



# An ISLAND CELEBRATES

Flags are flying on Gozo, as usual, but this year they include a reference to Valletta's Capital of Culture status. Well, Gozo also has more than enough culture so as well as celebrating carnival we are contemplating the delights of taking a break and exploring the island's charming town and country sites. As food and feasting play an important part at carnival we talked to Magro Brothers' new CEO Chris Magro and on page six there are

some delicious recipes for sweet and savoury treats.

As Gozo gears up for the big parades we go back to Carnival at the time of the knights. And, if you are wearing a mask to wear during the celebrations, make sure you choose the right character.

Until our next Gozo pullout in August, when we will be celebrating all aspects of summer on this wonderful island, we hope you enjoy the coming months.

Nicky

# From the VERY BEGINNING

*Love it or loathe it, there has been a carnival in Malta for 443 years and the tradition doesn't look as if it will die out any time soon.*

Its traditions of masks, both beautiful and grotesque, parties, balls, colourful floats and costumes and outlandish humour and satire, all presided over by the far-larger-than-life King Carnival, were there in some way from the beginning, and have been adopted and adapted to suit current sentiment, and legislation, for centuries.

As with many aspects of local culture and habits, we have the Knights of Malta to thank for this particular revelry, specifically Grand Master Piero de Ponte. Unsurprisingly, since the knights were originally based in Victoria, the first festivities were held there. In the week before Ash Wednesday, some knights played games and took part in various skilled tournaments and pageants.

But their frolics were too much for the Grand Master who insisted that some of their banquets and masquerades were excessive and lead to fights and abuse, which did not benefit members of a religious community, such as they were. Displays became limited to the type of tournaments and training that would equip them for fighting the Turks.

Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette also had to curtail the knights' behaviour. In 1560, they decorated their Order's ships, which were moored in Grand Harbour because of bad weather. La Valette, who had allowed the people to wear masks, which was against the law at any other time of year, did not approve of the number of masked guests invited to celebrate on board the ships, with more music and dancing than had ever been seen before.

Masks have been an issue during Carnival for centuries; as has mockery and micky taking. A ban, in 1639, on women wearing masks or even taking part in balls in the knights' auberges, on pain of being publicly whipped, was instigated along with one forbidding anybody to



Main Guard Carnival 1882

wear a costume depicting the devil. These bans angered most people who blamed them on a certain Father Cassia, a Jesuit who was Grand Master Giovanni Paolo Lascaris's confessor. As a result a group decided to ridicule the Jesuits, with one dressing up as a Jesuit with offensive words written on his back and the others playing scoundrels 'beating' him without mercy.

When the Grand Master heard of this he ordered the arrest of a knight, Girolamo Selvatico, from Padua, who was believed to have been the ring leader. But the incident caused havoc. Young knights attacked the Jesuit College and used force to help Girolamo escape from St James Cavalier. They also demanded that the Jesuits be expelled from Malta. They were and their church was closed until things died down.

For an order with an ethos of respectful sanctity the knights of all ranks certainly

made the most of carnival, although in 1664 celebrations were muted as they were mourning the death of Grand Master Raphael Cotoner. But, in 1678 the knights were again involved in scandalising some of the Maltese, prompting Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner, who himself was not easily shocked to take action, probably because the complaints came from the Inquisitor Ercole Visconti.

Two days into the celebrations, in 1679, Paolo Testaferrata, depositary of the Inquisition was insulted for no good reason by two masked knights named Saraceni and Gori. The Inquisitor complained to the Grand Master who insisted an apology should be enough to prevent any trouble and Saraceni went, with another two knights to apologise to Testaferrata, under the excuse that he had not recognised him. Not surprisingly, he also paid his respects to the Inquisitor.

Several Inquisitors came down heavily

on the knights' enjoyment of Carnival, sending spies to watch them and reporting any miss behaviour to the Grand Masters. In fact, Ramon Despuig, who was Grand Master from 1736 to 1741 was even asked to dedicate himself to the Order's reform and, although there were knights whose conduct was certainly unbecoming, he did little about it other than comment that he did not know what was happening on the island, and arrest and expel a few young knights whose carnival exploits were unacceptable.

But a lighter view was taken by Grand Master Marc Antonio Zondadari who introduced a new game to the celebrations the *Kukkanja*, and the site where the first pole stood can still be seen today. There would also have been great excitement when, on the Grandmaster's signal, hoards of spectators poured onto the square to seize as many of the ham joints, strings of sausages and even live animals that had been concealed near the guard house under tree branches full of leaves. This was because the people were allowed to keep whatever they were able to grab and carry away with them. And such items would have been prizes indeed.

By 1730 parades were taking place. These were led by the Grand Master's carriage, with the cavalry marching on either side to the beat of drums. A procession with open carts and carriages, decorated by the people followed – an obvious forerunner of today's cavalcade of floats.

Much more muted versions of carnival were celebrated in the 19th century but things livened up during the British period, when carnival became a vehicle for themes based on sharp satire and floats lampooning politicians and unpopular government edicts. It was only in 1926 that carnival came to be staged almost entirely in Valletta and Floriana, although other villages hold their own celebrations, especially Victoria and Nadur, in Gozo.

Carnival came into its own in Gozo in 1952. The island has its own floats and parades, which take place mostly in the main square in It-Tokk, Victoria. Gozo's carnival is an autonomous version of the festivities, and has its very own character, based more on the sentiments and traditions of those who organise it and the hundreds who prefer to enjoy carnival on Gozo.

The contrasting carnival of Nadur, however, doesn't follow the official standards, and has no committee or organisers regulating it. It is far more of a free for all. It also has a reputation for being somewhat dark, with noticeably sinister tones. But it is very much a source of curiosity, fascination, amusement and sometimes fear, for those who are drawn to the village during carnival.



Children performing versions of the Il-Parata