

# CULTURE COLUMN

## MDINA - THE SILENT CITY

**THE NICKNAME** of the 'silent city' which Mdina has coined seems incongruous on a busy afternoon when tourists are teeming through the city gate. Local Mayor, George Attard, assured us, however, that there are times of the day when Mdina does regain an air of tranquility, especially during the evening. "He told *The People* that the 'silent city' description is thought to be the creation of Sir Harry Luke, once Secretary to the Governor, although noone is quite sure of the origin. Certainly, the fact that only permitted vehicles can enter Mdina helps to lessen the noise and elevate Malta's former capital above other localities.

**With the earthquake of 1693, Citta Vecchia as Mdina was then known, was gradually rebuilt, with the Order gradually lavishing money on the city**

treasures looted from the city's Carmelite church. The furious Maltese rioted, killed the French commander and began the rebellion that led to the French being besieged inside Valletta and eventually, with the aid of the British, overthrown.

### REHABILITATION NEEDED

Today Mdina stands surrounded by bastions and twisting, narrow alleyways. Some of the existing architecture dates back to times before the Order, such as the medieval Palazzo Falzon, where the grand master received the keys to the city in 1530, and the original Roman city walls. The knights' influence in Mdina is restricted to a few buildings such as the Palazzo Vilhena and the baroque Cathedral of St. Paul's. The city still retains

a majestic aura, although Mayor Attard told *The People* that some of the buildings are in desperate need of restoration. "We were promised a Rehabilitation Committee for Rabat and Mdina," he said, "and some of the older properties such as the palaces are badly in need of repair work. However, despite pledges from the Government, we are still waiting for the setting up of the Committee."

### MELITA

Mdina was first invaded by Neolithic man and the Phoenicians, although the Romans were the first to colonize the area. Their settlement was named "Melita", the same as the Island and the city walls, which spread into Rabat gave the settlers good, natural defences in the north and east. The Arabs adopted Melita as their capital in 870 AD, renaming it Medina (the walled city). They dug a moat and strengthened the southern walls, which proved to be a sufficient defence until 1090 when the city was stormed by Count Roger the Norman with the spread of Christianity. Two hundred years after the Arab occupation ended in 1224, the city was renamed Citta Notabile and in 1571 when Valletta became the capital, the name Citta Vecchia was adopted.

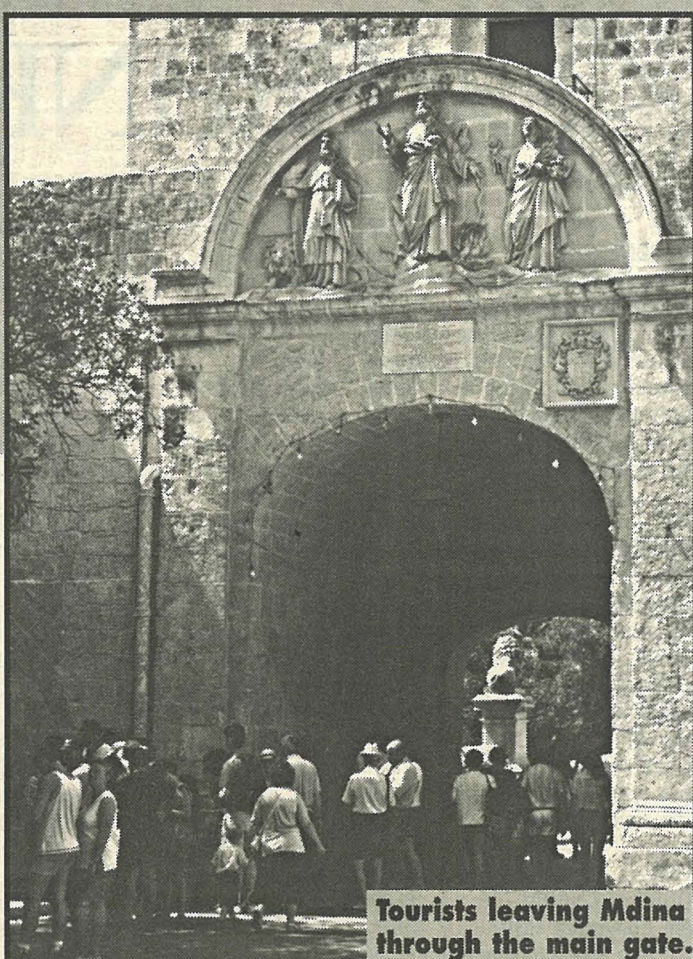
During the 17th. century, the city fell into a state of decline.

### EARTHQUAKE

However, with the earthquake of 1693, the Order decided to gradually rebuild the city, channelling a large amount of money into the project. By 1798, the keys to the city were formally in the hands of

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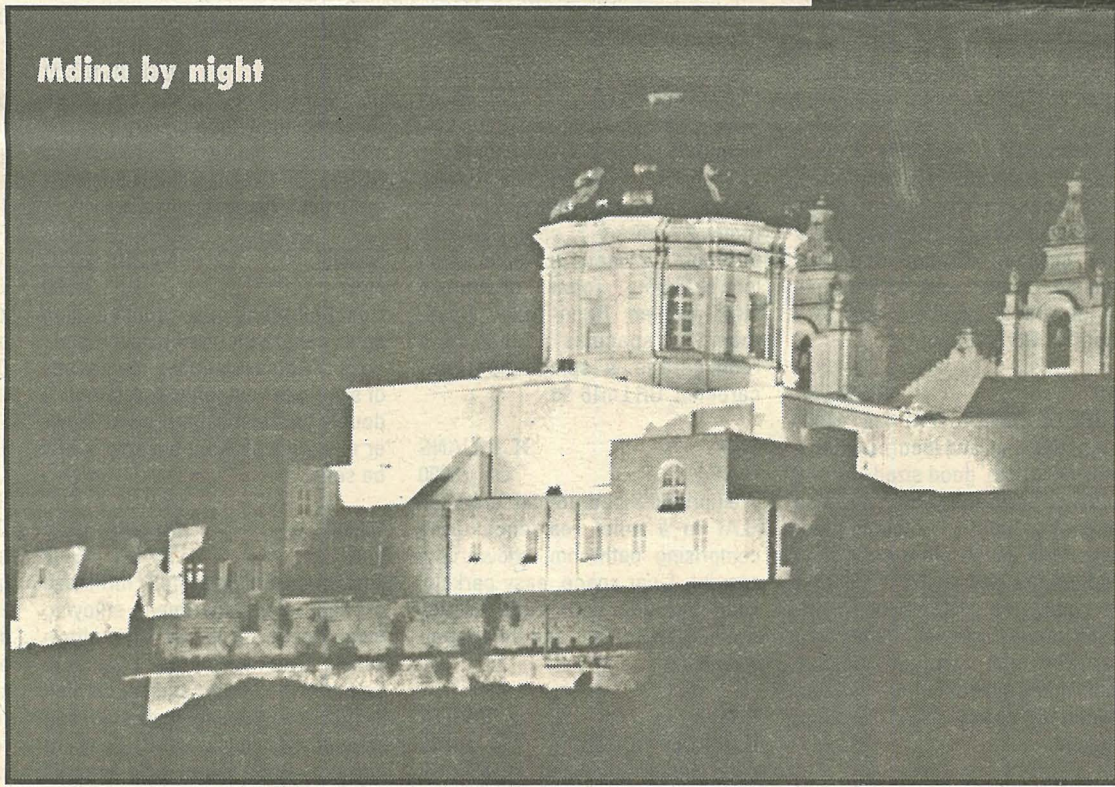
Napolean's governor designate, General Vaubois, and the Order's reign was over. Napolean's efforts at war were low on funds and within three months the French started auctioning



**Tourists leaving Mdina through the main gate.**

The typically baroque architecture of the gate, dating from 1724, is the work of Grand Master de Vilhena. Traditionally, when a new Grand Master was elected, he would make the procession with his entourage, journeying from Valletta to Mdina. Here, the Grand Master was ceremoniously given the silver keys to the city.

Mdina still retains a majestic aura. St. Paul's Cathedral, which dominates the skyline, is often described as the most mature example of Maltese baroque. Legend says that the cathedral, dating back to 1697, is built on the site of the villa belonging to the Roman governor, Publius. According to tradition, the shipwrecked St. Paul healed Publius' father and converted the governor himself to Christianity. Publius later became the first bishop of Malta.



**Mdina by night**