

Sliema in pre-war postcards

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Sliema can hardly claim to be typical of the rest of Malta in any way. A very late starter in urbanization, it caught on rapidly only after the 1850s. Then, particularly round its sea-fronts, it changed its architectural fabric even more rapidly from the 1970s onwards.

Apart from Valletta, all the other urban conglomerates in Malta were originated by and for the local inhabitants, with later accretions by foreigners: real knights and British settlers. With Sliema it was mostly the other way round. The ‘residential’ potential of that rural area seems to have been discovered only by the knights – for idyllic country getaways – see Luc de Boyer d’Argens, who has rue d’Argens named after his property, then by foreigners, like the Prince of Capua, of Capua Palace, and by British officials with their families.

Finally, the Maltese too noticed Sliema; at first those in tow who believed their status would increase in proportion to how closely they aped their imperial owners. This gave rise to the *tal-pepè* phenomenon – an upper-middle class living like the British, behaving more English than the English themselves, speaking (minimum) pidgin Maltese as if they were English, and pidgin English as if they were Martians, with the affectation of uncritical imitation. But once the migration momentum set in, there was no stopping the Maltese, and Sliema became a populous area sought after by the colonial devotees as well as by those who could not have cared less.

Maybe that is why Sliema remains so different – and, let’s admit it, rather unphotogenic. It has no major landmarks, no important baroque buildings, no piazza with any gravitational pull, no permanent market to act as a centre for social cohesion and interaction, at best, and as a gossip mart at worse. Even the three parish churches of Sliema suffer from the ennui of a hybrid, eclectic style, not bold enough to be captivating, not plain enough to be unoffending. The equally uninspired Anglican church of the Holy Trinity built in 1866 gave Sliema a second sobriquet: *tax-xelin*. Those Maltese who attended Anglican services received a one shilling handout – Judas money for the rest of the Catholics. Most of the other towns and village cores have focal points. Sliema next to none.

Would that be a reason why for a hundred years after the invention of photography (1840), Sliema seems to have remained so uninspirational, so sparingly photographed? Very likely not. Most photographers tended to be ‘commercial’ in the sense that professional camera artists succumbed to the tyranny of the market and went for views that would sell.

They pandered unashamedly to the buyer's interests. With very few tourists around, the bulk of their clients would inevitably be the numerous British armed forces stationed in, or passing through Malta, together with their families. That accounts for the vast quantities of postcards showing places of some military interest or of interest to the military, and unfortunately almost none of the smaller towns and villages, or aspects of indigenous life.

This reflection seems to be supported by the fact that, in the general Sliema area, far more postcards circulated of military barracks behind St. George's Bay, than of Sliema itself. The British Tommy and Jack Tar would want to send with a message or acquire as a keepsake cards showing his ship, his barracks, his parade ground, his march, his regiment, where he swam, where he lodged, where he enjoyed his grog and beer. Sliema, from that aspect, would have been almost wholly expendable.

We owe a considerable debt of gratitude to those few enterprising and far-sighted photographers and publishers who, with commercial odds stacked so heavily against them, nonetheless had the guts to record for posterity otherwise elusive and undocumented corners of time and space.

Not that one should look on Sliema postcards as absolute rarities. They exist, though in far fewer numbers than those of other major localities. But again, those Sliema cards that made it to the market because some photographers and postcard publishers took a risk and pushed their luck, generally turn out to be repetitive, obvious and, alas, rather dreary.

By far the majority opt for the Ferries landing place, though photographers showed considerable imagination in capturing the same spot from a surprising number of angles, with different props and in diverse lights. Next in popularity would be the Ghar id-dud promenade, and finally Tower Road as it once was. And that's about it.

Pre-postcard (1898) photographers of Sliema seem to be equally rare. The highly productive camera artists of the Victorian era, starting from the most profuse of them all, Horatio Agius, gave Sliema minimal attention, quite likely for exactly the same reasons as those that guided the century following. James Robertson and Richard Ellis, roughly contemporaries of Agius, similarly found Sliema uninspiring or unrewarding.

Roberto Paribeni in 1930 published a richly-illustrated book on Malta. He never once mentions Sliema in the text, and out of over 170 pictures, only one shows Sliema – and from a distance.

So what's new? Tony Armstrong Jones, in his now-classic collection of Malta photos published in 1958 did not include one single Sliema image. Its introduction by Sachaverell Sitwell almost explains why: "Of every ten Englishmen who have lived in Malta, nine have memories of Sliema. The waterfront has English signs

everywhere, and it is a place people are fond of although it is not beautiful. There are English wives pushing perambulators and the kettle is boiling on every floor. The aura of the seaside boarding house lies heavily on Sliema, a burden that must be lightened somehow if Malta is to attract visitors”.

Fifty years on, the seaside boarding house aura has disappeared with a vengeance, visitors crowd below the forgettable and supremely boring architecture of the rebuilt promenades, but the photogenic allure of Sliema has hardly improved at all.

I have selected, almost at random, 14 postcards from my collection – not necessarily the most representative. A few, sadly very few, cards show internal roads off the beaten track, everyday life, festas and events in Sliema – and these, to me are by far the most precious and interesting. This article only means to serve as an appetizer. I intend to publish a far more complete selection in a future *Histories of Malta*, possibly in Vol. IX.

One thing stands out in all these Sliema cards, some well over a hundred years old. In a short span Sliema has denounced its genteel, unhurried, refined, laid back atmosphere. The larger part of these cards shows no cars at all, at most one limo or a route bus, to instil some dynamism or novelty. Ghar id-Dud still consists of one or two-storey mezzanines and imaginative art nouveau buildings, now all demolished; in Tower Road, the row of variations on the bay-window theme, late Victorian and rather Brighton, is now only memory fodder.

I will try to follow a roughly chronological sequence, starting with a John Critien



Fig. 1

undivided back card – from an ‘aerial’ photo of the Landir.g Place going back almost certainly, to the 1890s (*Fig. 1*). *Karrozzini* by the dozen, some carts, one of the Sliema ferry boats, and the highest building soars to all of three floors.

The next two cards by the prolific and fastidious Italian publisher Modiano capture the same spot, but from different viewpoints. Modiano is known to have relied heavily on Ellis for his photographs, but one of these is uncredited. Of these two very early turn-of-the-century cards, one by Ellis focuses on the ferry pontoon (*Fig. 2*), the second one on Marina Street, with more ‘garrys’ in the forefront (*Fig. 3*) has no photographer’s credit.



Fig. 2

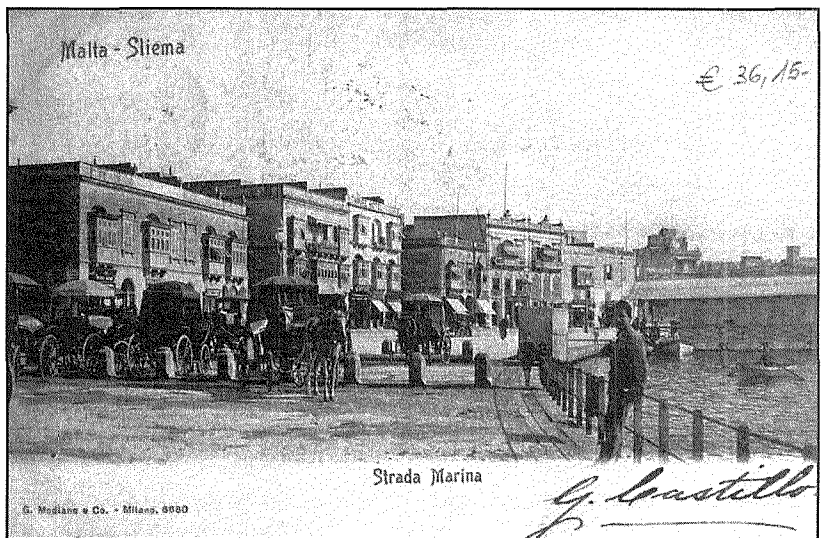


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

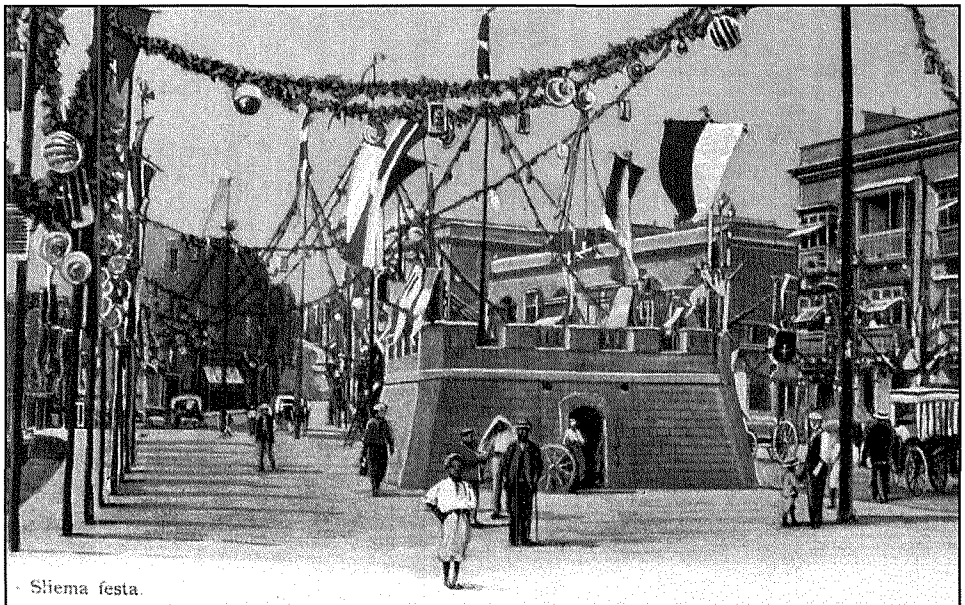


Fig. 5

A third card (*Fig. 4*) also by Modiano, but with my grandfather's imprint 'J. Bonello' depicts a rare naval fall-in (church parade?) at the Sliema landing place, also c. 1900 and uncredited. The sailors, in boots, still wear their sennet hats, called *benjies*, manufactured from imported weeds mostly in the Birkirkara households. These broad-brimmed hats the Admiralty only allowed in the tropics and the Mediterranean, but new orders, well before World War One, banned them and enforced the use of the regulation cap still current today.

From around the same time comes another Sliema card, one in colour belonging to the several series by Vincenzo Galea di Antonio, all dripping with charm (*Fig. 5*). It shows a 'Sliema festa', again at the Ferries landing place, with a squat tower which could have been a band-stand, banners, lanterns and festoons. Just behind the musical rostrum, Prince of Wales Road, now Manwel Dimech.

All the cards described so far were printed by ordinary typographical methods, and except for the coloured one, from astonishingly high resolution clichés. The ones that follow are real photographs, processed individually directly from a negative plate.

One of these, by the still unidentified photographer or publisher who signed his photos 'G.V.' snapped the far side of Ghar id-Dud, with the British 1876 Fort Sliema in the far background (*Fig. 6*). Of course, the logic of the market dictated

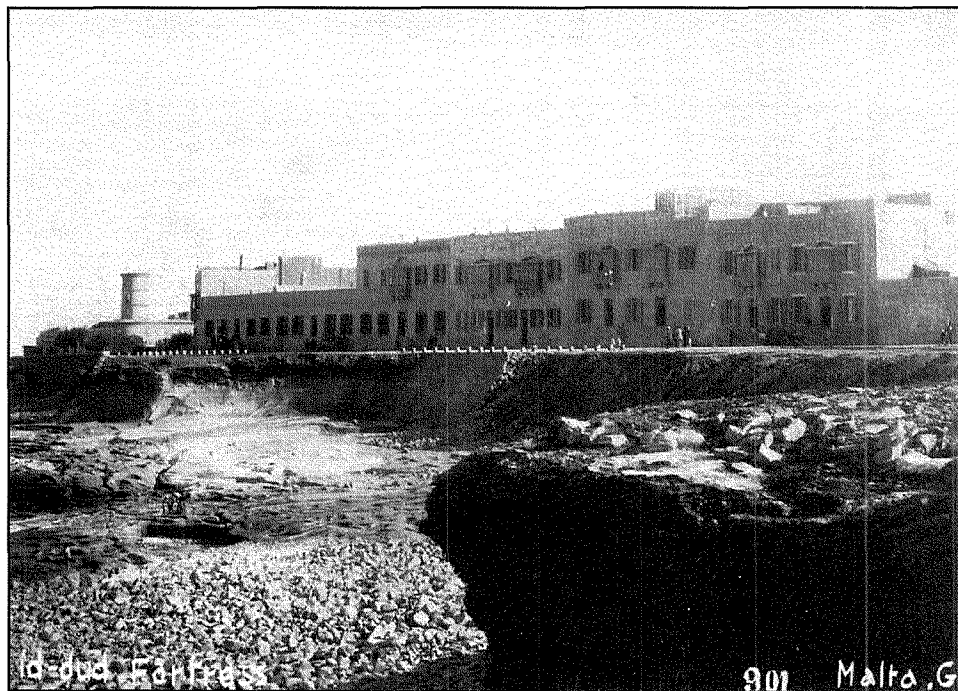


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

that the card be captioned ‘Ghar id-Dud Fortress’ - probably only the garrison stationed there would buy it. More Tower Road than Ghar id-Dud, it shows a long row of very plain one or two-storied houses and, at the extreme right, a low wall still leading to a field or garden.

More Tower Road, and several twin bay-windowed houses – with a yet unbuilt gap between them, the large Bellanti house at the corner, and the rubble wall of a field still in place (*Fig. 7*). Photographer and publisher unknown, but used in 1912 (final digit unclear). To compare with another Tower Road card, lacking any maker’s imprint, possibly by the highly skilled ‘amateur’ Alfred Vella Gera, a bark manager. The ‘Brighton’ promenade, now complete, hosts a



Fig. 10

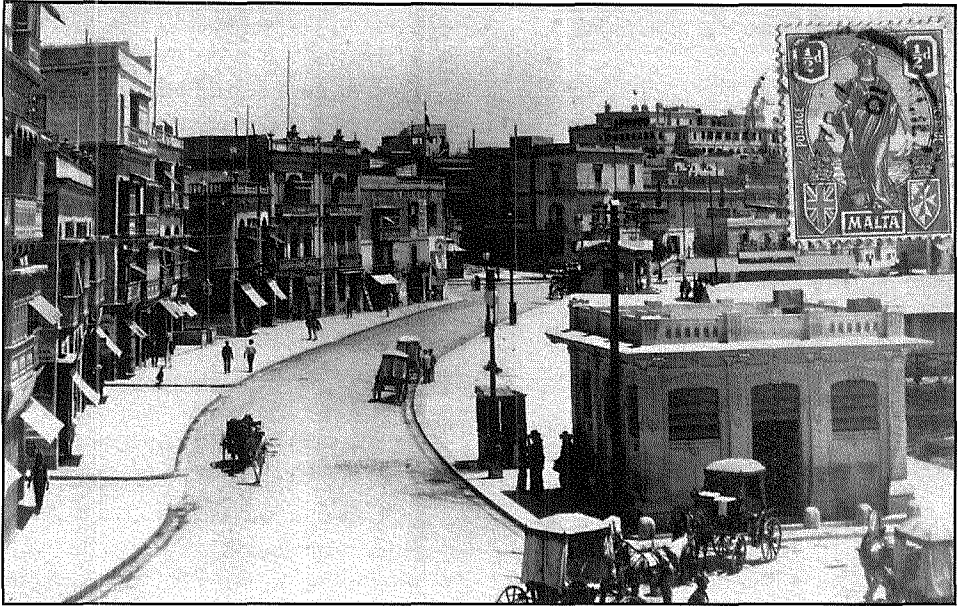


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

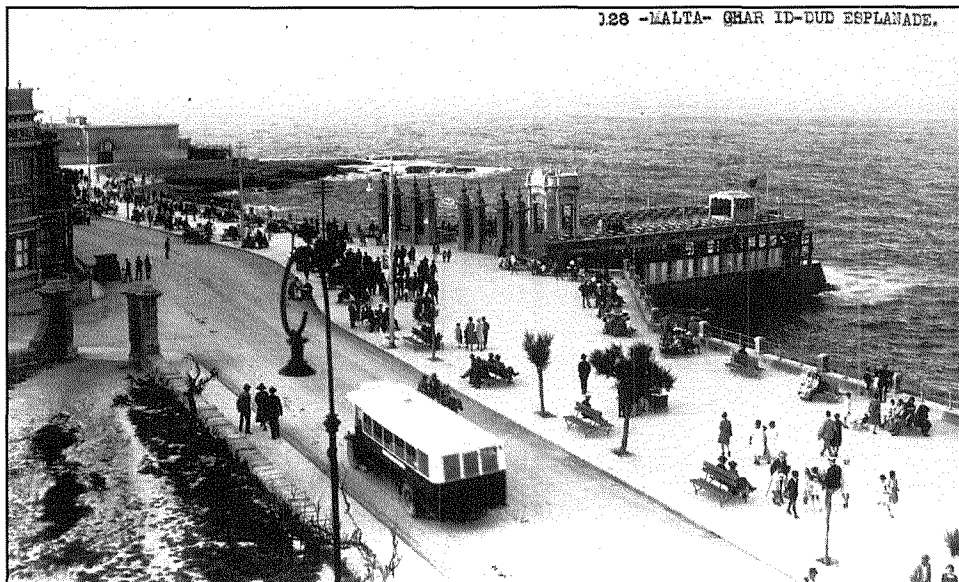


Fig. 13

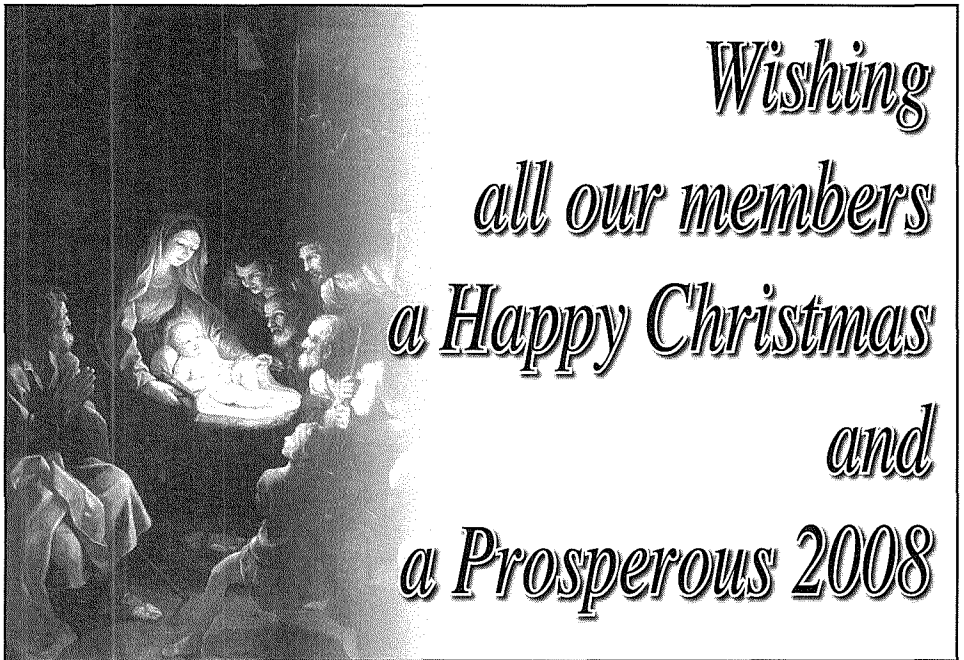
ta' Gasan charabanc with a snub nose engine almost flush with the driver's cabin, and all this dates it to the late 1920s or early 1930s (Fig. 8).

From about the same time comes an upright card of lower Prince of Wales road – no cars, one *karozzin* and a lady in *faldetta* over a white blouse – unusual (Fig. 9). Another internal road, this time Dingli Street from about the same time (Fig. 10) has imprinted on the back 'The Result Studio, Sliema' – again a known, but not yet clearly identified photographic establishment situated at the Ferries. I have inserted it to witness one scene that has not (yet) undergone cataclysmic changes, if you don't count unending parking on both sides of the road as one.

Back to the Ferries landing place – only twenty years later. Still no cars, but a well designed and possibly too imposing art nouveau public toilet dominates the foreground, not visible in the previous cards (Fig. 11). The final three photographic cards, all uncredited but one possibly by Alfred Vella Gera, come from the early 1930s, or maybe just earlier (Fig. 12, 13, 14). Particularly impressive is the dark *demm il-baqra* (burgandy red) art nouveau block of flats, to the left of where the Preluna skyscraper now towers. Not a single house visible in these three photographs survives today.



Fig. 14



*Wishing
all our members
a Happy Christmas
and
a Prosperous 2008*