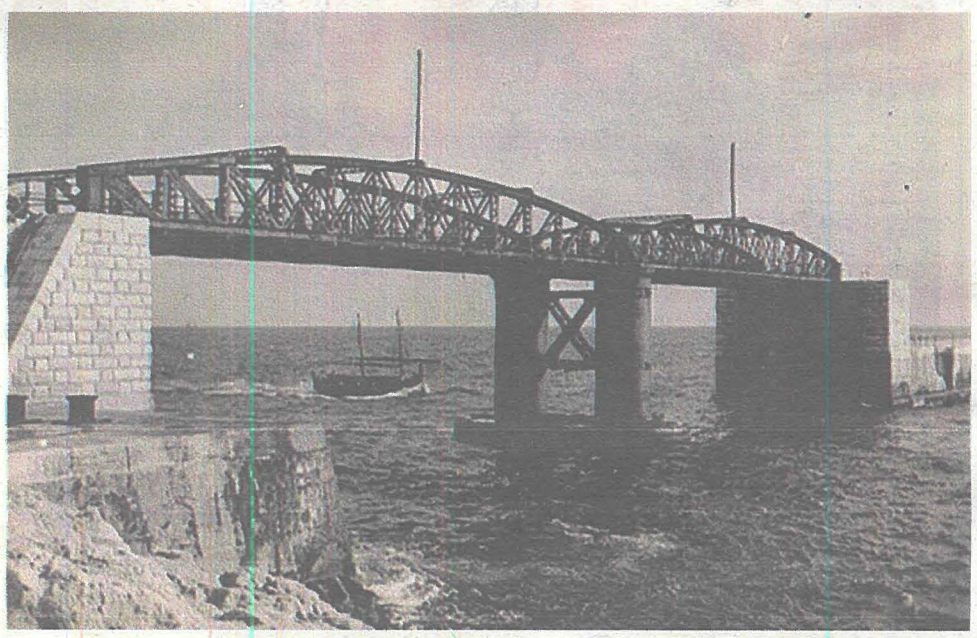
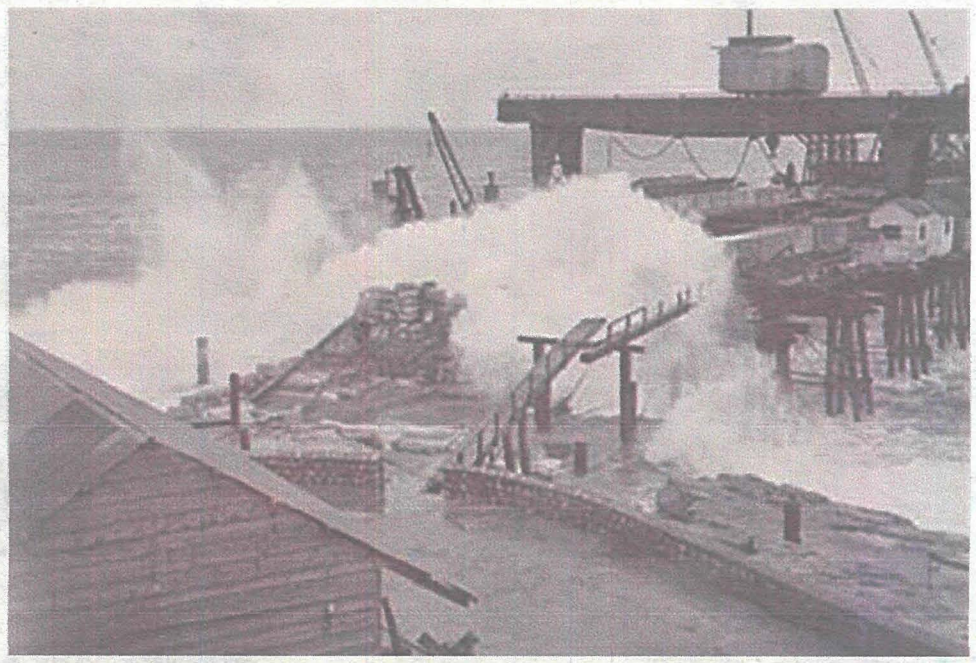
It happened in April



The former footbridge that was completed in 1906 but destroyed through enemy action in 1941.

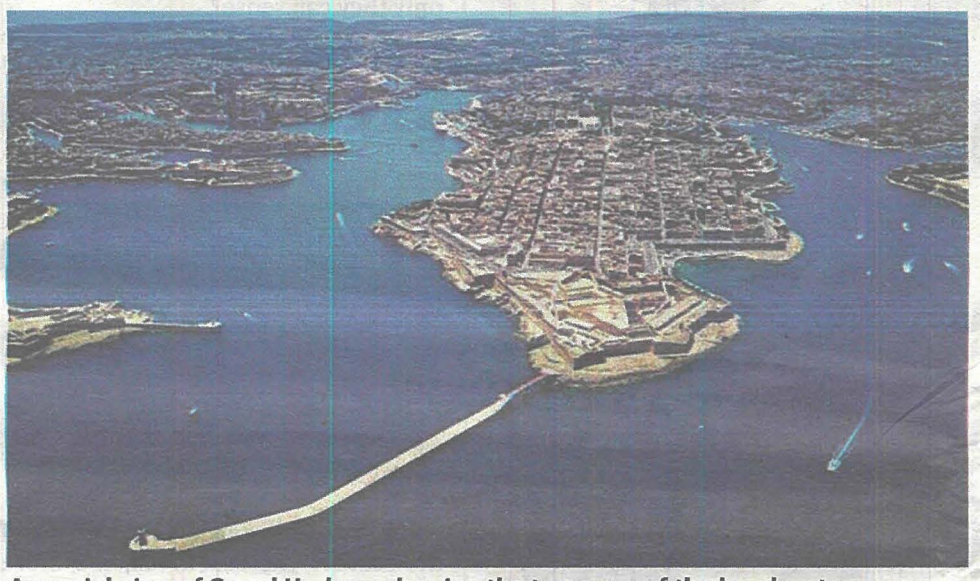


Stormy weather hindering work on the installation of the footbridge in 1904.

Construction of the Grand Harbour breakwater

JOSEPH F. GRIMA

Retired casual lecturer of history and assistant director of education



An aerial view of Grand Harbour showing the two arms of the breakwater.

Between April 16 and 21, 1903, King Edward VII visited the Maltese islands, the first British reigning sovereign to do so. In his reply to Fortunato Mizzi's address of welcome, King Edward stressed his personal interest in the prosperity and welfare of Malta, which he described as one of the most precious possessions of the British Crown. But his visit also included the initiation of an important project: the laying of the foundation stone of a much-needed breakwater at the entrance of Grand Harbour.

One of the drawbacks and defects of Valletta's wharves was their exposure to the strong northeasterly winds (the gregale). This defect had always been recognised but, for strategic reasons concerning the defence of Grand and Marsamxett Harbours, the Order of St John had decided to go ahead with the building of Valletta in 1566. However, for naval purposes, the Knights continued to use the sheltered Galley Creek, lying between Vittoriosa and Senglea, and hence its name, though they did make extensive commercial use of the Valletta and Floriana wharves, which they constructed and expanded, not least by lines of warehouses.

But times changed. As early as 1872, it was being realised that the lack of a breakwater at the entrance of Grand Harbour was hindering the full use of the port and the facilities it offered. Strong winds blowing from the northeast also made entering Grand Harbour a dangerous manoeuvre. The British Admiralty, therefore, started to study the effects and strength of the gregale with a view to coming to a decision regarding the location and size of a projected breakwater. For defence reasons, the project was even more attractive because it could greatly hamper and impede torpedo attacks on shipping sheltering within the harbour.

In 1900, a member of an engineering firm, Mr Mathews, reported on the technical side of the construction of the breakwater. In November 1900, the British cabinet decided in its favour and, subject to approval by the House of Commons, all preparations were given the go-ahead. In April 1901, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Selbourne, visited Malta and a final decision was taken as to the line on which the breakwater was to be constructed.

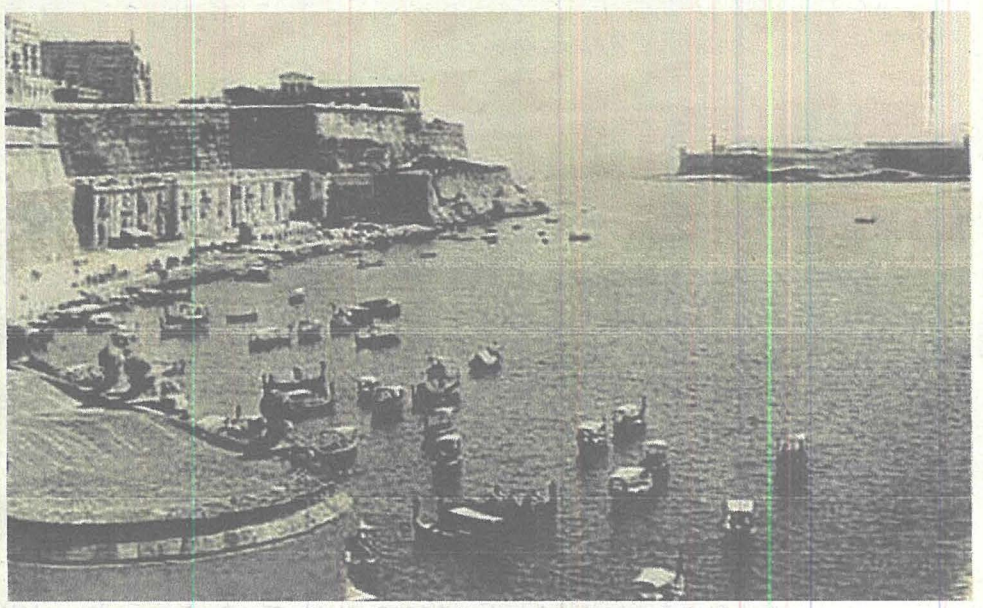
Tenders were issued in 1902, with one of the conditions being that any artefacts that came to light during the dredging of the seabed or in the construction of the foundations would be handed to the British Admiralty. In 1903, the contract for the works to be carried out was awarded to a British firm, S. Pearson & Son Ltd.

On April 20, 1903, the ceremony was carried out on the Fort Ricasoli side of the entrance where a special dais was constructed for King Edward, seating accommodation was provided for the guests and the whole area was decorated with flags and banners. Navy launches transported the guests from Customs House to Ricasoli Point, while various small seacraft, all full to capacity with spectators, thronged and surrounded the area where the stone was to be laid.

King Edward, wearing naval uniform, was greeted by the British national anthem and was then formally requested to lay the first stone. Underneath it, a copper casket was embedded, containing copies of contemporary newspapers, British coins and photographs of Grand Harbour. Then, by means of a pulley system, the granite stone was laid in place in such a way that the copper casket was completely embedded in the foundations. King Edward then solemnly declared the stone well and truly laid.

A commemorative inscription on the stone states that it was laid by King Edward to commemorate the beginning of the construction of the breakwater at the Grand Harbour entrance. The copper casket was manufactured by three employees of the Malta Dockyard, namely, Messrs Saliba, Ginies and Galea, two fitters and a pattern-worker respectively. Its four sides included the eight-pointed Maltese cross together with a copy of the inscription on the actual foundation stone. In 1967, during her visit to Malta, Queen Elizabeth II presented the Maltese government with a replica of this casket.

A gang of eight workmen painting the footbridge. A good number of the workmen were foreigners.

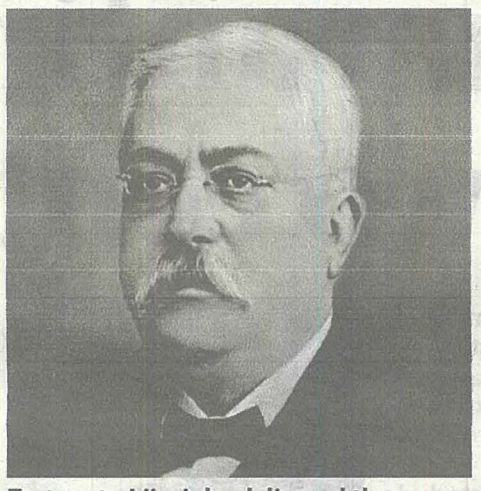


The entrance to Grand Harbour before the construction of the breakwater.

Working on the last phase of the construction of the breakwater.

The foundations of the breakwater lie on solid rock on the seabed. They are made up of concrete blocks each weighing more than 40 tons, together with hard limestone (*żonqor*) quarried from Ras il-Qala in Gozo. The breakwater has two arms. The shorter arm, jutting out from the Fort Ricasoli side, is about 120 metres long and faces the northwest. The longer and main arm faces the northeast from the Fort St Elmo side and is about 371 metres long. This main arm was joined to Fort St Elmo by means of an iron footbridge on two spans, over two columns in the middle, which together measured about 67 metres.

The main arm of the breakwater was not joined directly to the St Elmo side for two main reasons: to prevent the formation of stagnant water within the port and to allow small sea craft to enter harbour (from under the bridge) without having to sail round the long main arm. The edges of both arms are lit by warning lights, with the lighthouse on the St Elmo arm being 14 metres high and completed in 1908.



Fortunato Mizzi: he delivered the welcoming speech when King Edward VII visited Malta in April 1903.

"The whole project is calculated to have cost about £1 million, a very great sum for those days"

About 500 workers were engaged on the construction of the breakwater, which took over six years to complete. The project provided much-needed jobs for Maltese workers, although a large number of workmen had to be brought over from Sicily, Italy and Spain because of the lack of local expertise. But, indirectly, these works also provided more jobs through ancillary services. Obviously, underwater work was carried out by divers in standard diving suits and working in diving bells. These workers were supplied by air pumped from the surface through the use of a manually-operated pump.

In November 1904, when construction work was in progress, inclement weather caused damage to the breakwater and destroyed the bridge which was, however, completed in 1906. Notwithstanding this setback, the breakwater was eventually completed without any more mishaps.

The whole project is calculated to have cost about £1 million, a very great sum for those days. In 1910, the Admiralty officially declared that the project had been completed.

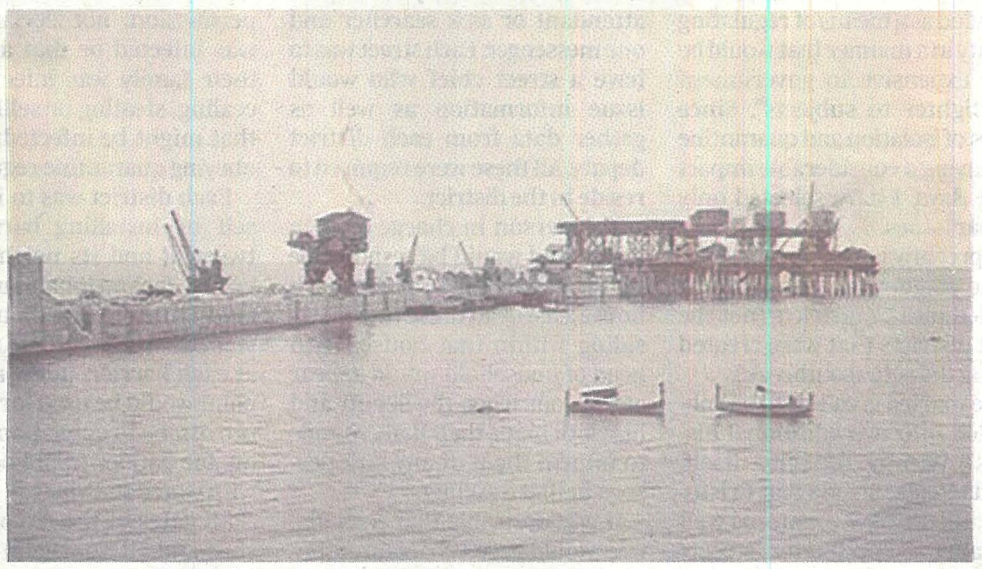
Various other projects were being carried out in Malta at the same time, and this exceptional boom, which more than offset a reduction of British armed forces and their resultant spending, brought about a rise in the standard of living. Unfortunately, the end of the boom – including the completion of the breakwater – brought about a great increase in the number of unemployed and cuts in the wages of others.

Today, a century and almost two decades later, the breakwater is still there and is still carrying out the work it was primarily designed for. True, for seven decades, people could no longer cross over for a stroll on it in fine weather because the footbridge no longer existed, a legacy of the Italian e-boat attack on Grand Harbour on July 25, 1941, during World War II.

However, a new single-span footbridge was constructed in 2012 – it was inaugurated on July 23 – leaving the former columns (they are scheduled) in place, possibly as a nostalgic reminder of what it had looked like originally. The new footbridge was fabricated at La Coruna in northern Spain and weighs 190 tons, with the whole project costing €2.8 million.

The breakwater still stands, silent and watching, guarding the entrance to one of the finest natural harbours in the Mediterranean.

The breakwater bridge after it was destroyed through enemy action during World War II.



Work proceeding on the main arm of the breakwater.