

LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY

EXTRACTS FROM *CONNECTING THE HARBOUR TOWNS O. F. GOLLCHER & SONS 1897-1959*



The ferry skirts destroyer flotillas in Sliema Creek.



Matchbox buses at Porta Reale.



The companies' buses at the Ferries.

The ferries' long goodbye



MICHAEL CASSAR

The slow and painful decline of the harbour ferry service began with the introduction of motor bus transport after World War I when former Royal Army Medical Corps ambulances were converted into 'American' style 'matchbox' buses. It was at Sliema that buses demonstrated the disadvantages of a ferry service whose landing places were far from one's final destination, and which was subject to the vagaries of weather.

With a bus terminus on the level at Porta Reale, the trip to Sliema could be broken at dedicated fare stages closer to home, a convenience that was impossible by ferry. To aggravate matters for the ferries at Sliema, buses parked next to the landing stages. The National Steam Ferry Boat Company (NSFBC) augmented revenue by selling space on the corrugated roofs of its landing stages for adverts in bold white lettering for C.H. Bernard and Sons of Harwich, Portsmouth United Beer and British-American Dry Cleaning.

There was a dearth of investment in the inter-war period, and both companies decommissioned some of the older ferries; the ferries had been there for as long as people could remember, and, compared to the buses – an innovative (for Malta) form of transport – had lost their lustre, albeit being cheaper to run and maintain with fewer employees.

The dirty, coal-fired, wooden ferries were an anachronism in the 1920s when diesel engines had already been installed on the Gozo lateen boats (*dghajjes tal-latini*). Competition from the buses and inter-company rivalry may have precluded similar conversions, although Emily Phad a Kelvin K4 diesel engine by the time it was broken up.

In 1926, after an erratic start, two companies inaugurated scheduled bus services from Valletta to Sliema and St Julian's. It was a critical year for the ferries, and the government addressed complaints about delays and poor service by appointing a commission of enquiry to make new regulations. The long-standing rivalry between the NSFBC and the Marsamuscetto Steam Ferry Service (MSFC) of the Mattei family exacerbated problems. It was a different situation in Grand Harbour where the Grand Harbour Steam Ferry Company (GHSFC) had a monopoly of ferry services during the heyday of the Mediterranean Fleet.

The report of the Ferries Commission, which was published on September 12, 1926, recommended an increase in the early morning/late afternoon time window for workmen's fares, which were also available to students on presentation of an official pass. Longer hours were allowed on Sundays and public holidays, smoking was prohibited in the saloons, dogs had to be kept on a leash and passengers could ask for the saloon windows to be closed.

"It was at Sliema that buses demonstrated the disadvantages of a ferry service whose landing places were far from one's final destination, and which was subject to the vagaries of weather"

There were ad hoc regulations for Marsamxett Harbour; crossings had to take six minutes, and ferries had to leave the landing stages in turn. There was to be a clock for public display on board and three ferries (instead of two) could be used. Ferries ran between 5.45am and 9pm. From June 1 to September 30.

Each company was allowed to run up to 9.30pm on alternate days. The ferries ran from 5.45am to 8.30pm between October 1 and May 31. In winter, each company was allowed to finish earlier at 8pm on alternate days. The waiting time for the last ferry at the landing stage was not to exceed six minutes.

On Sundays and public holidays the ferries were allowed to run up to 10pm in summer and 9pm in winter. The time window for the half penny workmen's fare was extended from 7am to 7.45am and from 4.30pm to 5.45pm, instead of 5.30pm.

When the regulations were amended in February 1929, MSFS manager Alessandro Mattei claimed they discriminated against his company, threatened to drive him out of business and create a monopoly. On July 21, 1930, Mattei advised the Governor he felt "in duty bound to bring to your knowledge the disastrous way in which ferry service is being performed". He averred that the new regulations

had abolished the long-standing equitable practice of service by turn adopted in 1919 after a report by a government commission, and reiterated in 1926 when "fresh and more stringent regulations were enacted as regards the time limit of the trip, but not the least alteration was made as to the service by turn". He pointed out that the new "regulations were contrary to the spirit of the police laws to which they were intended to give execution. In fact, collisions became more frequent and the safety of passengers was greatly jeopardised. Moreover, to make things worse, a route has been allotted to my ferries which I calculate to have been the cause of the present trouble and ruin of my concern.

"This route, if in a way could be considered convenient when HM's ships are at anchor, is not justifiable in the least when the ships are away and the harbour presents no congestion, unless such regulations were intended to give undue advantage to the National Steam Ferry Boat Coy. over my ferries.

"Incidentally, it would not be out of place to remark that my ferries' trip is much longer than that followed by the other company, and yet the same time limit has been fixed for both. In reality, it may be safely stated that the service is being performed with three ferries only, in as much as both ferries leave the pier

at one and the same time, thus both piers remain without any ferry for a considerable time.

With regard to the use of an extra ferry, Mattei added that even if it was "true that they (three launches) were introduced to secure greater safety in the service through congested waters, they forced my firm to do the same, this when, since 1919, four launches were sufficient to cope with whole travelling public from Valletta to Sliema and vice versa. Therefore, I do not see the reason why the service could not be run with four launches, instead of six, two on each side, considering that much of the transport traffic has been absorbed by the ever increasing motor competition.

"The consequence of the above state of confusion is not only the increased danger to the travelling public, but the running down of the only local transport industry which survived since 1884 (1882 actually), and is kept going only through a cut-throat and ruinous competition, which, in the long run, shall force one of the two contending parties to close down, and bring about the consequences of sheer monopoly."

Mattei asked for the appointment of a commission of experts with powers to examine both companies' books, and study the current situation with a view to reverting to the two-ferry system and "make suggestions as to the best means to remedy the lamented state of affairs".

On September 29, the Officer Administering the Government informed Mattei that his claims had been given careful consideration but "His Excellency has ascertained that, under the present arrangements, the public is enjoying a faster and cheaper



Departure by turn at Marsamxett.

service, that causes for complaint have practically disappeared, and that, generally speaking, the interests of the travelling public are properly safeguarded. In these circumstances His Excellency does not consider it advisable to take any steps that might disturb an arrangement which has brought a marked improvement of the steam ferry service."

Mattei reiterated his disappointment on October 9; he noted ruefully that the changes introduced in 1926 had been revoked three years later by the same panel of experts. Section - 18, 'Ferries', in the report vindicated him:

"While not strictly bearing on the question of motor transport, your committee considers that the present running of the ferries from Sliema to Valletta is unsatisfactory. There is a 'war' in respect of fares between the two companies running the ferries, and, if series of tickets are taken, the fares are as low as a farthing for the single journey. This is not on a sound economic basis, and is aimed at effecting an elimination of the rival service.

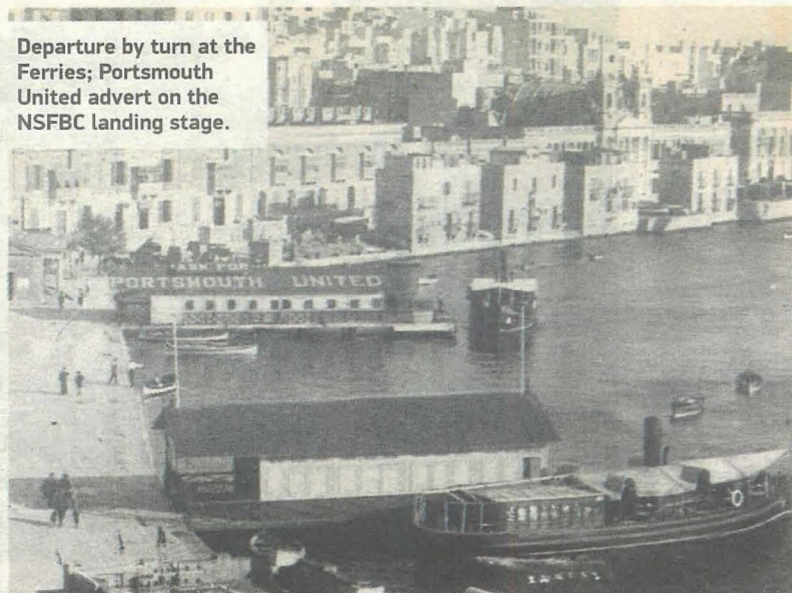
"The practice of each of the rival ferries leaving at the same time, instead of at intervals, is not in the public interest. Some pressure should be brought to bear to bring to an end a 'war' between rival companies, which will ultimately end in the elimination of one of the companies, when fares would no doubt be increased to recover the losses sustained in the interval of intensive competition."

In 1933 the government relented, and the ferries reverted to departures from landing stages in turn; the situation had verged on the comic with the public having had to put up "with the absurdity of seeing two ferries charging 1/4d fare if a dozen tickets were taken at a time... leave at the same time, whether the other was full or empty, instead of having a quicker service, through the ferries leaving their respective landing places alternatively".

(To be continued. The first parts of this series of articles were published on August 18, October 20, November 3 and 17.)



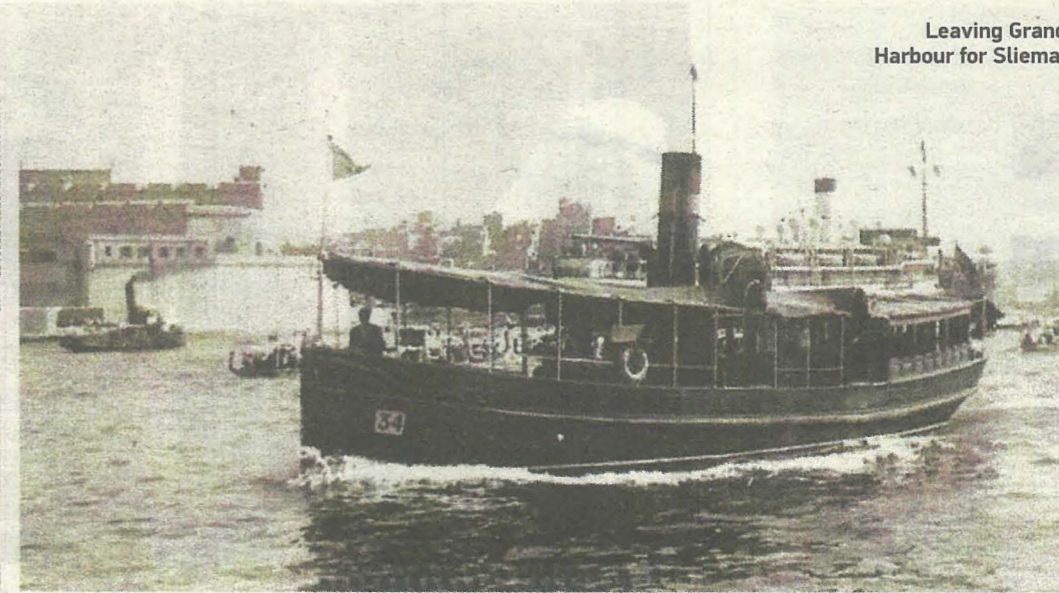
An early matchbox bus at the Ferries.



Departure by turn at the Ferries; Portsmouth United Improved on the NSFBC landing stage.



Sliema Motor Bus Co. and BMC buses at Porta Reale.



Leaving Grand Harbour for Sliema.