alterations to the town gates made it possible to run directly to Porta Reale. The demolition of St Anne's Gate in 1898 breached the fortifications; later, the 'hanging' inner arches at Porte des Bombes embossed with ANNO MDCCXXI and MDCCCLXXVIII, were removed for the installation of the overhead wires.

The company operated closed saloon and open cross-bench cars; both had open reversible wooden seats on the upper deck. Saloon cars seated 22 people inside (seats set longitudinally) and 30 on the roof. The interior was finished in figured oak and ash. They were painted green and white, with the national colours and 'Malta Tramways' on the rocker panel beneath the six full drop glazed windows with blinds.

The open cross bench cars, which the Maltese called gradilja (toast racks), were more basic. Canvas blinds protected passengers from the elements and dust; the conductor collected fares from the footboard.

The company laid the dust with two sprinkler cars. Tramway lines were flush with the road but the rail groove had to be constantly cleared of dust, grit and dirt to prevent derailments and secure wheel adhesion and braking. The mediocre surface made the line proud of the road and caused wheeled traffic untold harm. A comment on the verso of a postcard: "these trams rock very much on some parts of the line" suggested that travel on the upper deck was akin to being on a boat.

After an impressive start during which the first day's takings were distributed to charities, the remaining months were marred by incident and tragedy. A karozzin driver, no doubt unused



Macartney and McElroy (seventh and eighth from right) with the staff at the Marsa Depot.

to having trams hogging the thoroughfare, was killed. Two trams collided and a power cut left cars disabled. At Ghajn Dwiell a runaway tram ended in a field, killing four, including the trainee driver and injuring several.

In 1906, karozzini drivers and tramway staff went out on separate strikes, the former because their livelihood was threatened, and the latter, ironically, over wages and working conditions. The company broke the resolve of its staff by employing blacklegs. The karozzini savoured the brief respite and charged exorbitant fares during the stoppage. Overhead wires were cut with increasing regularity; some found

it hard to resist the allure of scrap copper wire. Broken or vandalised lines were repaired by a dedicated gang working from atop a wooden tower carried on a cart driven by a pair of English dray horses. A man fired shots at a tram but was released owing to insufficient evidence. Fatal accidents continued. The trams were poorly insulated; a man was electrocuted and the trolley poles were afterwards covered with wood. Before each return trip the conductor reversed the seats and turned the trolley pole; poles swung carelessly often broke balcony windows at Birkirkara. The company was the first to introduce mobile



Cross bench and saloon car at Porta Reale.

advertising for Simonds ales and stout, Sunlight and Lifebuoy, Dewar's whisky and Harvey's London Dry Gin, Lux and Veteran cigarettes, Nestlé milk food, Mermaid condensed milk, and Lancelotti's Music Emporium. Advertisements on the upper deck railing had the additional advantage of blocking lascivious gazing.

The tramway and the railway became, to quote Gerald Strickland, "two sharks choking each other to death in a fountain". The tit-for-tat over fares and revenue continued until both systems were replaced by motor buses after World War I. The tramway offered to take over the railway if allowed to run to Sliema. Two hundred employees were laid

off when the tramway service ceased in 1929; the railway chugged on until 1931. The trucks with their electric motors were separated from the bodies which ended up in fields at St Thomas Bay for conversion into summer huts. In another recurring cautionary tale, there is no record of the tramway (except for part of the power station building at Marsa) because no prescient Maltese thought it fit to preserve a couple of tramcars for posterity. John Francis Macartney died in 1913; he was buried at Ta' Braxia Cemetery, close to his home at Hamrun which overlooked the line. He bequeathed £1,000 to charities. His daughter

<b>Y 0140</b>	
<b>OUT</b>	<b>IN</b>
Valletta to Marsa Depot	Cospicua to Porte-des-Bombes
Valletta to Hamrun	G. Paula to Porte-des-Bombes
Valletta to Gurmì	Zebbug to Porte-des-Bombes
Porte-des-Bombes to Birkirkara	
Porte-des-Bombes to Zebbug	Gurmì to Valletta
Porte-des-Bombes to G. Paula	Hamrun to Valletta
Porte-des-Bombes to Cospicua	Marsa Depot to Valletta
<b>2<sup>d</sup></b>	
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The towns served by the tramway.

Dorothy Ethel Ball, who died in 2016, aged 102, maintained close links with Malta where she resided for part of the year and was an active member of the Anglican community.