

LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY

It happened in February

# Rise and fall of the Malta Railway after its inaugurations in 1883 and 1892

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February reminds us of the inauguration (and a subsequent reopening) of the Malta Railway, then popularly known locally as *il-vapur tal-art*, which was the first mechanised overland public transport service to be introduced in the Maltese islands.

Primarily, it provided a useful commuting service for the working population but it also became popular for leisurely travel since it linked Valletta and Mdina via San Anton Gardens.

Surveys and plans for the railway were carried out in the 1870s with the original intention being to construct a network of lines covering almost all of Malta, together with plans for an internal underground

service in Valletta. Plans were submitted by J. Scott Tucker in 1870, Major Hutchinson in 1873, Architect Edward Rosenbush in 1873 and George Fernandes in 1875.

Rosenbush's ideas were chosen by a committee set up by the Council of Government, the members being Sir Adriano Dingli, Giovanni Battista Trapani, Emanuel Scicluna, Ramiro Barbaro and Francesco Saverio Decesare, with technical help being provided by chosen architects.

All the plans came to nothing except the sole central line that was eventually constructed.

A company formed in 1876 was soon dissolved but another company, the Malta Railways Company Ltd, was formed on June 12, 1879, and obtained a governmental concession to construct a line linking Valletta with Mdina. The concession was for a duration of 99 years but the government reserved the right to acquire the railway at any time after the lapse of 15 years.

The Malta Railways Co. Ltd inaugurated its service at 3pm on Wednesday, February 28, 1883, amid great enthusiasm. That afternoon, the guests were taken on the inaugural train journey to Mdina where they were entertained to a meal and heard speeches befitting the occasion by various speakers, including the Governor of Malta, Sir Arthur Borton. The public train service started the next day and provided eight return journeys. The first manager of the railway was F.A.B. Geneste.

The Valletta terminus was below modern City Gate, then known as *Porta Reale*, but the station itself was in Ordnance Street (where the present Parliament building now stands) and included the manager's office, the booking office, a waiting hall and two ramps leading down to the railway platforms. From here, the trains crossed the Valletta ditch into a tunnel leading to Argotti Gardens (Floriana Station) and, via another tunnel, through St Philip Bastion (near *Portes des*

*Bombes*) on to Hamrun Station. At Hamrun, there was a double track with two platforms and side lines leading to the workshops which, by 1900, were capable of major maintenance and engineering work. Formerly, repairs and renovations had been carried out at the dockyard. There were stops at Msida, Santa Venera and a station at Birkirkara which had two platforms.

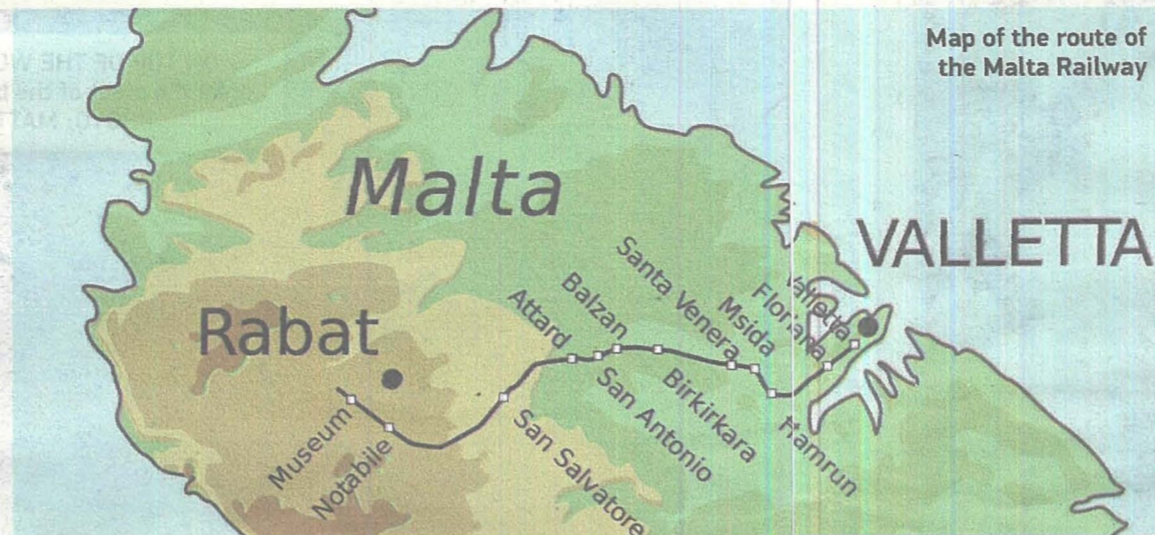
**“For the journey from Valletta to Mdina, the locomotives pulled the carriages but, for the return journey, the locomotives pushed the carriages”**

Another two stops at Balzan and San Anton preceded San Salvatore Station at Attard. The line subsequently passed under

the Attard-Mdina road through a 25-yard-long tunnel and then up the final steep climb to Rabat which was the last terminus till 1900. In that year, the line was extended via a half-mile tunnel beneath Mdina to the Museum Station just below the Roman Domus (popularly known as the Roman Villa).

The line extended for another 300 yards beyond the station and ended abruptly, probably being part of a scheme to extend it to the Mtarfa Barracks and Hospital but which was never brought to fruition. This took place during the management of Nicholas Buhagiar who had succeeded to this office in 1897. The last manager was architect Carmelo Rizzo.

The whole journey from Valletta took 35 minutes but the return trip was only half-an-hour long because it was mainly downhill. Fares were one penny (1d) per mile first class, a half penny (½d) per mile third class, a flat rate of two pence (2d) for workmen from Valletta to Mdina (and vice-versa) and a number of concession rates. All the rates remained unchanged over the years.



Map of the route of the Malta Railway



Employees of the Malta Railway pose for a group photograph at Hamrun Station in 1924.

**THE MALTA RAILWAY CO. LTD. LOCOMOTIVES – SOME TECHNICAL DATA**

| No. | Type   | Cylinders (inches) | Builder        | Works | No.  | Date |
|-----|--------|--------------------|----------------|-------|------|------|
| 1.  | 0-6-0T | 10½ x 18,          | Manning Wardle | 842,  | 1882 |      |
| 2.  | 0-6-0T | 10½ x 18,          | Manning Wardle | 843,  | 1882 |      |
| 3.  | 0-6-0T | 10½ x 18,          | Manning Wardle | 844,  | 1883 |      |
| 4.  | 0-6-0T | 13 x 19,           | Black Hawthorn | 753,  | 1884 |      |
| 5.  | 2-6-2T | 15 x 20,           | Manning Wardle | 1243, | 1891 |      |
| 6.  | 2-6-4T | 15 x 20,           | Manning Wardle | 1261, | 1892 |      |
| 7.  | 2-6-4T | 14¼ x 20           | Beyer Peacock  | 3678, | 1895 |      |
| 8.  | 2-6-4T | 14¼ x 20,          | Beyer Peacock  | 3952, | 1896 |      |
| 9.  | 2-6-4T | 14¼ x 20,          | Beyer Peacock  | 4163, | 1899 |      |
| 10. | 2-6-4T | 14¼ x 20,          | Beyer Peacock  | 4719, | 1905 |      |

Because of debts, calculated to have been in the region of £80,000, the line closed down on Tuesday, April 1, 1890, but government reopened it on Thursday, February 25, 1892.

During the closure period, works on buildings were carried out and more locomotives and carriages were imported. As is quite clear from the technical data provided in the table on the right, these new locomotives, or engines, were larger and stronger than the ones used hitherto.

During its span of life, the railway made use of 10 locomotives, of which only one (number 3) failed to survive the railway's final closure in 1931. Locomotive number 1 was reported to have survived in Hamrun until 1944. Engine number 5 was completely rebuilt and converted from a 2-6-2 to a 2-6-4, a feat which, incidentally, reflects highly on the efficiency and engineering capabilities of the Hamrun workshops and their personnel.

All the engines were tank class and uniformly finished in a dark olive green colour, black smoke boxes and red buffer beams. The domes were made of brass and the chimneys had copper bands at the top. The frames and the wheels were black and each engine carried an oval brass number plate.

The line used was a single-metre gauge with 42lb/yd rails spiked to timber sleepers, the rails being eventually replaced with 60lb/yd rails after they became worn out. The minimum curve radius was of 220 yards, and the ruling gradient was 1 in 50 (two per cent) except in the final run of one-and-a-half miles to Mdina which was 1 in 40 (2.5 per cent). For the journey from Valletta to Mdina, the locomotives pulled the carriages but, for the return journey, the locomotives pushed the carriages.

The railway employed quite a number of staff, apart from the operators of the engines. They

included skilled workers for maintenance and engineering jobs in the workshops, 'pointmen' in the stations and also 'chainmen' along the railway line. Where the line crossed over a public road, a chainman had to ensure that no one crossed when the train was on its way and so they barred access by means of chains. The government financial estimates for 1920-21 state that the Malta Railway had 63 employees on its books, including the management.

**“The advent of the motor bus service sounded the railway's death knell and it finally closed down on April 2, 1931”**

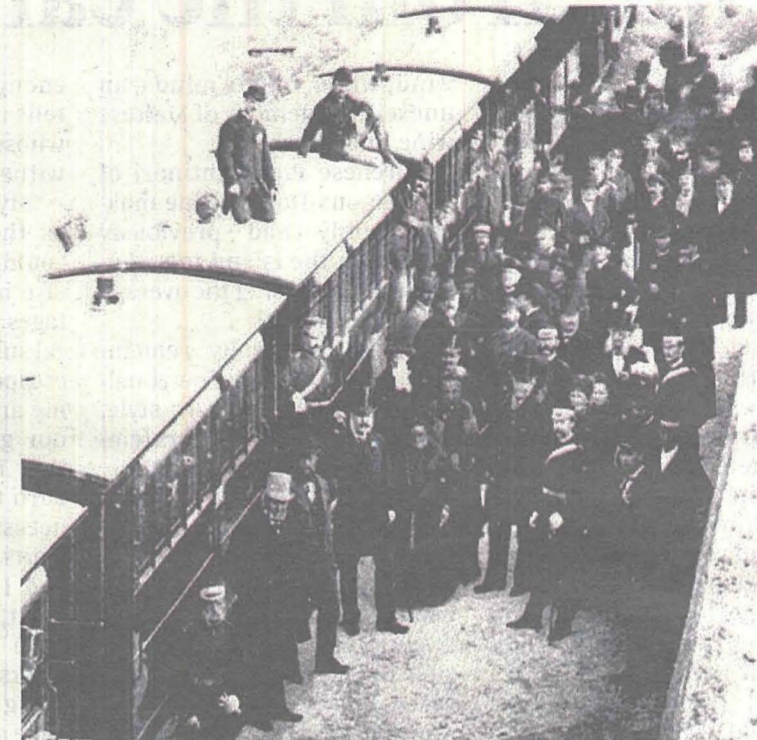
Naturally, accidents involving the railway did occur from time to time, of which one can mention the following two more important ones:

On January 25, 1893, on the 5pm journey from Mdina, a certain Dominic Vassallo died on the spot after falling from a carriage and ending up between its wheels.

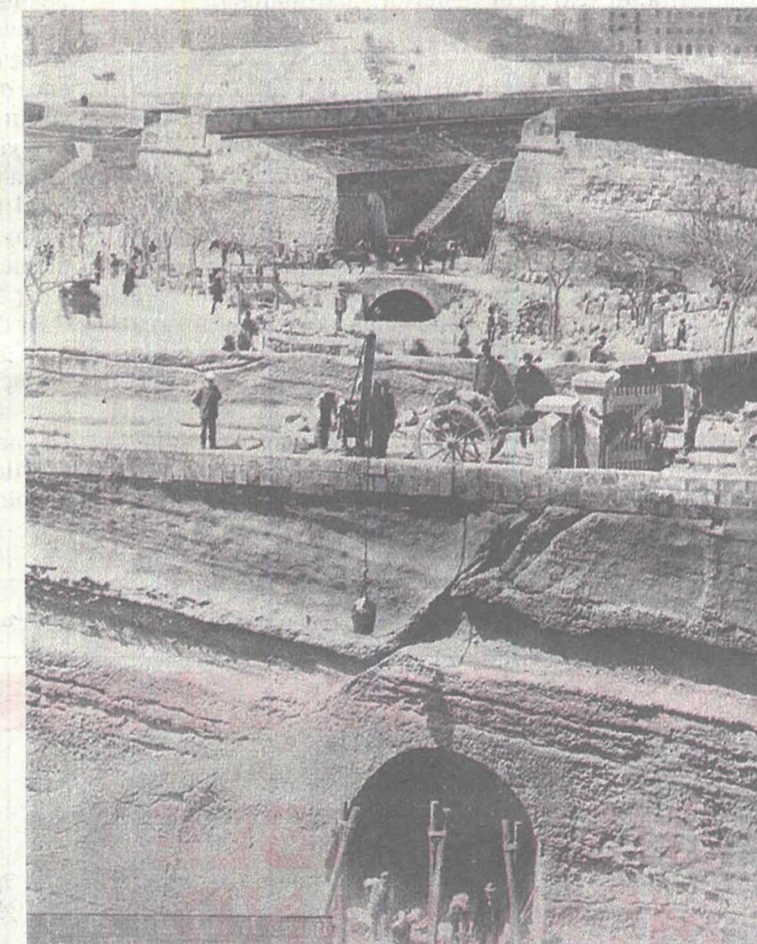
On July 22, 1923, the train of the 8pm journey from Mdina (it was actually the last trip of the day) was derailed after slamming into a large herd of cattle that was being driven to a farm after being disembarked from a ship. The accident happened between Santa Venera and Hamrun, where the present church of St Francis now stands. Fortunately, no human lives were lost and no one was even injured. However, the cattle were not so lucky because 34 of them were killed and some others suffered injuries.

The railway faced stiff competition from the tramway service's three lines after their inauguration in 1905. But it was really the advent of the motor bus service that sounded the railway's death knell and it finally closed down on Thursday, April 2, 1931.

Strictly speaking, the Malta Railway was not the only railway to operate in the Maltese islands because J. Pearson & Sons Ltd brought three standard-gauge locomotives to Malta during the construction of the Grand Harbour breakwater in 1904. However, they were taken back to England when the breakwater was completed and were never put to public use. Moreover, the Royal Navy also had an internal standard-gauge railway in the dockyard.



The guests at the inauguration of the Malta Railway on February 28, 1883.



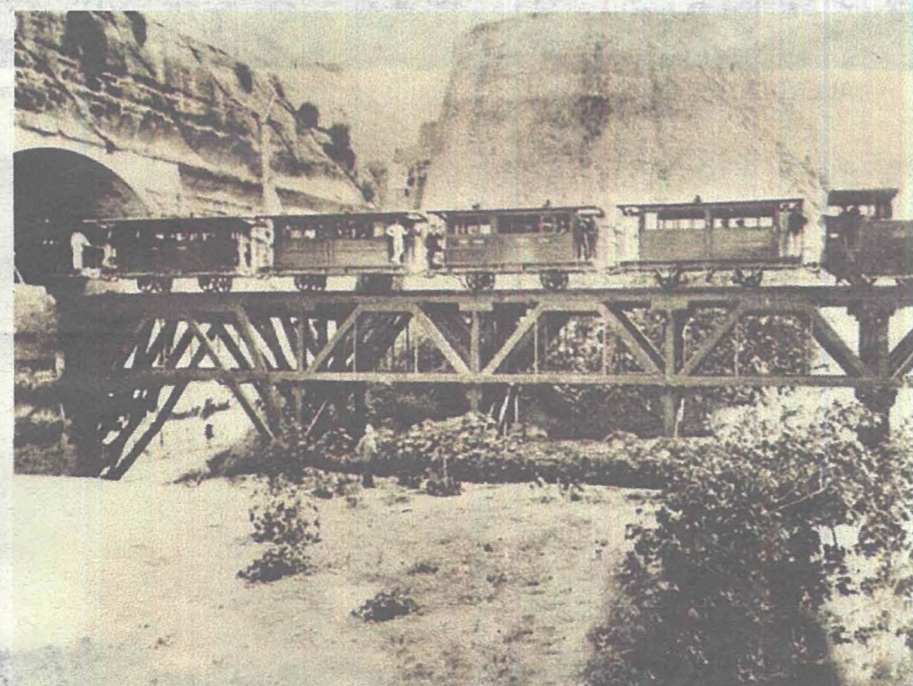
Work on the excavation of the Valletta-Floriana tunnel in April 1882.



Birkirkara train station: the building is still standing.



The Valletta Station on the site where the present parliament building now stands.



One of the earliest trains leaving the Valletta tunnel.