



The Victoria Lines trail

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The Victoria Lines is a network of fortifications built by the British Armed Forces during the second half of the 19th century consisting of a number of different elements: forts, batteries, entrenchments, searchlight emplacements and howitzer positions, and a continuous infantry line that connects them all together. They were strategically built on the edge of the Great Fault and span across the whole width of Malta; some 12 kilometres from Fomm ir-Rih in the west to Madiena in the east.

The defining element within the Victoria Lines is the infantry wall. This follows the configuration of the crest of the ridge along the Great Fault but was generally built just beneath it, to make it less conspicuous from below. The long stretches of infantry wall generally consist of a simple masonry parapet, with an average height of 1.5 metres. As such, the defensive wall may appear low when viewed from behind but being on high ground, it still overlooks anyone approaching from below.

The infantry wall was constructed primarily using stone quarried on site. Parts of the hillside, beneath the lines, were dug-up to make them steeper and, in some instances, the resulting rubble was dumped in such a way as to form an additional obstacle.

The nature of the infantry line varies along its length but in most places it consists of a sandwich-type construction with outer and inner retaining walls, with rubble-fill in between and topped by a capstone. The outer shell was finished to a smooth surface to make it more difficult for an enemy soldier to scale the wall whereas the inner shell was often left rough. The construction of other parts of the infantry wall in those areas which were the least accessible from below, tended to be more rudimentary.

In various places, although not throughout its length, the wall was surmounted by a series of musketry loopholes.

These took the form of horizontal slabs placed in such a way that a space was left between the two slabs supporting them through which the soldiers could fire their rifles. Unfortunately, almost all of these have since disappeared.

For example, photos taken when the Victoria Lines were still in use show that the infantry wall in what is now Għnien l-Għarus tal-Mosta had musketry loopholes. However, only a very short stretch of the original musketry loopholes is still extant, in the vicinity of Fort Mosta.

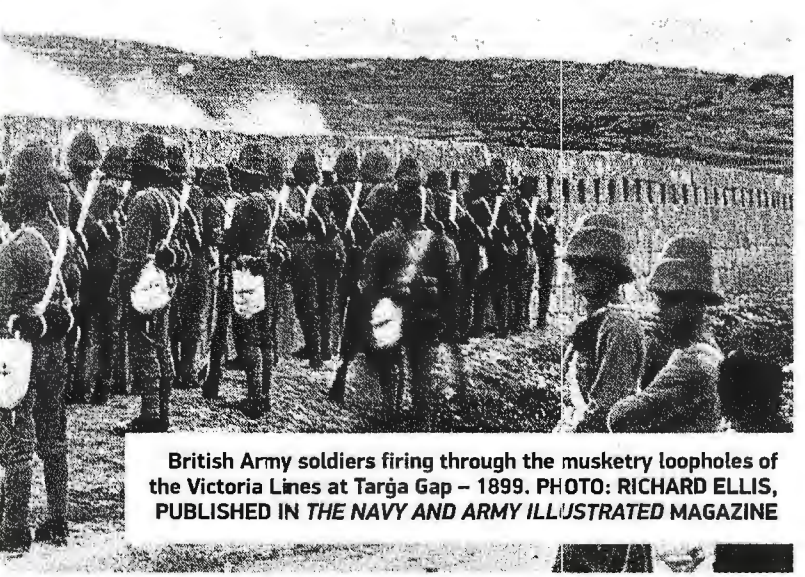
In 1997 a longer stretch of the loopholes were reconstructed next to the remaining ones. The intention was good but its execution left much to be desired. In the absence of an adequate structure



to provide proper direction and supervision, machine-cut stones were used which contrast with the original hand-cut stones. However, from a distance, they do provide an idea of what the original infantry wall with its loopholes in place looked like.

The infantry line is at its most spectacular where it crosses a number of valleys. These were bridged over by means of so-called stop-walls intended to facilitate access by the soldiers defending these positions from one side of the valley to the other, and provide them with adequate cover from behind while they could fire at the enemy.

The Victoria Lines were never put to the ultimate test of an enemy invasion and their military significance began to fade even before World War I. Nevertheless, they still provide a very interesting insight into the development of fortifications in the 19th century and,



as such, form an intrinsic part of Malta's historical heritage.

It has now been many years that the Victoria Lines have lain abandoned and time has taken its toll. Surprisingly perhaps, quite a few stretches are still in good condition but there are also places where parts of the wall have collapsed and there is even a tract which has disappeared altogether, eaten away by a quarry. Nevertheless, a walk along those parts of the Victoria Lines that are accessible is still a most rewarding experience.

The Victoria Lines provide some of the best vantage points from where to discover the Maltese countryside and have themselves become a striking feature within the landscape on which they have at times a most dramatic effect. A walk along the Victoria Lines is a unique experience which reveals the stunning beauty of Malta's

natural landscapes, offering breathtaking views.

However, at the present time, walking along various parts of the Victoria Lines is quite difficult because of overgrown vegetation and other obstacles that block the original patrol path and some sections are altogether inaccessible. This is a pity because the potential for a first-rate managed trail along the Victoria Lines is indeed substantial.

A Victoria Lines National Trail would:

- provide an exceptional pathway that cuts across Malta from coast to coast, from where the public can access and enjoy the Maltese countryside;
- offer a new and innovative tourism product serving to attract a new form of responsible, high-quality tourism;
- constitute Malta's first linear attraction to complement the existing point and area attractions;

• put Malta on the European Ramblers' map;

• ensure a greater level of protection for the cultural heritage and the landscape surrounding it from further encroachment and destruction.

The reasons for seeking to promote a national trail along the Victoria Lines are many:

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The Victoria Lines National Trail would traverse the whole island, from coast to coast, following the contour of the Great Fault, one of Malta's most prominent geological features.

The Victoria Lines themselves are an intrinsic part of Malta's historical heritage and are scheduled Grade I buildings.

The trail traverses various areas of high landscape value and areas of environmental importance, including Natura 2000 sites. It links together a variety of

landscapes: coastal, rural and urban, and it is surrounded by a multitude of archaeological and historical sites representative of different historical periods.

The trail would basically follow the original military patrol path on land which has remained government property (i.e. it does not require the requisition of private property).

A trail along the Victoria Lines is already envisaged within the relevant Local Plans.

The Rural Policy and Design Guidelines (MEPA 2014), under the heading 'Policy 1.21 - Country Pathways' specifically refer to the Victoria Lines.

The Victoria Lines National Trail has already been the subject of an in-depth academic study under the auspices of the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture at the University of Malta.

What defines the Victoria Lines is the combination of natural features and man-made structures to create a linear defensive barrier that cuts across the whole width of the island.

The individual components of the Victoria Lines, such as the forts, are interesting in themselves, but it is their linkage together into one integrated

defensive system which provides the unique character.

This is something that can be fully appreciated only if one actually walks along the Victoria Lines. Dedicated trekkers and ramblers already manage to do this despite the many current obstacles but a managed national trail would extend this experience to the wider public, both locals and tourists.

The Victoria Lines National Trail would be nothing less than a pedestrian 'highway' that cuts across Malta from coast to coast, for the enjoyment of the public, and an additional, innovative tourist attraction.

Ray Cachia Zammit is co-founder of the Friends of the Victoria Lines Trail which aims at increasing awareness of the Victoria Lines and their potential to be developed into Malta's first national trail. The immediate objective must be to secure unimpeded and safe access along the whole length of the Victoria Lines with the ultimate goal of establishing a properly managed national trail within the necessary framework to sustain it on an ongoing basis.