

Water arrives in Mellieħa 100 years ago

Jimmy Muscat

It all came to a head in November 1910 with an exchange of correspondence between Chief Engineer, Colonel F.W.Horniblow RE, for the Chief Engineer's Office, Malta Command, and the Superintendent of Works, Mr Lawrence Gatt.

At stake was the new water main from Ġhajn Tuffieħa to Mellieħa, supplying the latter village with a long-awaited, fresh drinking water supply.

These two gentlemen were faced with the problem of whether the planned lines of the new water main encroached on War Department property, in which case approval from the War

Office had to be sought. In fact it seems that only part of the pipeline actually encroached on War Department land but as the remaining portion was laid under a road maintained by the same War Department, Colonel Horniblow opined that the whole length of the pipeline was to be considered as an encroachment. Superintendent Gatt had no alternative but to refer the whole matter to the Crown Advocate who in turn objected to Colonel Horniblow's proposal and advised the Superintendent to inquire if the Colonel had any special reason for his suggestion.

This matter lingered on into March 1911 when it was decided that, since the whole road in question was maintained by the War Department, notice had to be duly given to it by the Superintendent of Public Works before the road was broken up. Furthermore, the same Superintendent had to devise ways and means of determining permanently which parts of the pipeline constituted an encroachment in order to avoid any future complications.

Tenders

On 16 May 1911, a call for tenders was issued for the construction of a water service tank at Mellieħa. Superintendent Gatt wrote to the Assistant Lieutenant Governor giving him the specifications and conditions for the work in question. The estimated cost of the whole project on the tank or reservoir was £1220 and tenders had to be presented within 15 days. A deposit of £3 had to accompany each tender and a final report on the received tenders had to be completed within 10 days of the closing date. The tenders for this work were issued on 19 May 1911.

In a communication dated 19 July 1911, Superintendent Gatt forwarded to the Assistant Lieutenant Governor further specifications and conditions, this time for the excavation of trenches for the Mellieħa water supply, which work was estimated at £71. Tenders had to be presented within 15 days and a report on them had to be drawn within 6 days of the closing date. These tenders were issued on 21 July 1911.

The trenches to be excavated in the streets of Mellieħa and near the new service tank were about 2000 yards long and had to be two feet wide and from two to four feet deep, with hand holes at given intervals to allow fitters to joint the pipes. The laying and jointing of pipes were to be carried out by the department and trenches with lengths of pipes that were laid and tested were to be filled in by the contractor, after receiving the go ahead from the officer in charge of the work.

Special precautions had to be taken while filling in the trenches. Only sand, fine material and small chippings were to be used up to 6 inches above the pipes and then no large stones exceeding 20 pounds in weight could be used to top up the rest of the trench.

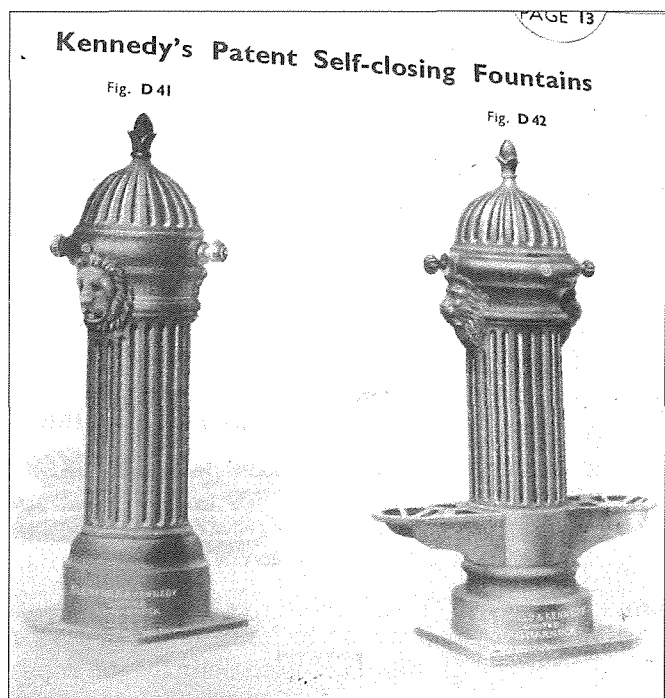
The contractor was bound to start work within four days from the date of an order from the officer in charge and he had to provide the required number of miners and workmen, as directed by the Superintendent of Public Works, within 24 hours. The contractor could start work at different places but he or his representative had to be on the spot all the time to supervise the work in progress. Payment by the Office of Public Works was to be made monthly at the rate of 75% of the value of work performed. The contractor had to pay a penalty of 1 Shilling a day per miner or workman who failed to turn up for work.

Other Correspondence

On 29 August 1911, contractor Carmelo Camilleri of Rabat wrote to the Superintendent of Public Works asking to be relieved of his tender for the excavation of trenches for the Mellieħa water supply because of the sudden illness and eventual death of a relative who was in charge of these works.

One week later, the Director of Contracts informed him that his petition could not be accepted. On 8 September Camilleri wrote again, this time to the Lieutenant Governor, to beg for a reconsideration of his request. However, by a resolution dated 16 September, the Lieutenant Governor turned down Camilleri's request for an 'exemption from his obligations' and informed him 'that the Government was not prepared to alter the previous decision'.





In another communication to the Lieutenant Governor, dated 31 July 1911, Superintendent Gatt forwarded an indent for the supply of water fountains required by the Water Works Branch of his department in connection with the water supply to Mellieħa.

His request was for 7 pillar, self-closing, water lion fountains, at a cost of 40 Shillings (£2) each. These fountains were ordered by the Crown Agents' Office for the Colonies in London from Messrs. Glenfield and Kennedy Ltd, Kilmarnock, and were to be shipped to Malta towards the end of August 1911. However, due to a large number of water fittings in hand at the factory, they were delayed and eventually reached Malta, for use in Mellieħa and St. Paul's Bay, on board the SS. Asturian in November of that year.

Inauguration Day

Eventually, by June 1912, all the necessary preparations to furnish Mellieħa with water were ready. On Sunday, 2 June, exactly 100 years ago this month, Governor Henry M. Lesley Rundle, together with his friend Field Marshal Lord Kitchener and a host of prominent people, among them the parish priest of Mellieħa Rev. Carlo Cortis, the Crown Advocate, the Postmaster General, the Director of Public Instruction, the Receiver General, the Superintendent of Police, the District Medical Officer, the General Commanding Royal Artillery, and many others, were at Mellieħa for this inauguration.

A carpeted dais, close to the imposing arched ExVoto doorway leading to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mellieħa, was prepared to accommodate the Governor, Lord Kitchener and other distinguished guests.

The small village of Mellieħa was all beflagged for the occasion and a marquee was erected just in

front of the Police Station in the centre of the square, today *Misraħ Iż-Żjara tal-Papa*. Inside this tent dainty tables were prepared with all sorts of delicacies to refresh the distinguished guests who had come a long way to Mellieħa to witness this event.

Addressing the gathering, Superintendent Gatt said that the 3500 inhabitants of Mellieħa had long awaited this occasion. Now they would be relieved from the anxiety, trouble and expense caused to them in the past by the lack of water. They would now have water in their homes, farms and public streets and would no longer toil to carry buckets, jars and casks from the Mellieħa Spring half way down the hill.

He added that before this whole project materialised, the Government had tried to bore several shafts in search of water but to no avail. He went on to give an account of all the works involved and explained how water to Mellieħa was being supplied, by gravitation, through a five-mile cast-iron main laid from Bir Nuħħala spring at Bingemma which is 140 feet higher than Mellieħa. Water would also be pumped from the Ghajn Tuffieħa spring to supplement this supply especially in summer, while the surplus water reaching Mellieħa in winter would be run into a reservoir of over half a million gallons capacity, enough water for the people of Mellieħa for three months.

The work consisted in the laying of 5-inch, 4-inch and 3-inch cast iron pipes, the construction of a pumping station capable of lifting 120 000 gallons a day to a height of 300 feet and a reservoir. The cost of the whole operation was £5000 out of an estimate of £9680, which also included an extension of the water supply to St. Paul's Bay. Superintendent Gatt ended by thanking Vincenzo Mercieca, who was in charge of the work, and then invited the Governor to inaugurate the project.

On his part Governor Rundle expressed his great satisfaction at being able to open the works completed by the Works Department. He praised Superintendent Gatt for overcoming all difficulties and augured that all neighbouring villages would soon enjoy such a service.

He then thanked Lord Kitchener, who had postponed his departure for Egypt in order to be present, and felt sure that the people of Mellieħa would in future remember the name of that distinguished guest who had honoured them with his presence. Throughout these speeches the villagers were eagerly listening and watching, ending with an outburst of applause to express their happiness.



An Unexpected Shower

A jet of water had been put up in the village square not too far from the carpeted dais while a flower-decorated apparatus had been arranged to turn it on. Governor Rundle then walked from the dais to this apparatus and with a smile, perhaps realising what was to follow, gave one twist and the water shot high into the air. Most of those present, including the Governor and Lord Kitchener, received a warm shower, but they took it in good spirit as a sign that the water would never run dry.



As the jet of water rose in the air, Parish Priest Cortis, who had also worked so hard for the fulfilment of such a dream, blessed the new supply and after thanking the Governor, in the name of the people of Mellieħa, both for the new water supply and for his presence, requested that such an interesting ceremony should be transmitted to future generations by a Latin inscription on marble, to be fixed in a prominent place in the same square.

When the ceremony was over, the Governor and Lord Kitchener soon left Mellieħa by motor car amid great applause, with the local Vittoria Band playing *God Save the King*. The other guests refreshed themselves at the marquee and left later at will. During the afternoon the band played a musical selection fitting the occasion, which had been ably handled by the District Police Inspector Vella and his staff.

When we look back at the good work done 100 years ago by responsible and hard working people like Superintendent Gatt, perhaps few of us have ever noticed or bothered to ask about the Latin inscription on the rectangular marble tablet fixed in a discreet corner in Misraħ iż-Żjara tal-Papa.

Surely we owe more than that to our forefathers who left us such a treasured commodity. Being its 100th anniversary, a new commemorative memento with perhaps an old Lion water pump put in place, together with an adequate translation in English and Maltese of the Latin inscription, would be a fitting way to remember such an important inauguration.

