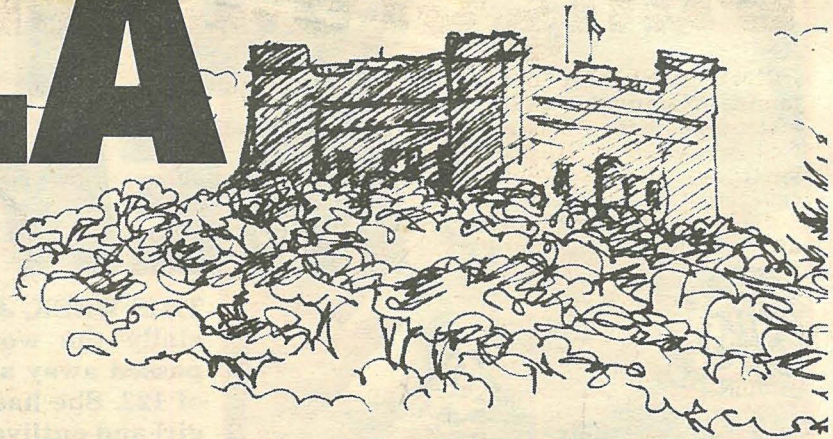


# VERDALA CASTLE



**The knights called it Boshetto (little wood), the only real woodland area in Malta and is overlooked by the Verdala Castle.**

No more than 2 km away from Dingli Cliffs and sitting under the watchful eye of Cardinal Grand Master de Verdalle's summer retreat are Buskett Gardens.

Panopies of foliage spread their shade over the valley floor, providing welcome respite against the heat of the summer. Orange trees, tall sad cypress trees, irregular cactuses, leguminous carobs, aromatic firs and the Judas tree (destined to foretell Easter with its pink blossom, and the tree from which he is said to have hung himself) are some of the randomly planted flora.

In its midst stands the majestic Verdala Castle. Grand Master de la Vallette was a humble man of gran-

ite Christian morals who was content with a tiny hunting lodge in the Boshetto from which he would hunt with his cross-bow.

Cardinal Grand Master de Verdalle, who resigned only 14 years later, was less the warrior and more the sybarite. The Verdala Castle was his specially commissioned palazzo, disguised as a castle; somewhere he could escape the oppressive summer heat of Valletta and feed his voracious appetite for the trappings of state.

The site he chose was on top of the hard rock overlooking Boshetto, from which he could see nearly all of his archipelago.

The design of the three story castle is credited to Gerolamo Cassar and construction began the year he died, 1586.

Initially, all the Castle's stone was quarried from the site and the excavations

formed the existing dry moat. In each of the four corners – the plan is basically symmetrical – is a bastioned tower which rises above the top floor.

At the garden entrance Grand Master de Vilhena, another Epicurean, added both the elaborate balustrade and his gigantic escuteon.

Inside the main door is a further signpost to its egocentric creator. A marble bust shows off his Byzantine collection of facial features: a tall slender forehead over hard eyes and flared nostrils set in a tight face that ends in a goatee on a virile chin.

This is the face of a man who did not find his penchant for piracy incompatible with holding office of cardinal to the Pope (the only grand master to receive this honour).

On his deathbed de Verdalle bequeathed to the Order all his vast wealth – even his quint – which he

had accumulated with the Order's laws, thereby silencing from the grave his many detractors.

The ceiling above the ground floor is by Paladini, whose frescoes show the high points of de Verdalle's illustrious life.

In the adjoining hall two chessboards carved into the stone floor are by French officers imprisoned here by the British during the Royal Navy blockade I 1800 (there is another in the top garret).

The bastioned towers are divided into passages, grim little cells and torture chambers for anyone who fell foul of the grand master.

From the roof you can see most of Malta through 360° as well as the southern Ta' Cenc cliffs of Gozo.

In the gardens and abutting the castle, is the Chapel of St Anthony the Hermit, built in the 16th century. The work by Mattea Preti, The Madonna and Child, is

overshadowed by the garish sculpture of The Pieta.

The Verdala Castle has its own ghostly spectre that is rumoured to wander around in the shape of the *Blue Lady*. The story goes that the *Blue Lady* was the niece of Grand Master de Rohan.

The *Blue Lady* came to grief after she rejected the advances of an amorous suitor who locked her in a room and kept her against her will. One day she managed to escape from her room, found an open window, and jumped to her death.

She is called the *Blue Lady* because she was wearing a blue dress when she ended her life.

A further touch of romanticism can be found, when each year the August Moon Ball is held in Verdala Castle's grounds in aid of the Community Chest Fund. Verdala Castle also appears on the Marsovin Verdala Wine bottles.