

# AROUND MALTA



## Historical Background of Birkirkara "From Yesterday to Tomorrow"

Birkirkara is one of the older villages of Malta. As such its origins can be traced back to the Middle Ages.

However traces of human habitation in or around the locality goes back some millennia, testifying among others to the presence of the people, that in Malta were to develop the extraordinary culture, which produced the first free-standing, stone-built monuments in the world. Inhabitants of the Phoenician and Roman periods have left their mark in the place too.

Evidence for nearly all the first millennium after the fall of the Western Roman Empire is very scant throughout the islands. This holds true also for Birkirkara. But in the later Middle Ages we find Birkirkara as a definite demographic entity, and already being known by this name.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Maltese ecclesiastical authorities constituted Birkirkara and the surrounding area as a separate parish.

### Hospitallers

However, even up to the first decades of the presence of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John in Malta, from 1530 on, the islanders still led a precarious existence because of unexpected Corsair raids. This culminated in the great Turkish invasion of 1565, which though unsuccessful, left the island in a ruinous state - Birkirkara itself not excepted.

After this, the Knights had definitely decided to stay in Malta and started to build a new capital city - Valletta. This was followed in subsequent years by various military and infrastructural projects, which together with the practice of privateering, brought a period of relative prosperity to the islands.

This was naturally extended to the villages as well. A higher standard of living started to be experienced, especially in a better type of housing. Besides, from the early seventeenth century onwards practically all the older villages started building new parish churches, which were to be the main landmark and the pride of each community.

One of the very first of these was the Old Parish church of Birkirkara dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin. It was built in the characteristic belated renaissance style that flourished under the auspices of the Knights in the first fifty years or so after the Great Siege. In this church too, the first collegiate in Malta was established in 1630.

### Baroque Church

But hardly a century later, the people of Birkirkara started to build a new and larger church in the baroque style. This church dedicated to Saint Helen, is still the principal church of the town.

The Order's rule in Malta was abruptly terminated when Napoleon himself took over the islands for France in 1798. The vicissitudes and depredations of the subsequent three months led to an all-out insurrection by the Maltese in the countryside. The French garrison was pinned down behind the fortifications of Valletta and the harbour cities, which Napoleon had coveted so much. They withstood the siege for two years and finally capitulated to the com-

mander of the British forces that had come in aid of the Maltese. After this Malta became a British possession.

The British soon assumed all authority in the islands. But the Maltese started their long and unabated fight for their lost rights, finally achieving independence in 1964. This was not to be however, before a second siege by Axis air and sea forces during World War two. During this time, Birkirkara was one of the main inland towns receiving refugees from the worst-hit harbour area, although itself suffered its share in the toll due to enemy air incursions.

### The Train

Up to 1931 Malta had its own railway line that ran from Valletta to the ancient capital - Mdina in the heart of the island. It was a single track but at this place, which was then one of the stations en-route, the track was double to allow trains coming from opposite directions to overtake.

Station



Festa preparations



### The Turn of the Century

By the turn of the century, Birkirkara found itself undergoing a slow though radical change. Up to then, the local population was about 8,000 and mainly engaged in agricultural and allied activities.

But better job opportunities attracted workers from further afield to the harbour areas and when the immediate vicinity of Valletta was saturated, Birkirkara was found to be a convenient place of residence by employees in the harbour industrial and British military establishments.

Agriculture hereafter began to be regarded by many as a part-time supplementary activity. Better communications, which for about half a century included a limited railway service, that was later to be supplanted by better roads and a bus service, had in the meantime made this possible.

The population figure for Birkirkara which continually grew now stands at 22,000 or thereabouts.

### St. Helen's Collegiate Basilica

It was begun in 1727 and has a three-bayed facade of superimposed composite and Corinthian pilasters with a projecting centrepiece. It is topped by a restricted ornate pediment and twin florid belfries with statues that add to the flamboyant effect. It was blessed in 1745 but was not finished before 1866. Inside, it has a cruciform shape with a three-bayed nave and side chapels. The twin ribbed vaults and the dome were all frescoed by roman artist Virginio Monti (1910).

The Basilica



The church possesses various noteworthy works of art. These include no less than fourteen paintings by the Maltese baroque genius, Francesco Zahra. Of the various processional statues. Mention must be made of the polychrome wood statues of S. Joseph (1926) and that of S. Helen (1837).

This last statue was donated by Vincenzo Borg, local patriot and leader during the blockade of the French (1798-1800).

S. Helen's is the seat of a capitular chapter erected in the old parish church in 1630 through the efforts of Don Filippo Borg. It was granted basilical status in 1950.

Like all other Maltese towns and villages, Birkirkara also has its characteristic *festas*. In fact every major church here celebrates its own *festa*. But without doubt, the principal feast is that of St. Helena which is celebrated in August. For this occasion, not only the church is decorated but also many streets in the centre of the town.

The statue of B'Kara's patron St. Helen is carried in the procession every 18th August as part of the feast celebrations.

### The Feast of B'kara

Birkirkara's feast is individual in that the procession takes place in the morning instead of in the evening. By eight o'clock the church square is thronging with locals and visitors who make it a point to be there in spite of yesternight's late hours and of the unrelenting scorching sun.

The last instants of this event are the most momentous, as the statue, carried shoulder high, comes back into the square and is taken up on the parvis amid a rapturous applause.

B'kara Feast



Lane



Houses

