

MALTA IN THE WEMBLEY EXHIBITION, 1924

Postal Connections

by Giovanni Bonello LLD.

In the tradition of the great Universal Exhibitions which had gained popularity and momentum in the previous century, London embarked on its own showpiece in 1924, to demonstrate to the world the might of the British Empire.

1924 was a momentous year for Britain. Stanley Baldwin's Conservatives resigned in January, to be followed by the first Labour Government ever, led by Ramsey MacDonald, only to be shortly later heavily defeated at the polls by the Conservatives. Baldwin was back with a vengeance in October. The Prince of Wales, later the short-lived King Edward VIII, chaired the Exhibition. Baldwin and Edward VIII soon fell out badly over the Wally Simpson romance.

The exhibition had been meticulously planned since the end of the First World War. Britain expected every dominion and colony to be present with its own pavilion.

The choice of a venue fell on Wembley. A huge park was laid out, including a new soccer stadium, virtually the only structure that survives today.

The design of the Malta Pavilion was entrusted to architect Joseph Cachia Caruana (1894 - 1981) who conceived the edifice as a walled fortress, to which access was gained



King George V, King Victor Emmanuel III and Queen Elena of Italy visiting the Malta Pavilion at Wembley on May 28, 1924.

through a full-scale replica of Mdina gate. Three large halls made up the interior space; one for Malta's prehistory, another for the island under the Knights and finally one for contemporary industry, trade and art.

King George V inaugurated the Exhibition on April 23. Royalty and heads of state from all over the world had been invited. In fact, King George V, King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy, together with his wife Queen Elena from Montenegro, the Prime Minister of the U.K. and the Governor of Malta, Lord Plumer, visited the Malta Pavilion together on May 28. King Victor Emmanuel's troubles had to start that year: Benito Mussolini won a convincing victory in the parliamentary elections in Italy.

Preparations for the occasion had been going on in Malta for quite some time, with a grand preliminary exhibition being organised at the Auberge d'Italie, for a selection of those firms, products and works of art that would be sent to Wembley, to be displayed during the British Empire Exhibition. Keen rivalry underscored the competition.

The cream of local artists took part: from Edward Caruana Dingli (with a Salome) to Giuseppe Cali (with a Madonna and Child), Lazzaro Pisani (Death of Abel), Gianni Vella (Youth) and Gużè Duca who entered a scene of Marsamxett harbour with a policeman booking a boy swimming starkers. Lord Plumer's portrait, by Edward Caruana Dingli, was also on show at Wembley. It is now in the Casino Maltese, Valletta.

Two other local artists played a prominent role in the pavilion. Robert Caruana Dingli painted the large frieze running round the whole of the Neolithic hall. I still have his letters to my father, discussing the progress of the pictures and asking for advice. If I remember correctly, the canvases, or some of them, now hang in the Ghar Dalam museum.

Ramiro Cali executed the friezes round the Hall of the Knights of Malta, representing episodes from the history of the Order, and some of its buildings. He also authored a large allegory of Malta under British rule, now, I believe, in the staircase of the Maritime Museum at Vittoriosa.

The prehistoric section showed models of the neolithic temples, the 'fat lady' sculptures and a large profusion of ancient pottery. Originals or replicas? The priceless jars and bowls, looking more fragile than ever, sit, totally unprotected, on tables and shelves. An elbow in the wrong direction and 5000 years of history would turn to powder.

The organisers cluttered the Hall of the Knights with a huge medley of paintings, mirrors, wall-clocks, furniture, arms and armour. By today's canons of display that mass of objects, often on three tiers, would be deemed unseemly, notwithstanding the worth and beauty of each individual item.

Many products of Malta were on show in the contemporary "Industrial Section" to stimulate orders and business opportunities. Cigarettes from the ATLAM factory, stone carvings, embroidery, pottery, wickerwork, filigree and wood products, together with edibles, such as honey, jams, oranges, grapes, wine etc, and "attractive young women making Malta lace".

The silversmith's craft, proudly displayed a model of HMS Renown and one of Verdala Castle by Francis Meli, recently again on show at the Silver Exhibition organised by *Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti* in 1995 at the Palace, Valletta. The infant tourist industry also exploited the Pavilion as a showpiece and a promotion occasion.

The Exhibition, meant to close down in November, turned out to be such a popular

success that it had to be extended well into the following year. In all it welcomed 14 million visitors, with peaks of up to 300,000 in one day.

The Maltese government (in 1924 headed by Francesco Buhagiar and, later that year, by Sir Ugo Mifsud) commissioned Edward Caruana Dingli for the artwork of two postcards, as souvenirs of the Wembley Exhibition. These were splendidly printed in full colour by Ritcher & Co of Naples. One represents a Maltese lady in faldetta against a sunset on Grand Harbour; the other the close-up of a country woman selling oranges against the Cottonera side of Grand Harbour. They both show the Tourist Board's slogan: Malta - the Island of Sunshine and History.

The prolific London postcard firm of Raphael Tuck & Sons Ltd already had to its credit a number of attractive Malta sets; it did not let the Empire exhibition go by without putting its wares on the market. It published a set of 12 sepia photogravure cards, representing in detail the Malta Pavilion - externally and internally, together with views of Malta and a tourist collage. They sold in two separate envelopes of six cards each.

The Maltese government kept the copyright on all the cards. Those which are not photographs reproduce sections of the frieze in the Hall of the Knights of Malta and are probably the work of Ramiro Cali, except for the last one, showing Neptune overlooking Ta' Liesse and Grand Harbour, which seems more in the pictorial style of Edward Caruana Dingli.

Postcards in full colour commissioned by the Malta Government from the painter Edward Caruana Dingli to serve as a souvenir of the British Empire Exhibition in Wembley in 1924

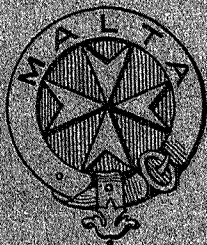


Six Photogravure Postcards

OF

MALTA

Reproduced by RAPHAEL TUCK & SONS, Ltd.



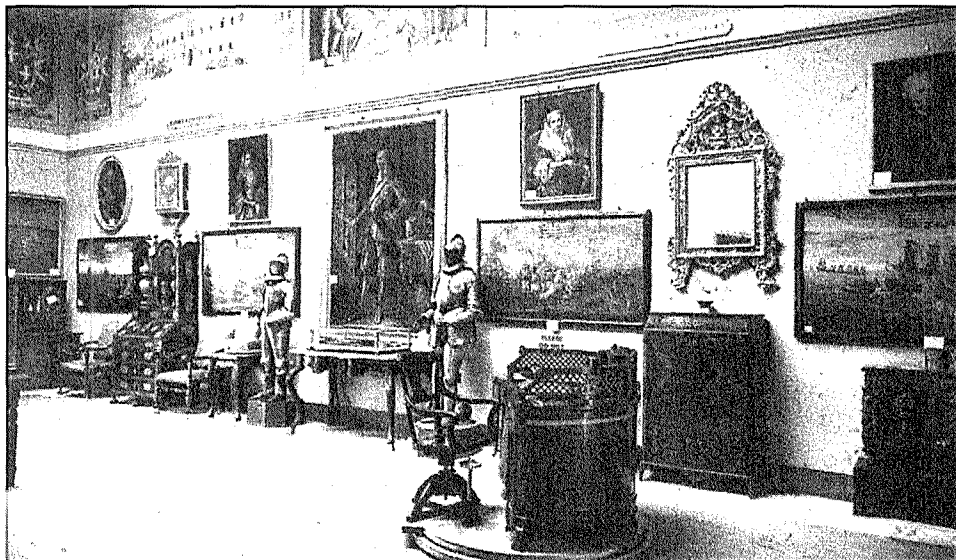
Specially taken for

THE BRITISH EMPIRE EXHIBITION

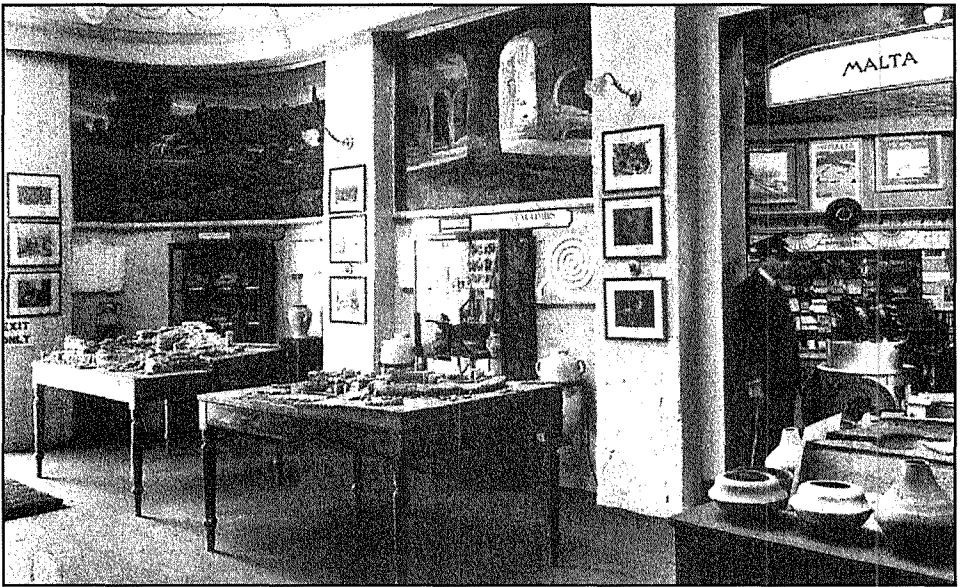
1924

SERIES 1

Envelope containing a set of six cards published by Raphael Tuck & Sons in 1924 on the occasion of the Wembley Exhibition.



“Hall of Malta under the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem”.
No.2 in the Raphael Tuck series of 12.

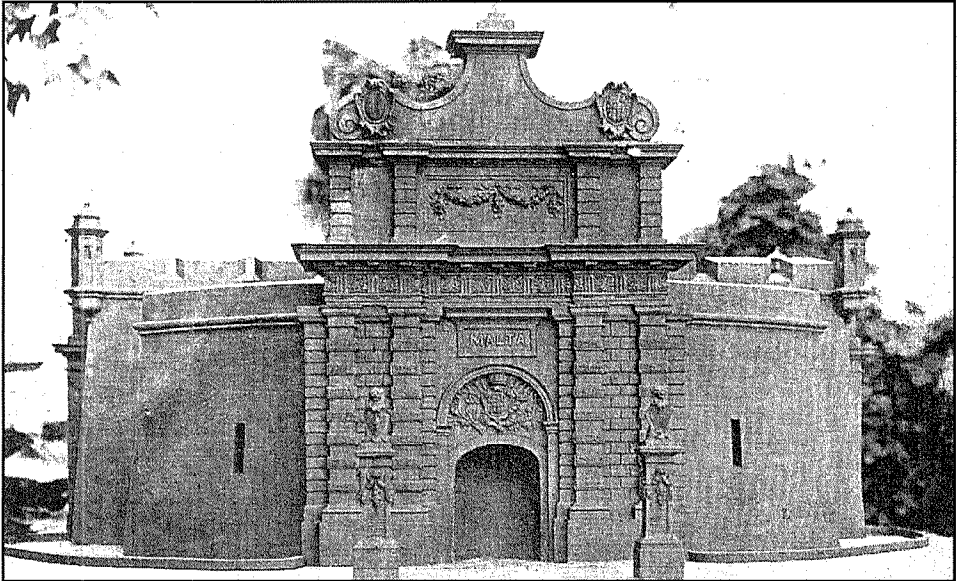


“Prehistoric Malta Section”. No. 4 in the Raphael Tuck series.



**“Industrial Malta Section”.
No. 7 in the Raphael
Tuck sets.**

Concurrently, Malta distributed a large black and white card showing the Pavilion, with a short script in the then trendy Art Deco style, and a booklet about Malta, specially prepared for the Exhibition, which sold for four pence.



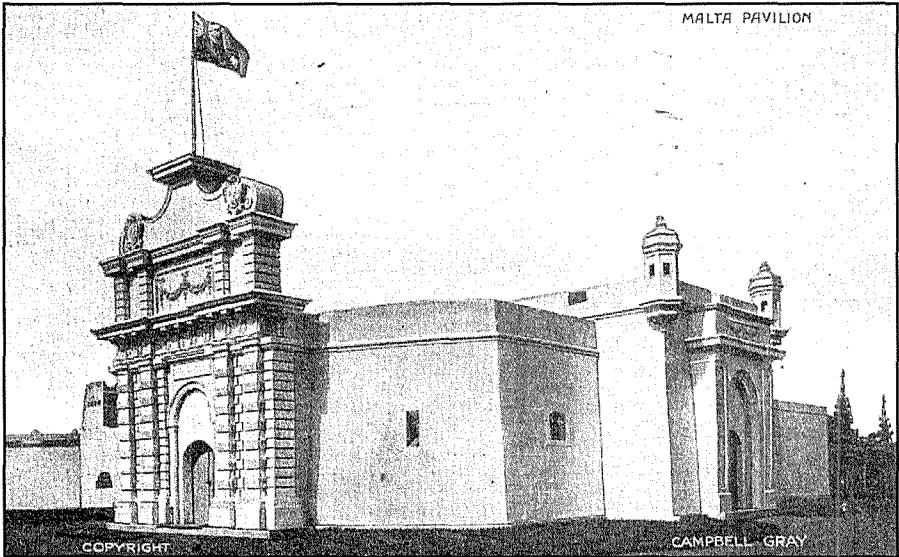
THE MALTA PAVILION
AT THE
British Empire Exhibition 1924

Large card showing architect Joseph Cachia Caruana's concept of the Malta Pavilion at Wembley.

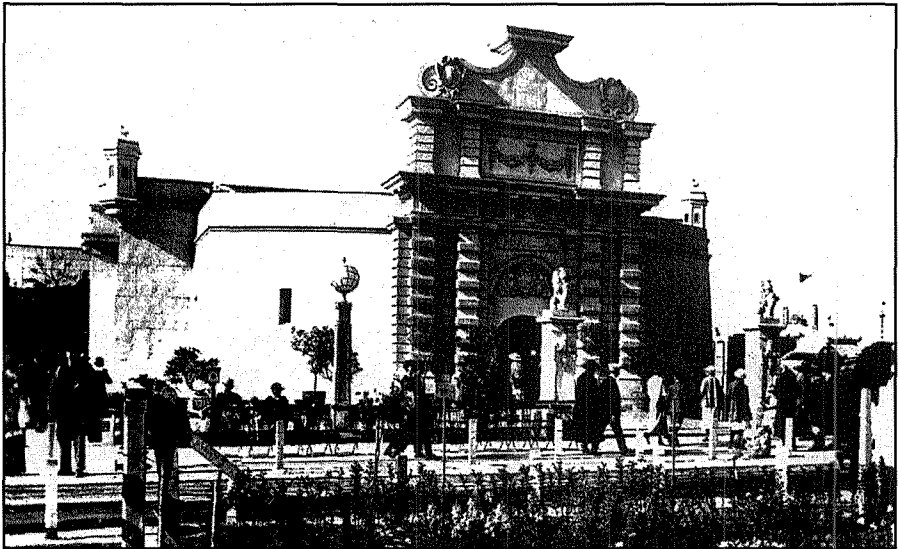
The Raphael Tuck & Sons Ltd sets for the Malta Pavilion at Wembley

- 1 Hall of Malta under the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. Photo.
- 2 Ditto (another angle). Photo.
- 3 Prehistoric Malta Section. Photo.
- 4 Ditto (another angle). Photo.
- 5 The Grand Harbour and the Three Cities Malta. Artwork (probably by Ramiro Cali).
- 6 The Malta Pavilion at Wembley. Photo.
- 7 Industrial Section Malta. Upright. Photo.
- 8 Valletta and the Marsamuxetto Harbour/The Destroyers of the Mediterranean Fleet moor in this Harbour. Artwork (probably by Ramiro Cali).
- 9 Auberge de Castille, Valletta, Malta. Artwork (probably by Ramiro Cali).
- 10 A Maltese boat. Artwork (probably by Ramiro Cali).
- 11 Picturesque Malta. Upright. (The 'fjord' before Ghar Lapsi). Photograph.
- 12 Malta. The Island of Sunshine. Upright. (The statue of Neptune overlooking Liesse Church and Grand Harbour). Artwork (probably by Edward Caruana Dingli).

Two other British publishers printed postcards of the Malta Pavilion, all based on photographs by Campell Gray. One was the Fleetway Press of Holborn, the other Wildt and Kray of London. Curiously, Campbell Gray's photo of the Pavilion is common to both publishers.



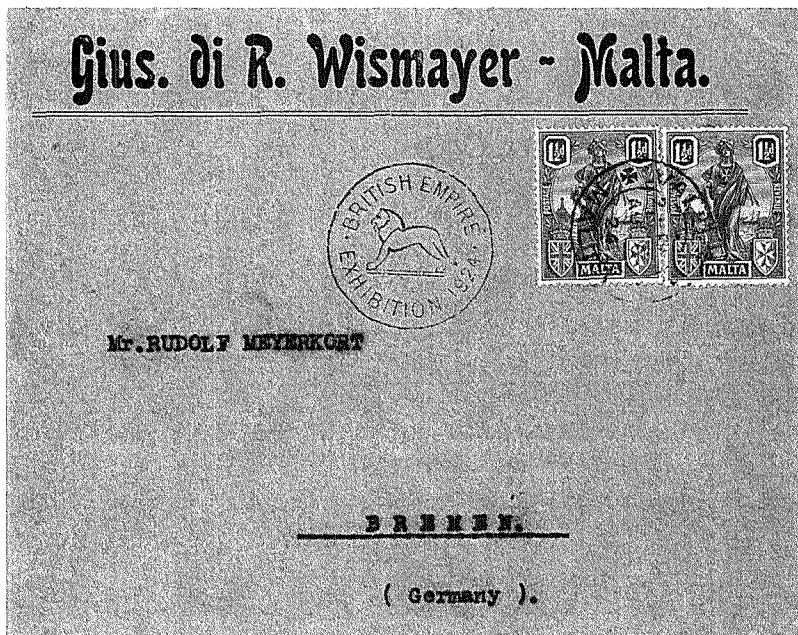
**One of the cards issued by the publishers Fleetway Press
for the British Empire Exhibition of 1924.**



**One of the cards issued by the publishers Wildt & Kray in connection
with the Wembley Exhibition.**

(All illustrations from the author's collections)

The Malta Post Office made history by issuing its first-ever commemorative handstamp. Before Wembley, the only cancellation used by the local postal authorities consisted of a cachet indicating the post office and the day of cancellation. The first exception was made for the Wembley Exhibition - a circular cachet with the British lion at the centre and the words "British Empire Exhibition 1924" round the rim. The graphics of the lion used by our Post Office reproduce the official logo of the exhibition.



Envelope showing the first ever commemorative handstamp issued by the Malta Post Office in conjunction with the Wembley Exhibition.

Very likely three 'Wembley' handstamps were issued: one each for the Valletta, Sliema and Cospicua post offices. They were already in use in May 1923; collectors prize envelopes and cards displaying the cancellation; they fetch dizzy prices on the market.