

# Kalkara and Birzebbuga in early postcards

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There appears to be a great imbalance in the production of early Malta postcards, with views of the harbour towns turning up ever so frequently, and all the others, it seems, ranging from moderately to extremely rare. The scarcest of them all probably belong to the so-called ‘south’ of Malta, a rather recent label which sounds as politically loaded as it is geographically slipshod: what passes for the south more correctly leans to the east. Along with the three harbour cities, this area comprises Haz-Zabbar, Zejtun, Imqabba, Qrendi, Hal-Safi, Zurrieq, Marsascula, Kalkara, Hal-Luqa, Hal-Ghaxaq, Hal-Kirkop, Gudja, Birzebbuga and Marsaxlokk. Early postcards of these localities prove considerably hard to come by.

Why this is so should not be too difficult to discern. The bulk buyers of Maltese postcards consisted of the British armed forces and other visitors who sporadically visited the islands. These necessarily became the market of choice that postcard publishers targeted, as those foreigners would be more easily induced to part with their money to purchase postcard views of places frequented or familiar. The ‘south’, apart from the three cities, lay quite off the main traffic lanes of soldiers, sailors and other visitors.

Not many barracks, no equipped harbours, sparse concentration of leisure amenities, few remarkable sandy beaches, scant bars and lodging houses: that probably accounts for the dearth of postcards with subjects from the ‘south’. When they do exist, the numbers printed of each must not have been high at all. In this feature, by early I mean the 1930s latest, even if the majority date to World War One or before.

My first intention was to survey cards of the south of Malta, but, despite their scarcity, one feature would not possibly cope with their voluminous production. For no particular reasons, I homed on two localities, Kalkara and Birzebbuga, and I hope to publish here some views few or none have seen before. Both towns have grown mercilessly since those photographs were taken, and the changes in the urban fabric, as in their demographic density, have been truly amazing. Many look like images of corners of places unknown.

## Kalkara

This picturesque town, which presumably derives its name from some lime kiln in the area, over the years became better known for another activity: a place for boat building – not ships, but the more homely Maltese models: *fregatini*,

*kajikki, xprunari, dghajjes tal-pass, firilli, dghajjes tat-tigrija*, perhaps even the more substantial *dghajjes tal-latini* and *luzzijiet*. Kalkara also attracted a moderate number of summer residents, mostly from the three cities.

Although the population grew, Kalkara never really became a large town. Records show 150 households in 1870, and that went up to 2870 inhabitants in 2005. Apparently, apart from some isolated fisherman's hut, serious building only started towards the very end of the knights' rule, round 1790.

I got to know Kalkara quite well in my early days because Archbishop Michael Gonzi, brought up there, always kept Kalkara quite close to his heart. Enemy action had destroyed the old 1890 parish church on April 10, 1942, and the prelate made it one of his life's missions to give the village he so fondly loved a new, sumptuous church in a position more prominent than the one it had to replace, to be built on land he had personally bought for the purpose.

To project the new architecture he chose my father and asked him to draw plans and elevations. Vincenzo Bonello, just back from exile in Uganda, proposed several alternatives, ranging from the overtly baroque to far more restrained designs. The Archbishop chose one of the most austere of father's concepts, possibly on aesthetic grounds but perhaps on economic ones too. Besides providing the master plans and elevations, father worked hard at each architectural, structural and ornamental detail.

As father did not come with an architect's warrant, he had to have at his side someone who did, to sign the plans and certify structural stability from an engineering point of view. The Archbishop's choice fell on Guzè Damato, and the two were born not to collaborate. What father understated and hinted, Damato wanted grander and showier. The compromises, generally unhappy ones, mostly left both dissatisfied. This was father's first large-scale architectural work and it occupied him from his return from Uganda's barbed wire in 1945, till the laying of the temple's foundation stone the following year, to the consecration of the bare new church on the tenth anniversary of its destruction, and up to the completion of the dome in 1962. The stacks and rolls of drawings related to the Kalkara church, elaborated by father, my sister and I quite recently donated to the Wignacourt Museum in Rabat.

Father visited the Kalkara building-site regularly, frequently taking me there with him. What a treat to cross Grand Harbour by coal-fired ferryboat, and then walk from the landing place to the rising stone traces of the new church. Father insisted on seeing and checking personally all the masonry work and in the process became friendly with those master artisans, scalpellini and stone sculptors. I kept my eyes and my ears wide open, lapping up every word the old-time wisdom and experience of those highly competent craftsmen let fall. Sometimes Monsignor Gonzi would

turn up too. Kalkara became a regular cultural and spiritual pilgrimage shrine for me, and a mesmerized me in short trousers could eavesdrop on the formidable Archbishop well before anywhere near my early teens.

I am here publishing sixteen postcards of old Kalkara. I had one card (or was it a photograph?) of the small old parish church before enemy bombing destroyed it, but I failed to retrace it. Most of the cards obviously concentrate on the more photogenic features of the village, but a few show moments of the everyday life that went on around it. Although Bighi and Ricasoli could be considered as belonging to Kalkara, I have opted to overlook them for the purposes of this feature.

**Fig. K1** and **K2** come from the handsome series of postcards printed in Germany before World War One and are thus datable as c. 1912 -1914. The same images also exist in the extensive dark mauve series of real photographs, the colour favoured by Richard Ellis but so far unattributed to any named photographer. Some of these photo cards have faded disastrously (that would seem to rule Ellis out). These two printed postcards show, in dark sepia, an overall view of the little bay crammed with boats, in the sea and on the beach. **Fig. K2** is particularly interesting as it gives a glimpse of the old parish church of St Joseph against a background of St Elmo's lighthouse and the double iron bridge over the harbour breakwater (both demolished or destroyed during the war). Most buildings reach two stories in height, but a couple of extravagant skyscrapers stretch upwards all the way to three floors. **Fig. K3**, a real photograph, taken from a higher vantage point on the Cottonera fortifications, shows the same stretch of waterfront, perhaps slightly later.

The photographer Salvatore Lorenzo Cassar contributed **Fig. K4** and **K5** from virtually the same viewpoint, but shot at considerably different times. The boathouse on the extreme left has some posters affixed to it, and on it the shop sign reads clearly: "Frank Attard and Scicluna boat builders, Calcara strip", and what could be a date painted on the wall: 1930. A poster advertises a film *SOS Iceberg*, released in 1934 and another one has a mixed bill: *Early to Die – Beauty – Man of Aran*, also released the same year. A couple of houses still have their facades painted in the by then old fashioned burgundy red (*demmm il-baqra*). These two Cassar postcards exist in other formats too. **Fig. K6** has much the same scene but probably earlier, and the real photo suffers from a notable lack of contrast.

Also real photos, **Fig. K7** and **K8**, almost certainly date to the 1920s and illustrate different segments of Kalkara creek, with a multitude of typically Maltese boats berthed there or serenely afloat. Their photographer remains so far unknown.

And, what relief, a postcard of Kalkara that, instead of reworking some sea view, has a charming photograph of a road – Strada Rinella – bedecked in *fiesta* decorations, and dated 1927 (**Fig. K9**). Seeing the photographer position his tripod, a horde of village children in gala clothes and shoes worthy of the *fiesta* day, gather in front of his bulky camera – being captured on film was then a rare and exciting

treat, and the unknown camera artist had the good grace not to shoo them away. The chances are that very few of those boys and girls would be around today.

Follow two postcards from the splendid *Vela Photo* series, popular since the late 1920s, produced and marketed by that gifted amateur photographer Alfred Vella Gera, a bank manager (**Fig. K10** and **K11**). Curiously, though very different, both views carry the same progressive number, 10, which seems to indicate that at some stage Mr Vella Gera substituted a new image to the previous one but retained the original sequential run in his numbered series. The first includes a small commercial outlet “Bighi Sally Port Kiosk” flying the Union Jack.

Both the next postcards link Kalkara with sad events – funerals. **Fig. K12** shows a long procession of British seamen heading for the burial of their comrade Harold Crawley of HMS *Triumph*, who died not yet 20 years old in consequence of an accident on March 15, 1910 – exactly one hundred years to the day of my writing this feature. Crawley’s touching funerary monument can still be seen in the Kalkara naval cemetery. **Fig. K13** records an actual funeral inside the capuchin’s cemetery, better known as Santa Liberata. This comes from a larger series of S.L. Cassar postcards, probably datable to the 1920s. **Fig. K15** illustrates the actual capuchin church dedicated to Saint Barbara but popularly known as Santa Liberata from the holy relics of the saint preserved in that precinct.

And a proficient, unusual close up of fishermen with their large wicker traps near land on the Kalkara waterfront (**Fig. K14**). The photographer remains unknown; he skilfully captured atmospheric details, including a small toddler under an enormous straw hat. Everyone then covered their heads, and none would dream of defying the sun. The suntan fashion had yet to catch on and what darkening of the skin occurred was actively unwanted and resented.

My last Kalkara postcard (**Fig. K16**) presents one of the street decorations for the feast of the patron saint of the fishing village, St Joseph and the Holy Family, larger than life size, in papier maché, with a group of villagers posing proudly in front of its elaborate pedestal. I wonder whether that impressive statuary ensemble still exists today.

## **Birzebbuga**

This small seaside town retains traces of human activity from early ages and comprises in its immediate vicinity that living zoological showcase that is Ghar Dalam. It saw most of its recent urban development since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, though it had shown its utility to the British navy since Nelson’s times. Sir Jahleel Brenton, the Anglo-American naval hero, mentions in his 1809 memoirs that the launch which supplied explosives to the warships was not allowed to berth in Grand Harbour, as a precaution against some disastrous explosion. Instead, the admiral kept the barge in Birzebbuga, whose name the British had, by that early time, already

bastardized to ‘Bizzy Bay’!<sup>1</sup> Differently from Kalkara, Birzebbuga boasted of two guest houses at the turn of the century: *Dowdall’s* (established 1895) or *Flagship Hotel*, and the *Sea Maid Hotel*.

Of the few postcards that represent Birzebbuga, only one is printed by typography – all the others come as real photographs. I have excluded several of Ghar Hasan, which lies within the precincts of Birzebbuga. The cards have interrupted ribbons of buildings on the waterfront and very little else in depth. Obviously both the locals and the summer residents preferred a house with a sea view. That quaint Birzebbuga appears virtually unrecognizable today, with the great Freeport development close by and the high blocks of modern housing stretching far back in the hinterland. The present parish church was only started in 1926 and consecrated in 1938.

**Fig. B1** comes from the extensive black and white series of printed postcards issued by Cesare Bornaccini, c. 1900. It shows a small cluster of buildings round a neo-gothic chapel, all surrounded by fields. Richard Ellis has a real photographic card, from about the same time, of the Birzebbuga waterfront that came to be known as Pretty Bay (**Fig. B2**). Another panoramic view of the bay and the urban front, of the 1930s, includes one solitary motor car parked on the slope leading to the promenade (**Fig. B3**).

Salvatore Lorenzo Cassar marketed his postcards of Birzebbuga in the 1920s or earlier. **Fig. B4** displays the ribbon development on the waterfront, some rooms on the beach and a building with neo-gothic windows close to the sea shore. More striking is a card of four boys drinking water for the village’s public pump – running water in homes was then quite unlikely (**Fig. B5**). All the boys have a cap and not one wears shoes. A large devotional stone statue of the Virgin and Child dominates the scene.

And finally, another unattributed real-photo postcard of Pretty Bay (**Fig. B6**). This must belong to the late 1930s: as many as four parked motor cars clutter the promenade. Other Birzebbuga cards and views have already been published by me.<sup>2</sup>

## **Acknowledgements**

*My thanks are due to Hadrian Wood who put at my disposal for this feature five Kalkara postcards from his collection. The two volumes Bliet u Rhula Maltin by Alfie Guillamier, Malta, Vol. I (2002) and Vol. II (2005), proved particularly useful.*

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<sup>1</sup> Jahleel Brenton, *Memoir*, ed. Henry Raikes, London, 1846, p. 377.

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Bonello, *Histories of Malta*, Vol. VI, 2005, p. 195, 196, 213.

*Calcara Bay, Malta.*



Fig. K1

*Calcara Bay, Malta.*



Fig. K2



Fig. K3



Fig. K4



Fig. K5



Fig. K6





Fig. K7



Fig. K8



Fig. K9

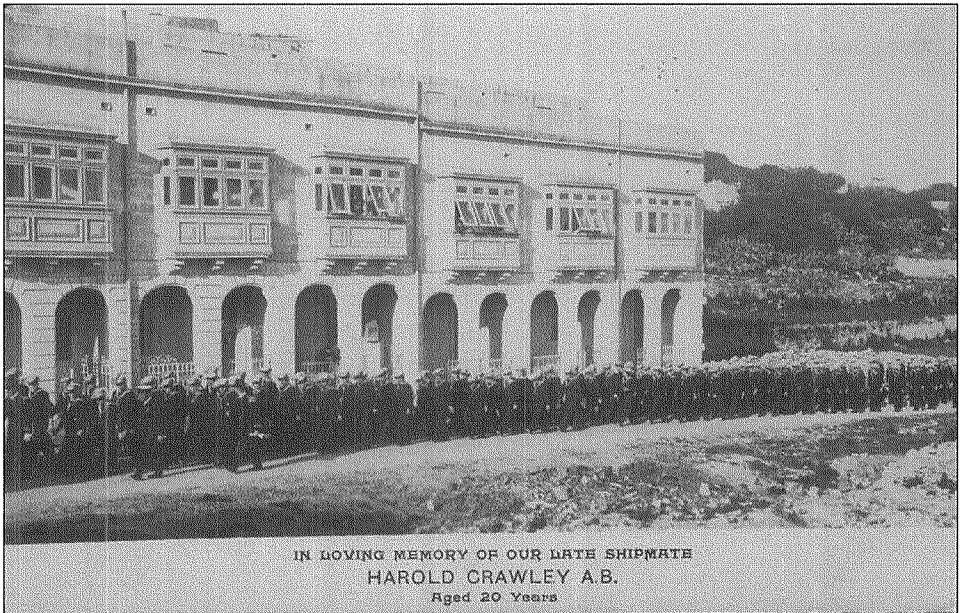


Fig. K10



10. MALTA- Calcara Bay (Boat Building Place)

Fig. K11



IN LOVING MEMORY OF OUR LATE SHIPMATE  
HAROLD CRAWLEY A.B.  
Aged 20 Years

Fig. K12



Fig. K13



Fig. K14

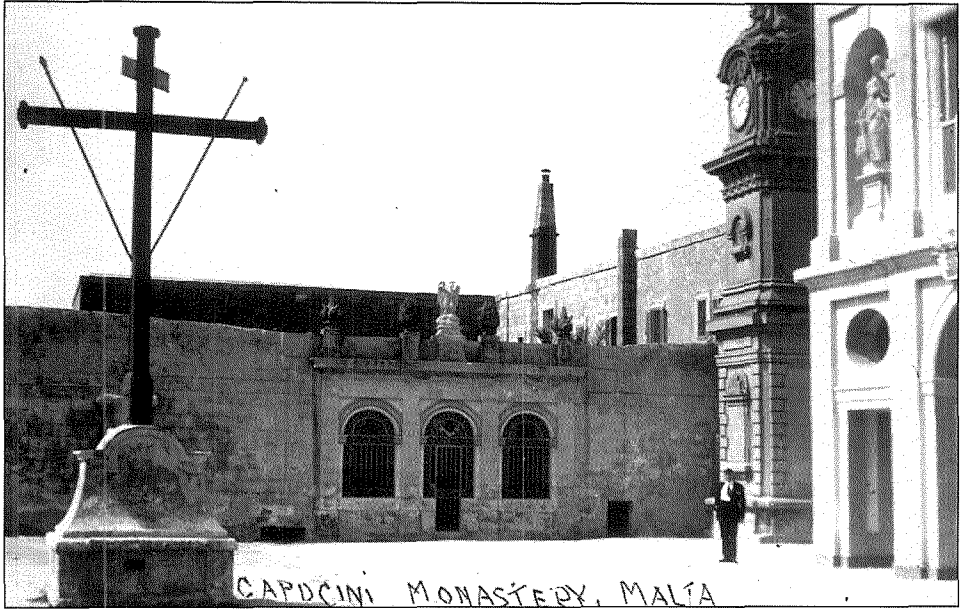


Fig. K15



Fig. K16

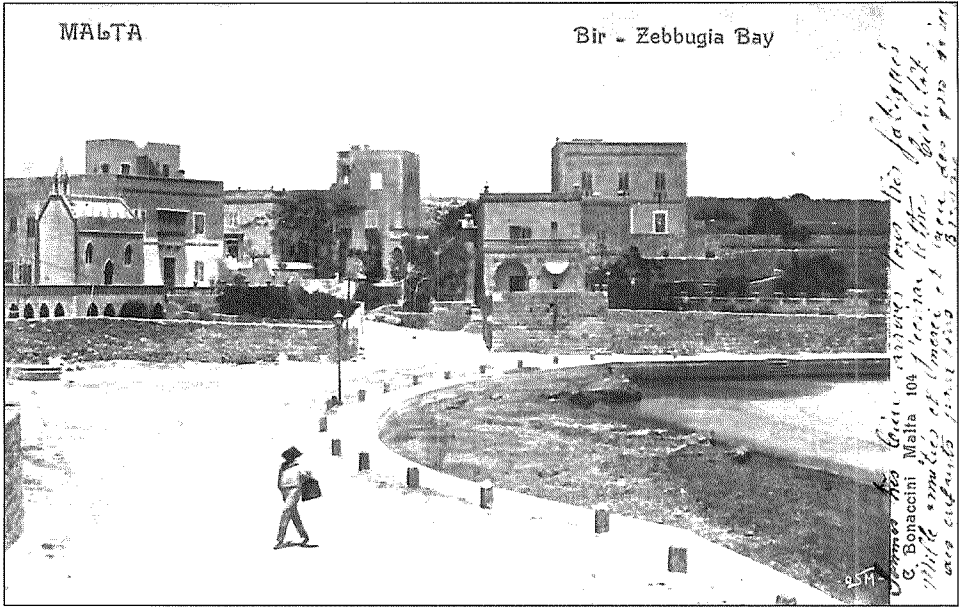


Fig. B1

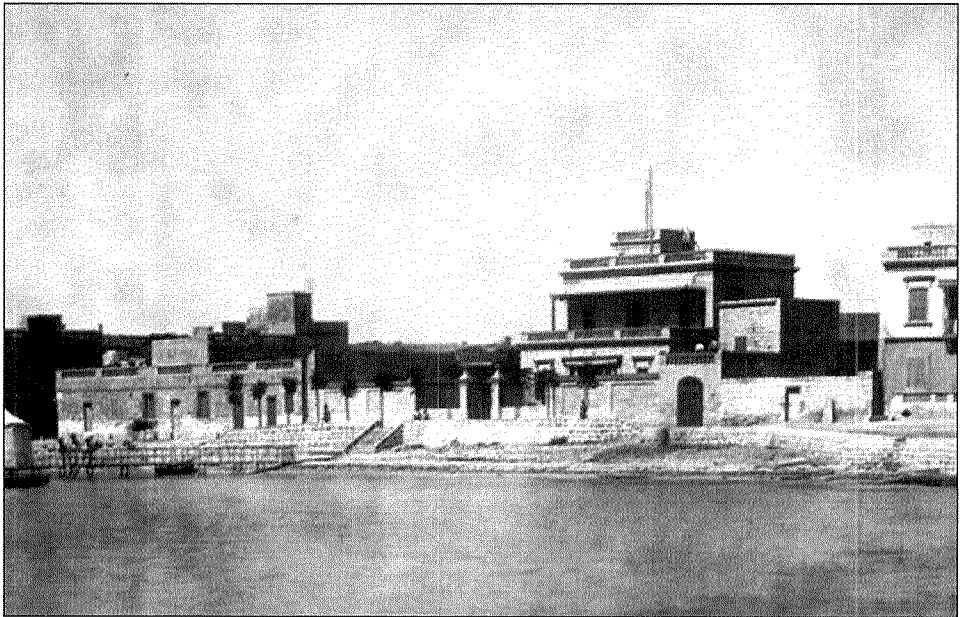


Fig. B2



Fig. B3



Fig. B4



Fig. B5



Fig. B6