

A Hitherto Untapped Mine Of Postal History Information

by

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Title Page of the first edition, published in 1881

Sometimes, important information may be found by chance in sources where one least expects to find it. This is exactly what happened when last November a friend of mine casually showed me a copy of “*Guida Generale di Malta e Gozo per l’anno 1905*” published in Italian by the local firm Libreria Editrice Scolastica Giovanni Muscat, which operated from Nr. 48 Strada Mercanti (Merchant’s Street), Valletta, Malta. At this stage it is good for one to be reminded that besides English, Italian was the other official language in use in the Maltese islands at the time.

As I had already encountered very scant references to this publication sparsed in some old philatelic literature, instinctively I looked for anything which might have a postal connection. Going through the extremely informative contents of this compendium I was surprised when unexpectedly I stumbled upon a complete list of all the Post Office officials working in the Administration of the GPO at the time, including their grade and the salary they earned. Further down the same page there was also a separate listing for those working in the Branch Post Offices (BPOs). I was more than happy when in another section I found a reprint of the Post Office Guide.

My curiosity had been aroused by this collection of long-neglected data. Noting that previous to this issue there had been others, I paid a visit to the National Library in Valletta to consult earlier editions of this important reference book. The visit proved fruitful as I discovered that the collection held by the Library included issues from 1881, the first year of publication, up to 1940.

A cursory look at some of the earlier editions revealed that without doubt the information contained should be particularly helpful for those interested in or researching the development of the Maltese Postal Service following its transfer to local administration in 1884. I am confident that a detailed analysis of the data available may bring to light new information which may be tied to philatelic questions that up to now are still unanswered; or else provide evidence to corroborate/disprove intuitions and assertions made in the past.

A case in point which I wish to share and delve deeper with you is that the postal guides found reprinted in the series once again raise the question of when did the Migiarro Post Office become a Branch or Sub Post Office. Alan Bannister in the PSM Journal Vol.40/2 Aug. 2011 Pg. 2 puts forward his conclusion that this post office was not a BPO during the Queen Victoria period but became one only in 1924 when it was allowed to issue and pay money and postal orders. He arrives at this on the basis of material dating between WWI and 1924.

However, according to the Post Office Guides reprinted in the four editions of the compendium *Guida Generale di Malta e Gozo* relating to the period from 1886 up to 1889, under the section headed POSTA INTERNA (Internal Post) one finds the following mention:

“Al Gozo vi sono due Uffici di Posta succursali, dove gli abitanti di quell’ isola

G O Z O.

Il servizio postale del Gozo si effettua per vapore "Gleneagles" due volte al giorno meno nell'inverno, quando il vapore fa un solo viaggio giornaliero di andata e ritorno. L'ora della chiusura della valigia per il Gozo è sempre indicata nel vestibolo dell'Ufficio Postale in Valletta con apposito avviso.

Al Gozo vi sono due Uffici di Posta succursali, dove gli abitanti di quell'isola, possono ottenere francobolli, raccomandare lettere, ecc., e vi è stabilita anche una regolare consegna che si effettua dai Corrieri Postali. Uno di questi Uffici è al Rabato e l'altro al Migiarro.

30

Extract from the 1886 Post Office Guide where both Gozo Offices are referred to as Branch Offices

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Translation:

"In Gozo there are two branch Post Offices, where the inhabitants of that Island may obtain postage stamps, register letters, etc., and where a regular distribution made by Postal Carriers is in place. One of these Offices is in Rabat and the other at Migiarro."

In the 1890 edition the paragraph was amended slightly by including the words "o Citta Vittoria" "or City of Victoria" after Rabato; this after the capital of Gozo was renamed Victoria in 1887 in honour of the Queen's Golden Jubilee.

Unfortunately the 1901 and 1902 editions are missing from the Library's collection and so could not be consulted, but in the 1903 Postal Guide we find that the following sentence had been added to the above paragraph:

"All' ufficio della Citta Vittoria si possono anche ottenere vaglia e *Postal Orders*." or "At the office in the City of Victoria one may also obtain money orders and *Postal Orders*."

It is important to note that throughout all these editions, under the section titled POSTA INTERNA, *both* of the post offices are being described with the adjective "succursali", i.e. branches, and not sub post offices in these earlier publications.

The dilemma however continues, as in the issues up to the year 1900 the postal guides only mention Maltese BPOs in the list titled UFFIZI SUCCURSALI (Branch

Offices). In the 1903 edition we find that a Gozitan BPO had been added to the list, and that is Victoria - notwithstanding the fact that in the POSTA INTERNA section of the same postal guide the Migiarrò post office is still also referred to as a BPO!

The questions and their possible answers that came to my mind after noting these subtle details are:

1. Could it be that in the early stages after the postal services were transferred to local administration, being the only other post offices in existence in these islands apart from the GPO in Valletta, no particular attention was required to be made to the title of these post offices and as such both were *de facto* commonly looked upon as **Branches of the Department of Posts**? With the exception of the Cospicua BPO which opened in 1890, the Gozo offices predated all the other QV period post offices by at least ten years, the latter being opened between 1895 and 1898. An interesting fact is that the 1895 estimates for the year 1896 mention the provision for office furniture for the *Gozo Branch Post Office*, which further points in this direction. This reference to a BPO was made four years prior to Government Notice 88 of the 28th April 1900, which up to now has been regarded as the one through which the first BPO in Gozo was set up.

It is good for one to keep in mind that ultimately it was the Department of Posts, a government entity, which was responsible for the postal service, a responsibility which it carried out through the GPO, which in modern jargon one might describe as its Head Office, and the other post offices. It would be wrong for one not to make this fine distinction and to consider that both the Department of Posts and the GPO mean one and the same thing, as this would not be exactly correct.

2. Did the Victoria office eventually gain a more “elevated” status than the Migiarrò office because it was what I term as an “administrative depot”, only branch in Gozo allowed to issue and pay money and postal orders, and whose staff and office were not shared with other government departments? It is good for one to know that the building and staff at the Migiarrò office at this and for quite some time later, also doubled-up and shared the duties as the local Customs Office.

3. Were Government Notice 88 / 1900 which announced the setting up of the *Victoria Postal District* and inclusion of the Victoria BPO in the list of Branch Post Offices in the postal guide the result of a Department of Posts continuous improvement strategy in preparation for implementing planned administrative changes that were to be gradually introduced in the postal services? Were these



The Victoria and Migiarro hand-stamps with the letters B.O. which came in use shortly after the setting up of the Victoria Postal District

triggered by an administrative need of the Department of Posts to officially clarify the “standing” of both post offices and assign specific work / services to each? Was the credit and full recognition afforded to the Victoria branch for its role as the more important of the two only a by-product of this process? One must highlight the fact that Government Notice 88 refers to the Victoria office as a Branch Post Office, but does not state that it was being made a BPO with the setting up of the Victoria Postal District!

One must also consider all this in light of the administrative “fine tuning” carried out during the year 1900, including the significant change that was made when for the first time the Department of Posts, through the GPO, issued post office hand-stamps to village police stations which had been acting and continued to act as postal agencies as distinct from post offices.

4. If the Migiarro post office was in actual fact a BPO, as it is repetitively being referred to in the postal guides of the period, was it actually ever reclassified as a SUB Post Office when the Victoria Postal District was set up and started functioning as from 1st May 1900?

5. Why was the hand-stamp including the letters B.O. and time proper very similar to that issued to the Victoria BPO following the setting up of the Victoria Postal District start and was allowed to be used by the Migiarro post office shortly afterwards? Was this sanctioned by the Department of Posts because the Migiarro post office was in effect considered and looked upon as a BPO, notwithstanding the fact that only the Victoria office was indirectly officially affirmed as such through Government Notice 88 of 1900?

One must point out that in the excerpt from the *Report on the Post Office for 1924-25* accompanying Mr. Bannister's article where we find "...and the Post Office at Migiarrò Gozo **was elevated to the status of a Branch Post Office** having identical attributions of the Office of Victoria and of the Branch Post Offices in Malta ..." the wording as highlighted could be inadvertently misleading. The reason for this is that by highlighting other words in the sentence as follows "...and the Post Office at Migiarrò Gozo **was elevated to the status of a Branch Post Office having identical attributions of the Office of Victoria and of the Branch Post Offices in Malta ...**" one may arrive at a different conclusion.

In effect this could mean that through Government Notice No. 346 of the 27th November 1924 the new authority given to the Migiarrò post office to issue and pay money and postal orders in addition to change in staff, *brought its status in line with that of all the other Branch Post Offices with regards to manning and the services provided*, thereby addressing and eliminating an anomaly that had existed. One must also bear in mind that in Notice 346 the Migiarrò Post Office is referred to as a Branch, but nowhere is it mentioned or inferred that it *became* a BPO through that notice.

As an afterthought, have any documents where the Victoria and Migiarrò Post Offices are officially and specifically referred to as SUB and not BRANCH post offices by the Department of Posts during the nineteenth century been recorded? If not, the question should be raised whether it was only because of the abovementioned 1900 govt. gazette notice, considered in isolation and not in a holistic approach, that philatelists have taken it for granted that prior to 1900 both offices were SPOs of the GPO. In the light of the above rediscovered information, I now personally tend to support the reasoning that both Gozo post offices were *de facto* Branch Post Offices of the Department of Posts and that the proof of this may be found in how they were being continuously referred to in the Post Office Guides of the period.

It surely looks that this particular issue in the development of Malta's, or more appropriately Gozo's postal history needs to be researched in more depth than it has been up to now, as it may definitely not be considered closed yet.

After the 1884 transfer of the Postal Services to local administration one finds that the Post Office Guides gradually started to become much more informative than their predecessors. There is no doubt that information regarding postal services reprinted in this publication should no longer be overlooked but be researched from a philatelic perspective. The potential relevance of the *Guida Generale di Malta e Gozo* series as a source for philatelic research should not be underestimated, as it could be a catalyst for researchers to explore other possibilities than those traditionally entertained and to move away from paradigms as can be seen from the above.