

Connecting the harbour towns (1)

# Trouble with the barklori in Grand Harbour

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Lord Charles Beresford (1846-1916), after whom one of the 'Admiral' Class ferries was named.



Sigismondo Savona (1837-1908) took up the barklori cause in the twilight of his years.

After nine years at Marsamxett, the setting up of the Grand Harbour Steam Ferry Company (GHSFC), the second marine transport venture by Gustav Gollcher, Eduardo Montebello Pulis and Raffaele Polidano, ostensibly to serve the Grand Harbour, gave them an edge over the Marsamuscetto Steam Ferry Service (MSFS). Connectivity between both harbours became a reality; ferries could be interchanged to relieve others undergoing maintenance and repair.

However, compared with Marsamxett, a ferry service in Grand Harbour was fraught with difficulty; it was extremely busy at all hours, with naval and merchant ship movements and hundreds of small craft. Co-existence between the Royal Navy and mercantile community was tenuous: the Admiralty had 'owned' the harbour since Admiral Parker defined harbour waters in 1851.

Merchant shipping and local craft had limited rights of passage and berthing in naval waters and creeks; a red flag flown from Fort St Angelo during fleet movements brought shipping activity to a halt. Furthermore, the proposed landing places in Dockyard Creek were surrounded by extensive naval facilities, including the victualling yard and No.1 Dock.

Equally problematic was the large number of barklori who, in contrast with their fellows at Marsamxett, wielded enormous power. That the barklori did not enjoy public sympathy was common knowledge.

The periodical *Matteu Callus* of December 30, 1905, queried why rumours about the impending ferry service, about which it was in favour, were not being confirmed. Such a service was necessary to stimulate business between the capital and the Cottonera and to end the barklori monopoly. It sometimes took an hour to get home in all weathers, what with the time spent waiting for a *dghajsa* and the tedious row across the harbour.

All these considerations would have been on the table by the time the contract was drawn up by notary Francesco Schembri Zarb on December 30, 1905, in the presence of the same partners in the NSFBC: Gustav Gollcher, in his and his brothers James and William's names, all Olof's sons, residing in Valletta, Eduardo Montebello Pulis, born in Livorno, son of Giuseppe, and Raffaele Polidano, son of Francesco, both residents of Sliema.

The contract resembled that of 1896: a 10-year term of operation, extendable by mutual agreement; a fleet of steam launches to serve between the Marina, the Three Cities and other designated landing places; £4,000 capital issued by Gustav, Eduardo and Raffaele in the ratio of 2:1:1.

There was a significant change from the previous contract: the shares of Pulis and Polidano were subscribed by Gustav in the form of a loan at five per cent interest, hypothecated by property and shares in the NSFBC. Pulis was appointed administrator; Gollcher, treasurer, with the sole right to issue cheques and pay bills; and Polidano, manager.

Neither Gollcher nor Pulis received remuneration but Polidano drew a monthly allowance of £8. Polidano transferred to the new company, without compensation, the concessions awarded to him on July 31, 1905, for the landing places. The contract contained the usual provisions for the sale and devolution of shares, during and after the 10-year period, as decided by the partners or their heirs.

The impending construction of landing stages and the building of ferries confirmed the worst fears of the barklori. The men had already been dealt a severe blow the previous year by the tramway service; a fast steam ferry service would spell disaster.

The weekly *Malta Taghna* took up the cudgels on their behalf and advised that if they wanted public support they had to address long-standing grievances: they were unkempt, rude, proud, preferred soldier and sailor passengers, kept dirty *dghajjes*, and trips took too long because they did not always row in pairs according to regulations.

The men were advised to present a petition drawn up by a notary. *Malta Taghna* also suggested that the public boycott the ferry service and embargo passengers who betrayed the barklori. In thinly veiled incitement it was averred that since the livelihood of a large body

of workers and their families was at stake, they could easily revolt like workers had done in England, Russia and Italy.

The barklori registered en masse with notaries Cauchi and Vella of Cospicua. The petition was drawn up in Maltese and English and was presented on August 21, 1906, by Sigismondo Savona to the Lt Governor, Major General Sir Charles Barron, the head of Government, in the absence from the island of the Governor, Sir Charles Mansfield Clarke.

Savona (1835-1908) was at the end of an illustrious political and military career. When he died in July 1908, the *Daily Malta Chronicle* recalled that:

"For many years there were few figures better recognised... He had a style of dressing even of his own; his step was measured and stately. In his dress he unconsciously revealed some of the characteristics of the man. He was earnest in everything, deliberate in everything, determined in everything. Seldom was he ever seen in public except in silk hat and frock coat. His presence was commanding, and one recognised that he had a right to command. He was ever a man who had the courage of his opinions."

Savona averred that the ferry service would exacerbate the condition of 564 barklori and some 3,000 dependents whose livelihood had

already been impacted by the tramway, the discharges after the completion of the new docks at Ghajn Dwieli and the periodical absence of the Fleet from Grand Harbour. The barklori undertook to address public complaints; they also asked to be given alternative work when the ferry service started.

In the *Daily Malta Chronicle* of August 25, 'Nautilus' opined that progress was unstoppable; the writer recalled the English weavers' (the Luddites) erstwhile opposition to machinery, and averred that, rather than wait for the axe to fall, they ought, like others before them, join the P&O as sailors.

Barron told Savona that he could not rescind the Governor's decision. He regretted the likely consequences but the ferry service was being introduced for the convenience of the public.

Savona reiterated the claim for alternative work for the men, to which Barron replied that he did not believe the men would be as badly affected as was being claimed. Furthermore, he left for possible consideration (but later turned down) Savona's request for a copy of the agreement between the GHSFC and the government.

Like Borton before him, Mansfield Clarke had decided to lift the island's archaic transport network out of its age-old hibernation and vested privilege. The Governor had already wrecked the prospects of the government-owned railway by granting a licence to the electric tramway so he was unlikely to be moved by the plight of the barklori.

Unity among the men soon wavered; some wanted Savona to insist on fixed ferry times to allow them to work outside such hours, and for the ferry fare to be doubled. Savona averred that these proposals were defeatist and showed distrust in him. He insisted on new proposals being made in writing and confirmed by a notary so that he would not be subsequently accused of betrayal. Opposition fizzled out after that and even *Malta Taghna* ceased to uphold their cause.

In the meantime, the first three ferries were nearing completion on the slipway of Lorenzo Gatt at Marsa. In a sop to Cerberus (in Greek mythology, Aeneas gave Cerberus a drugged cake so as to be able to go past the three-headed monster dog who guarded the gates of Hell) the ferries were named after the three top admirals on the station: Admiral Beresford, Admiral Lambton, Admiral Bromley.

Lord Charles Beresford, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet (1905-1907), considered by many the personification of 'John Bull', had served as second-in-command to Sir John Fisher; their contrasting views on naval warfare and personal animosity was proverbial. On July 17, 1901, Fisher, who was at the Lower Barrakka Gardens watching Beresford mooring HMS *Ramillies* in Grand Harbour, decided that the movement left much to be desired, and, in a deliberate public humiliation, signalled an order to his junior to leave harbour and return "in a more seamanlike manner". Admiral Lambton was the commander of the 3rd Cruiser Squadron and Admiral Bromley was the Admiral Superintendent, Malta Dockyard.

By midsummer, the harbour was agog with excitement and rumour; it was now not a question of if but when the service would start.

**"Mansfield Clarke had decided to lift the island's archaic transport network out of its age-old hibernation and vested privilege"**

In 'Steam launches for the Grand Harbour', the *Daily Malta Chronicle* of August 13, entered the debate about the plight of the barklori who: "had hitherto carried passengers in all conditions of weather, and have ever conveyed them safely and swiftly, and at a very low charge" but were now talking of agitation and strikes.

The newspaper advised patience and caution; it would not help their cause to rush and listen to agitators as it would probably exacerbate the situation. Things were never as bad as they first seemed and "whilst feeling sorry for the hundreds of human beings who may for a time be driven to make strange shifts for a living, when the steam launches have commenced running... things will adjust themselves little by little.

The landing stage at Valletta was next to the fish market.



The Vittoriosa landing place at San Lorenzo Steps.

The *dghajjes* had a monopoly of ferry traffic in Grand Harbour until 1906.

The Barrakka Lifts saved the ferry company additional investment.



There were two landing places in Dockyard Creek: at Vittoriosa and Senglea.

(To be continued)