

News

Transport in Malta in the early years (part 2)



**Fr Hermann
Duncan**

In this article, we will take a look at the second part of the history of transport in Malta. In 1857, a Maltese company requested permission to import the first 'karrozzin' (horse-cab) to Malta. These were very similar to the Irish cart but later came to resemble Spanish and Italian carts.

The cab was beautiful, light and elegant and was a far cry from those noisy and heavy 'kalessi' (caleches) of the past. The roof had a fringe that rested on four pillars. Two front facing shiny lanterns would illuminate the darkness.

The British services would rent these cabs to get around Malta. The cabs used to be stationed at terminals or close to churches or police stations. In 1894 cabs began to operate in Gozo and were often hired for funerals. They were used until the first world war when taxis came into use and soon disappeared from use in 1920.

Between the years 1876 and 1879, a British company named London Malta Railway Company Ltd made an agreement with the Maltese government to bring a train to Malta. In 1880, an English architect drew up a report and released statistics on how many people entered Valletta and the profits were calculated. Shortly afterwards, they started preparing the land for the laying of railway tracks. On 28 February 1883 the first operational train was inaugurated by Archbishop Mons Scicluna. Throughout the lifetime of the train service in Malta, there were ten locomotives in use.

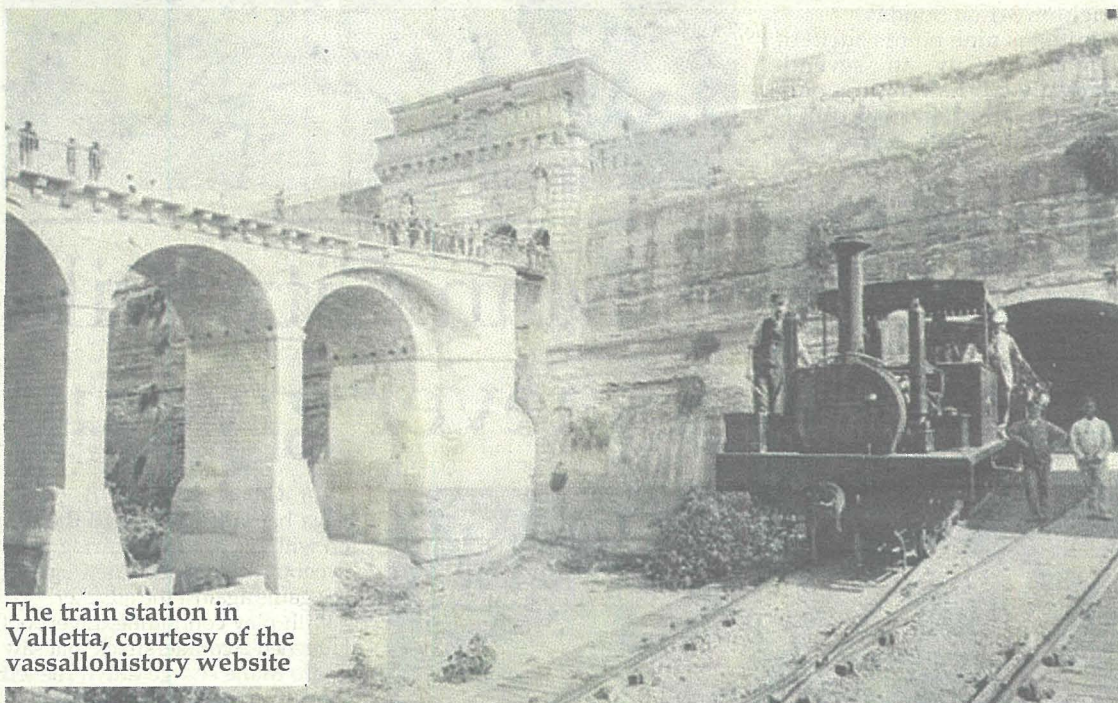
On 23 February 1905, Malta saw the first tram in operation near the Marsa Power Station. Mons Grech blessed the enterprise and Governor Mansfield Clarke turned on the switch to inaugurate the tram line. The rails were wide and there were two classes of tram. They had planned to run through Mosta but this did not materialise. Sadly, seven months later tragedy struck when a tram travelling from Paola to Cospicua derailed by accident and crashed into a wall, ending up in a ditch. Tragically, four people died and around twenty were injured.

The same company also built the lift that would transport people from Customs House by the sea in Valletta up 196 feet to the Upper Barrakka gardens. The inauguration took place on 17 December 1905. The service operated for 70 years. Finally, in January 1975, the manager and the contractor's jobs were terminated as profits had declined drastically.

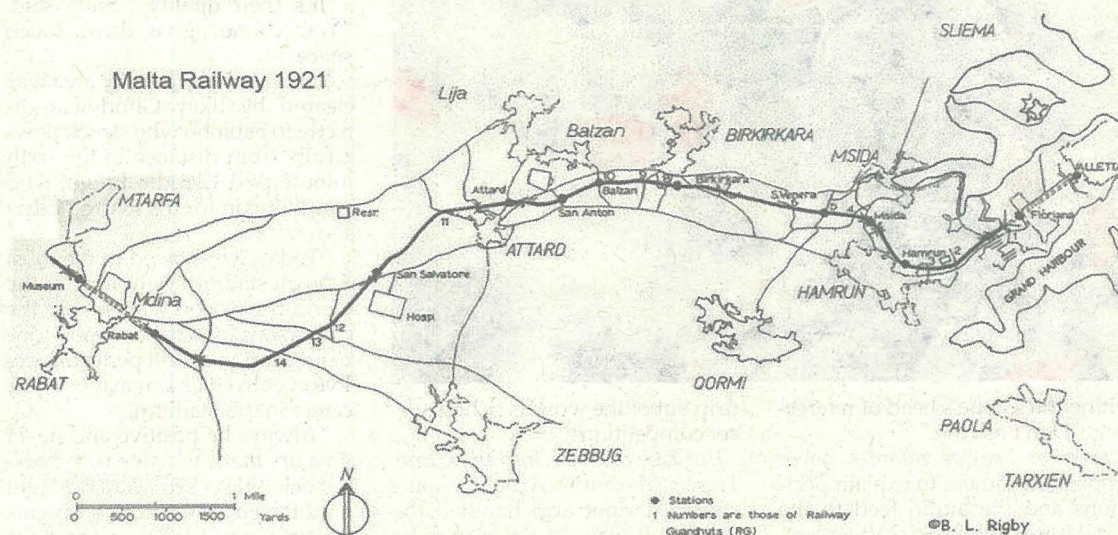
In 1902, the first cars began to



The train station in Hamrun, courtesy of the vassallohistory website



The train station in Valletta, courtesy of the vassallohistory website



The train route of Malta in 1921, courtesy of the vassallohistory website

appear in Malta, one of the owners being the Marquis Apap Testaferrata from Żejtun. The car used kerosene lamps as headlights. Three years later, route buses began. In 1905, a certain Mr Spiller was granted permission to

import the first bus to run between Valletta and St Andrews where there was a British military and naval base, and transport was essential for the officers. Slowly, the popularity of the buses began to affect the train

service. In time, due to the high maintenance cost of keeping the trains running, the service was stopped. The last train voyage took place on 31 March 1931 between Rabat and Valletta.

In 1921, a public transport com-

pany was formed. It was known as the Cottonera Motor Bus Company. Its president began giving licences to operate from Cottonera to Valletta. Their buses were powered by American Chevrolet engines and Ford V8 engines, which were mounted on a frame which had a wooden body, made by local carpenters called 'bus body builders'. During this period, there was a great demand for local carpenters to increase the number of buses.

Years later, in 1929, public transport regulations were enforced, such as those regulating dimensions, colour types and the engine capacity that had to be used. By 1930, there were 385 buses with route licences. Unfortunately, many companies were liquidated and thus every owner had to work on his own initiative.

Finally, in 1931, the Traffic Control Board was formed. The board managed to enforce discipline and control schedules and also introduced new routes. Each bus route had a different colour and bus owners were very proud of their vehicles.

After the 1971 general election, there was a reorganization of the public transport. A study was finalized and a decision was taken whereby the bus routes would be amalgamated into one group so that every owner would earn the same amount of money from every bus.

In 1973, three groups were formed, each under the control of a committee. Group A used a green colour (Bormla), Group B used a red colour (Birkirkara) and Group C a white colour with a blue stripe (Mellieha).

Two years later, in 1975, the buses were all sprayed green like those of Group A. Finally, in 1977, after a long period of turmoil and competition between bus owners, all routes began operating as a single group once again. A centralized office was opened and named Public Transport Association (ATP) under the control of a committee. Until July 2011, the ATP handled 508 buses. Following this, Arriva started operating new buses and continued to operate until the end of 2013.

On 1 January 2014, the government created a company called Malta Public Transport Services Limited, which began operations instead of Arriva. The following year, in 2015, another company started operating named Auto-buses Urbanos de Leon, which till today is the public transport service in Malta.

Much more can be written on the subject of transport in Malta but I have limited myself to the major developments of transport in our country.

I would like to acknowledge Mr Guido Lanfranco from whose book 'L-Istorja tat-transport f'Malta' a lot of interesting information was taken, and also the site *vassallomalta.com* with particular reference to their page on 'Maltese History & Heritage'.

Fr. Hermann Duncan is a Carmelite Friar at the Carmelite Priory in Balluta