

Feature

Transport in Malta in the early years



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In this article we shall take a look at the first part of the history of transport in Malta. In the past before roads existed, people would walk to work through path ways made in fields and valleys.

Trade would be carried out by a number of salesmen walking with buckets on their heads filled with their products for sale. In Valletta people called the "pastaz" would carry basket loads of merchandise from the market, to the homes of the wealthy.

Transportation was carried out mainly by donkeys, mules and horses. During the time of the Knights, the Auberges used to have stables for sheltering horses of the community. In earlier times, several horses served as part of the islands defence. The animals were used for carrying heavy material hung on both sides of their back. The public would also ride on horse back on occasions such as during the 'possession' of the Bishop who would ride a white horse from the Dominican friars in Rabat to Mdina. Artists such as Bellanti, Brocktorff and Schranz are noted to have painted horse drawn carts and wagons to remind us of our past.

Soon carts pulled by horses and donkeys, began to flourish in our streets and many troughs could be found for animals to drink. With the advent of the British, the number of horse riders increased, and the need arose to develop the 'rental' industry. There were several carts that were used for various purposes including those for work and the transportation of products. This also created work for those who were able to work iron and wood for such carts.

Carts were made with two long shafts that were tied to the animal with a breeching dee and saddle. On the tail board they would put the load. The wheels had a hub at the centre with spokes, and between each spoke there were felloes reinforced with felloe plates. Carts were often tailormade to suit the load they carried such as the cart with the water tank, that had a spout at the end and would transport well water to villages.

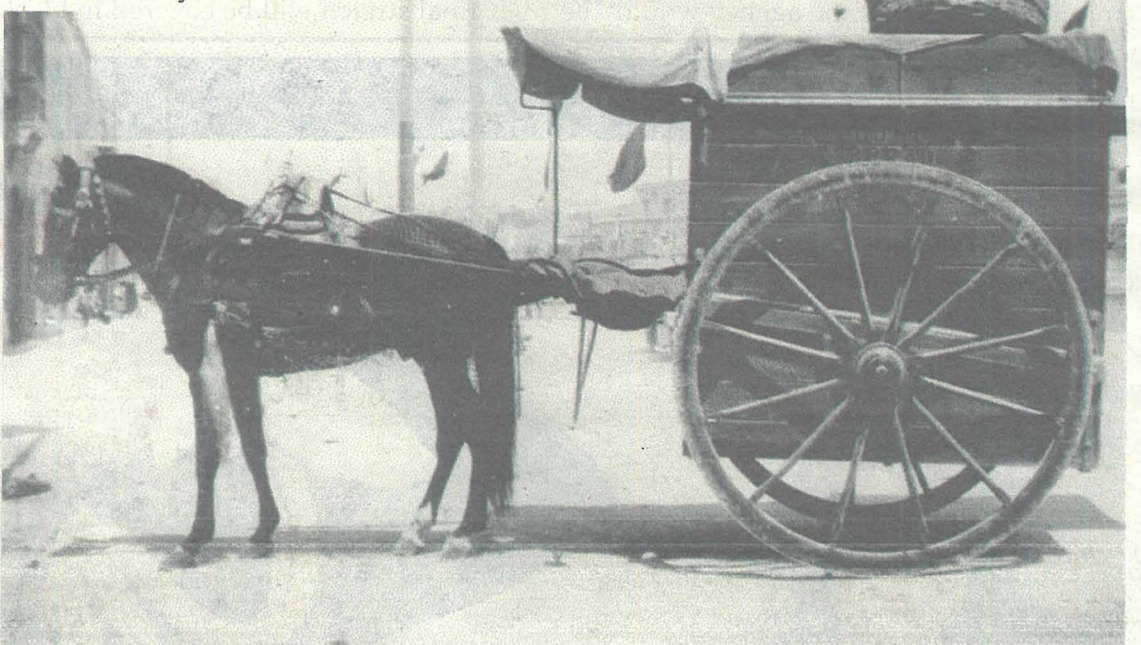
The Kaless (caleche) was used at the time of the Order and was often the property of nobles who lived in Mdina and other places. The kaless was made of thick strong wood with leather strips, and the wheels had a thick iron ring attached to the timber. The cabin had a stool to sit on. It was painted black or dark green and sometimes panelled with the coat of arms of the owner. It was drawn by a mule or horse and guided on foot by a man who kept one hand on the post and the other on the reins. Worthy of note is that Grandmaster de Villhena in 1724, passed an order forbidding this mode of transport to enter Valletta due to the noise it made, so had to stop near the Auberge d'Italie at the top of Merchants street.

The carriage (karozzella) was another horse-drawn mode of transport. A fine example is the one used by Grandmaster Hompesch (1744 - 1805) which today can be found in the Palace Armoury in Valletta. This is a luxury Berlin coach dating from the



The karrozzin

Horse drawn bread cart courtesy of the vassallohistory website



1780s and was formerly decorated in gold on the exterior and green velvet on the interior. The carriage was heavy however and was slow to move. The Bishop of Malta had a carriage pulled by four horses and the Inquisitor had one, pulled by two horses. At the time there were also black carriages which transported parish priests. These remained in use for funerals, baptisms and weddings. They were often decorated with white flowers and during feasts, the horses of the 'parilia' (feast) wore a blue feather. Till the 1930s, the bishop would use a carriage to enter St John's Co-Cathedral with a coachman and two varlets in uniform. Although it resembled the parish priests' carriage it had more luxurious upholstery.

Over time another type of carriage emerged, the Landeau or Lando as it was known. It was more elongated than the normal carriage, with closed doors and windows. One can see the Lando in old photos taken during the bishop's entrance to an event, or

during the visit of the Duke of York in 1901. Two other 'karozelli' (carriages) are the open wagonettes similar to the Irish cart, like a carriage without a roof, and the Phaeton (Fiton) with open seating with a long bench that could carry more than one passenger. The Phaeton had four wheels and was used for informal outings.

We also find the 'xaretti' which were used for outings, including the 'gabjolin' with three springs. Sometimes it was rented by a police inspector to go to court. During the First and Second World War in Malta, the firm J.E. Mortimer & Co. would use such vehicles to transport soft drinks.

In the year 1856 an advert was issued for local companies to buy shares in the omnibus service which was to transport people to several destinations. This was to be stationed in different places around the island where one could make use of this service. In October 1856 the first omnibuses came to Malta from England, imported by Vincenzo Attard

from Lija, who used to park them in Casa Leoni. These were big vehicles and could not pass through the arches of the monument at Port de Bombe (Bombi) in Floriana and Valletta. In 1861 the government began to subsidize the omnibus company to carry mail. There was also, the Sliema Omnibus service, in 1889 which was a service between Sliema and St Julians, but went out of service in 1890. In 1893 the omnibus services were bought by the company Mamo Mompalao but the service started to decline by the beginning of 20th century.

It is worth noting that in 1942 due to the rationing of petrol, those companies which owned an omnibus began to use them again, such as Schembri's Omnibus, that shuttled between Castille and Birkirkara.

I'd like to thank Mr. Guido Lanfranco for his book - *L-istorja tat-transport f'Malta* which provided most of the information I used in this article. A book very well documented!