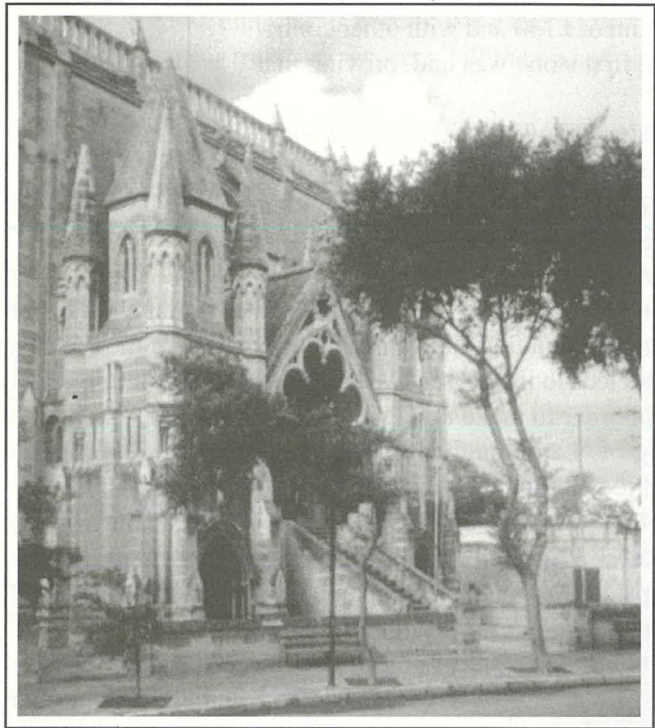


*Robert Samut Hall in Floriana
formerly known as the Methodist Church*

'The Methodist Church'

by
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**The Methodist Church in Floriana now
Robert Sammut Hall**

STORY

The year 1815 brings to mind the Battle of Waterloo, and in that same year also, British military personnel stationed on our island sent an important appeal to the Methodist Missionary Committee in London, to solicit the presence of a minister to conduct the weekly services here. The request was partially complied with in 1823. Eric H. Fawthrop wrote in his book 'The Floriana Story' – that methodism in Malta had by that time flourished so much, that among its members 118 were soldiers. Between them they hired three rooms, one in Senglea, in Valletta and in Floriana to practice their religious obligations. In August 1824 the Reverend John Keeling accompanied by his wife, arrived at the Malta Missionary Station and stayed at No: 55 Britannia Street corner with Old Bakery Street, Valletta. The building was the first and only Protestant Church in Malta until 1839, when St Paul's Anglican Cathedral was opened in Valletta.

Stone throwing incidents between the local groups and Methodist Missionaries occurred quite regularly. One such notable episode cited in the above mentioned book involving the Rev Dr William Harris Rule and Rev S.S. Wilson

took place on 5th August 1826. The latter had just finished the funeral service of the first Maltese to become protestant and a very large crowd estimated to be fifteen thousand, shouted, hooted, whistled, screamed, hurled stones and clutched at the coffin during the half-mile trip from Valletta to the grave in Floriana. Although there were no serious injuries the return trip was no less tumultuous. Apart from the prevailing state of religious affairs, the author ascribed the incompatibility of temperaments and characteristics of Keeling and Rule when put together seemed unduly provocative. Rev Rule was subsequently sent to Gibraltar, but Rev Keeling continued to battle on single-handed for some more years. A Dr Naudi was prominent as a go between tradesmen, country people and compatriots when it came to conducting the Bible Study Group and translating sermons in Maltese and Italian, the language spoken by the more educated people at the time. His aim was simply to 'exhibit the truth, preach the gospel.....without any mixture of controversy...'. During the fifty years that followed Methodism in Malta went through lean periods and extreme interest due to a number of factors, namely the sailing of Regiments to/from Malta, military regulations and the reluctance and suspicion of the Maltese Roman Catholic population to attend meetings and services. In the meantime Methodism in Malta was kept alive through class-meetings convened by laymen for soldiers and sailors.

On his arrival in Malta in 1868, the Rev W.S. Caldecott was more than fully occupied, and started by transferring formal services such as marriages to the Barracca Church (*now* the Malta Exchange) in Castille Square, Valletta. The transfer of the centre of work among servicemen took place 3 years later from Valletta to a fairly adequate premises, the Floriana Soldiers' and Sailors' Home in Piazza Maggiore (*later* the Salvation Army at Pietro Paolo Floriani Street, corner with Magazines Street), Floriana. A period of intense activity and development followed and in the absence of a proper church, Sunday services were held at the 'Recreation Room' at the Floriana Parade Ground (*now* the Independence Arena).

Several attempts were made in over 8 years by successive Methodist Ministers, to acquire the site close to the Floriana Railway Station, and also regular prayer-meetings were held until the Rev John Laverack accepted the outcome of '...the power of the prayer and providence of

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God....'. The projected erection caused considerable consternation among the local population and even petitioned against it. Plans were prepared by Mr T.M. Ellis of London for a church seating up to 450, school-rooms, hall and caretaker's quarters. The inclusive tender estimated at £3,448 and £450 architect's fees and contingencies was obtained from Contractor Emmerson. The new Floriana Methodist Church project was no exception to the rule of organising a bazaar, and to this effect an advert in The Malta Times of 10th December 1881 announced the activity. The work of ladies and friends, flower stalls, an Art gallery, an exhibition of scientific instruments, various models and curiosities generated the princely sum of £130 and with other contributions from different sources the amount of £3082 before the first stone was laid, proving that the irritating delay was a Godsend.

Senior Wesleyan Chaplain Rev John Laverack returned to Malta full of immense energy while developments were in full swing here. The second Soldiers' and Sailors' Home known as 'The Rest' was opened in Strada Cospicua in the Cottonera area, and 2 years later in 1884 another excellent property was acquired, becoming the centre of a vigorous and healthy church.

On the 16th March 1883 two eminent Wesleyan Methodist Ministers, the Rev John Kilner and Rev R.W. Allen arrived with a small party on the P & O steamer 'Sutley' to take part in the opening ceremonies of the Floriana Wesleyan Church. The Malta Times of some days earlier reported on the commanding and conspicuous position of the building on exiting from Valletta. It was the first building fitted with electric light. Mr C.E. Lamplough of London added further gifts (the pulpit) to his already generous contribution in order to make up the required amount by which time, expenditure had exceeded the original estimate. The naming of 'Lamplough Hall' was therefore very appropriate given that his children presented the font as their own present to the church.

The new church was opened on Sunday 20th March 1883 with due solemnity and a week of celebrations, with services conducted by Rev John Kilner assisted by Rev R.W. Allen, Rev J. Laverack Rev T.D. Barness with the participation of Rev D. Thom and Rev T. Greenbury. The band of the Shropshire Regiment accompanied the hearty singing during the services. For the many hundreds of servicemen there began 'The Floriana Story'.

Subsequently, there followed a period when Methodism was at last adequately equipped to cater for the spiritual and physical welfare needs of civilian and service personnel in Malta. Concerts were regularly held with admission charges being fixed at 3d and 6d (1.5c and 3c) and double charge for special occasions. Divine services on a typical Sunday were held between 10.30 am and 6.30pm with Sunday School at 2.45pm.

The year 1914 heralded the beginning of the Great World War with storm-clouds gathering over the international scene and affecting the island, with soldiers and sailors of the colonial and dominion forces wounded in the Dardanelles being hospitalized in Malta. Methodist chaplains were busy comforting the sick and dying, plying continuously between Pietà hill and the military cemetery, which services were greatly appreciated. Author Eric H. Fawthrop describes the period 1918-1919 as 'a rather frightening time' because of the emerging nationalistic feeling, culminating in civil riots of 7th June.

A couple of years later, Methodists went through a slight scare when Malta was given a self-government and the local administration tried to acquire the Floriana site. Irrespective of the ups and downs, and with the fleet in and out of port, church activities went on with a certain regularity, including a Sunday school pantomime, the social hour and many 'sing song' concerts. Services at the Floriana church were under the charge of both army and naval chaplains. The Rev. Irving Davies (1883-1953) Army and Navy Chaplain sojourned for ten years in Malta, and as he really was considered a Father in God, the countless men and women erected a plaque to commemorate his ministry in the island. The Second World War began on the 3rd September 1939, and although a decision was taken to send home all wives and children, and with other Methodist sites taking a severe battering, all work was centred on Floriana. The church had by no means escaped unscathed as a matter of fact it was unusable for a long time, however services were nonetheless maintained nearby at Connaught Home. The church roof sustained damage in four places, windows were broken and services had to be carried out against the roar of gunfire and falling bombs. The whole place remained a

most unsightly site for two years with temporary windows and patched up holes in the floor, damaged façade and steps. The church was the first one to be restored after the blitz and the re-opening on 29th April 1945 was attended by H.E. The Governor Lieutenant-General Sir Edmund Schreiber and members of his family and the Heads of Services.

Another attempt was made by the local authorities to obtain the site at Floriana for the proposed university, but once again it was discouraged.

In 1946 the smashed up stained glass windows adorning the space above the communion table, which were originally given by Australian Methodists had been sent back to Abbot of Lancaster, for a replica to be made. A generous contribution by Australian friends made their quick

return possible in 1947.(see note under references) German prisoners of war were allowed to attend and those who spoke English took part in the service under their own Pastor Dreus. Eventually they conducted part of the service in German and later singing some folk songs playing their acquired musical instruments they entertained the people at Floriana. Respect and comradeship grew and replaced the sullen and suspicious dispositions, becoming the best of enemies and friends that exchanged gifts between them in Christmas time. On bidding farewell Pastor Dreus had this to say “ We came to you as homeless weary men; you have given us the right to make this church our home. We came to you as embittered and despondent men; you have given us your trust and respect. Till the end of our lives we shall be able to tell this in our own country.”

Readers will allow me a personal reflection on these words, as I find them very similar in tone to those presumably exchanged between Paul and the prisoners with Publius, the chief man on the island, after the former's three month stay and the group's departure to Rome in A.D. 60. (vide Acts XXVIII-1,2)

Who knows how many Germans, the many many other servicemen and their families, who as Brothers in God worshipped together, joined in the music and merriment here at the Floriana Methodist Church. Of particular significance is the contribution of 35 long years and more given by the couple Mr and Mrs 'Mac' Stephens, the former taking the chair during the social hour assembly which was also called the Floriana Fellowship.

Church life and activities began to return to normality, and although much had still to be done, as for example the replacement of the organ after it had consistently refused to produce musical sounds. Yet, the general feeling was that the fellowship and family spirit that prevailed in the post- war years was equal and possibly surpassed what has gone before. However, the Naval Dockyard gradual closure that started in 1958, diminished the number of civilians but the strength and spirit of the fellowship never waned. Up to 1961, the Floriana service preserved the community belonging very much alive and was considered by the congregation as their highlight of the week

Apart from the Sunday Service, three hundred children regularly attended the Sunday School, the Music Circle met on Mondays, the Drama Group (Floriana Players) Tuesdays, the Brownies assembled on Wednesday afternoon, and while the mothers met during the Ladies' Fellowship later their tiniest children were looked after in a crèche. On Thursdays the Sunday School Teachers held preparation classes, and the Choir practiced later in the evening. The Youth Club rallied its members on every Fridays, as well as the Bible Study Group who met later. Saturdays was reserved for beach excursions during summer and to other interesting places in winter. The evening was whiled away with singing and Olde Tyme Dancing and other social functions.

The Church served also to prepare for special events and occasions, such as the '1961 Spring Fair' the proceeds which had to make good for the redecoration and refurnishing of 'Connaught Home'. The net financial intake resulted in £1,160 and the occasion was inaugurated by Lady Bingley who had incidentally passed away earlier this year (2005). The many hundreds of followers scattered far and wide across the globe, the name of 'Floriana' does not mean the suburb of Valletta, Argotti Gardens or The Mall, St Anne Street, the Granaries or Parade Ground but simply the Methodist Church as it brings them many memories of happy times. Throughout these years many owe their Christian experience of Floriana, the privilege of inheriting a great tradition, history and inspiration that served them for their own spiritual and physical welfare needs.

Towards the end of 1972 the pre 1833 encroachment terms fixed by government were due to expire, the latter therefore demanded £800² in annual rent, insisting also on other conditions which were unacceptable to the church authorities. Hence, steps were initiated to evacuate and hand over the building to government. On Friday 4th April 1975 the location now turned into a Cultural centre was inaugurated by the Hon Dr A. Buttigieg, President of the Republic. The former church is now used as a concert or seminar hall.

References and notes :

1 - Article adapted from 'The Floriana Story' by Eric H. Fawthrop. Malta Methodist Church, 1963

2 - Tonna, E.S. 'Final Focus on Floriana' 1979.

The two stained glass windows had been removed years later and now adorn St Andrews Scots Church, Valletta. This church serves members of the Union of Church of Scotland and Methodist Congregations (Presbyterians, Methodist and other Free Churches) - according to leaflet available to visitors