

A UNIQUE USE OF THE 1817 "MALTA" and a tale of gun-running from Malta.

By Vanni Bonello LL.D.

On March 22, 1989, Christie's Robson Lowe sold by auction in London the important "Francisco" collection of Maltese postal history.

One of the star items in that sale was a letter with the extremely rare 1817 'MALTA' handstamp (MLL). The auction catalogue, following previous publications, states: "This handstamp was only in use from 23rd March until 14 July 1817, and has only been seen in letters from naval personnel (Fig.1).

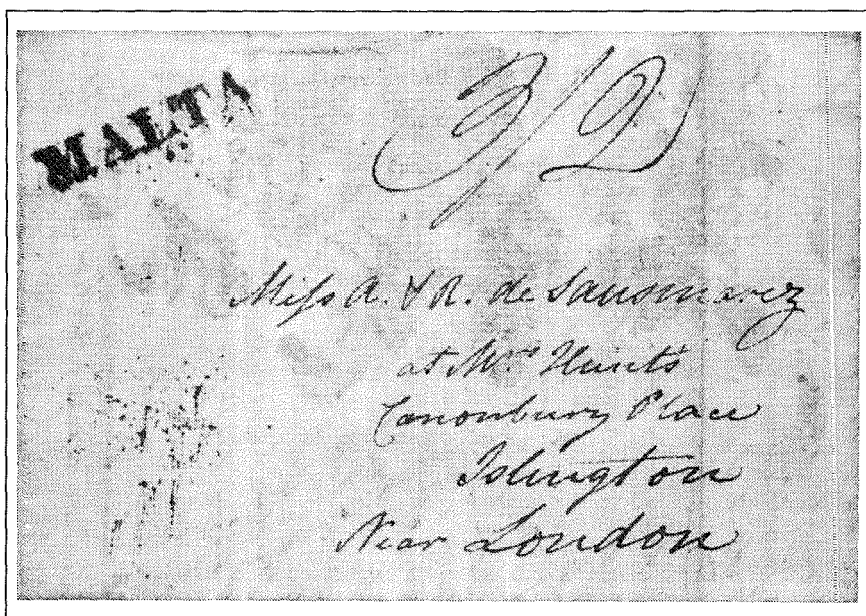


Fig.1 The MLL letter offered in the "Francisco" sale. Dated May 15, 1817, it is headed "H.M. Ship Tagus at Malta" and is rated "3/2".

There is little doubt about the extreme rarity of this handstamp, probably due to the very short span of its use.

I am today pleased to be able to publish another example of this rare MALTA handstamp (Fig.2). This letter is unique in so far as it is the only one known to date that has no military or naval connection. It is a business communication from one merchant in Malta to a commercial firm in London. This, to me, seems to prove conclusively that the exclusively naval purpose of this MALTA handstamp, should now be discarded.

The contents of this letter are quite interesting. They range from gun running to Maltese

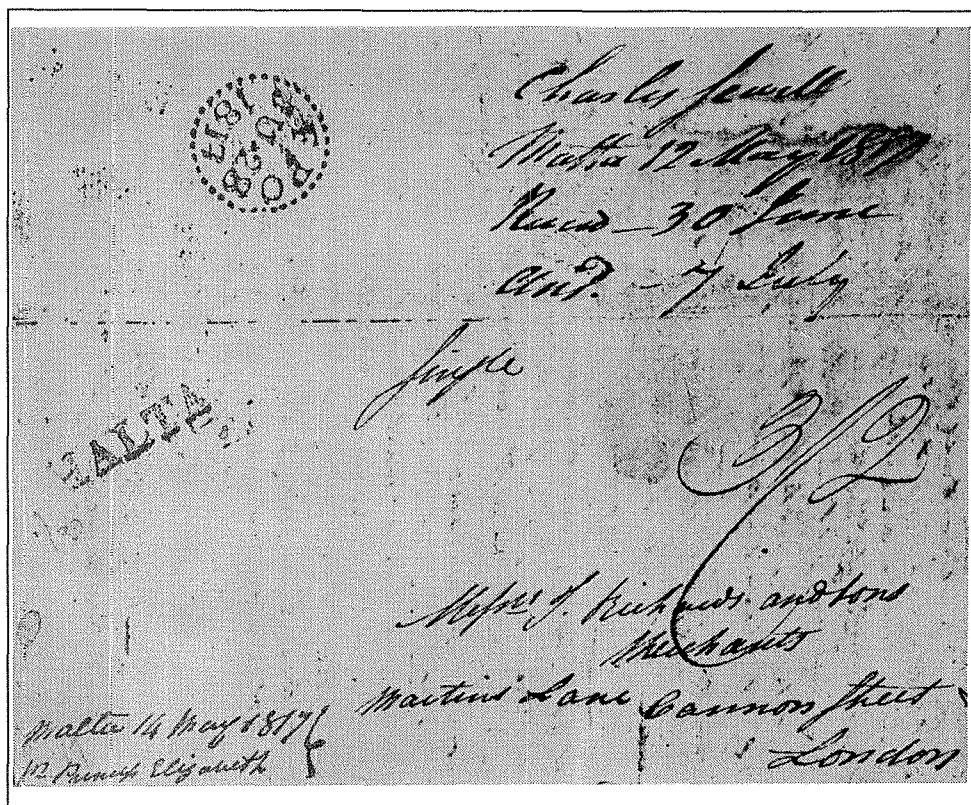


Fig.2 The MLL letter, posted one day earlier (May 14, 1817) from Charles Sewell marked "single" and also rated "3/2" by the same hand as Fig 1. The back panel shows the F.P.O. handstamp, dated June 28, 1817. This letter sent by the Packet "Princess Elizabeth" proves that the MLL handstamp was not, as hitherto believed, reserved for Naval mail, but was also used on civilian correspondence.

oranges. Charles Sewell (or Jewell?) is writing from "Lavalletta" to Messrs J. Richards and Sons, Merchants, of Martin's Lane, Cannon Street, London, on a double foolscap with a handwriting so minuscule that legibility occasionally degenerates into guesswork.

This letter actually consists of two separate messages. First, the replica of a letter already sent on April 24, 1817, per "Princess Elizabeth". Sending the same letter twice was quite customary, to ensure that the message reached its destination, should the original have been somehow mislaid.

The second part consists of the letter proper which, as appears from the front panel, was posted on May 14, 1817. This makes it just one day earlier than the "Francisco" letter, dated May 15! One can reasonably surmise that the two letters travelled together by the same Packet, the "Princess Elizabeth".

The previous letter copied

Mr Sewell starts his first letter by lamenting about the slowness of the postal service. One letter

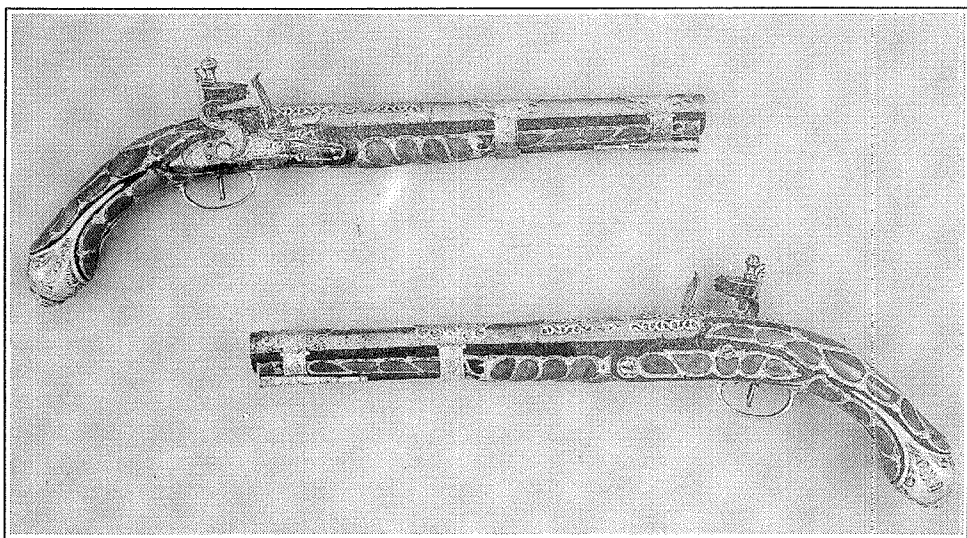


Fig.3 A pair of early XIX Cent. flintlock pistols, manufactured in Europe for the Islamic market. Mr Sewell's letter refers repeatedly to arms deals in lands belonging to the Turkish Empire, and more particularly to similar pistols and guns.

from Messrs Richards, he says, took three months less eleven days to reach him from London. "It is the most disadvantageous conveyance there is", he observes, "it would at all events be preferable to direct per via Marseilles".

He then quotes from a letter by a "Mr.P." whom he had asked to manufacture 25 Turkish watches at 50/- each. Mr. P. answered that the least he could do them for was 55/- each. Only two craftsmen now do these watches, and they can quote their own prices.

Sewell then tells Messrs Richards: "you blame me for purchasing the oranges... the greatest part of the cases were furnished from the same garden and there is no fruit but what came from there at less than 12/- a box freight. A Mr Vicase last year received net £99.4s for 24 Boxes from the same gardens and he paid 6/6 a Box more and 5/- more freight than we do this year."

Mr Sewell then laments that "business is in such a state that with the most rigid economy, it is as much as I can do to maintain myself..."

"My correspondent at Zante", adds Mr Sewell, "informs me that low priced guns will sell at that island, and he has sold 4 of those which I sent up to him as samples of those refused. He also states that he has been offered \$14 a pair for holster pistols. This would be a loss of at least 18%. I have sent samples of same to Alexandria; if nothing offers better, than I shall direct him to sell them.

"He recommends the large Turkish gun to be sent to Alexandria" adds Mr Sewell, "to the British Consul with whom he is in correspondence, as it is much too fine for either Zante or the Morea".

He then turns to an order for locks: "not very fine, Japanned with and without handles, drawer locks, trunk ditto, bolts for windows not too strong, nails, hinges, different sizes both long and short for light doors and Co. Brassware ornaments with tacks, spare tacks, chisels, handsaws, tenor saws, a few files both for wood and iron".



Fig.4 A Maltese orange-seller, photographed late in the XIX Cent. Mr Sewell's letter refers to the unsuccessful export of Maltese oranges to England.

The new letter

Then comes the letter proper, dated May 12, 1817 (but posted on the 14th) which refers again to the export of oranges from Malta. That they arrived in bad condition says Mr Sewell "is almost unaccountable and not my fault but my misfortune".

Returning to guns he says: "I have lately received a letter from Alexandria which informs me that the guns sent per "Friendship" have had very advantageous offers made for them...

The pistols, I am afraid, shall not do so well with their very high prices prevent anyone offering for them, but when I know exactly what the guns will fetch, I will arrange them to prevent your being too great a sufferer.

"By the first opportunity," writes Mr Sewell, "I will send one case of guns to Smyrna, and samples of holster pistols. There are samples of these at Corfu, Zante, Patras and Alexandria, and they do not suit without a loss at any of those places."

Then comes news of some historical value: "By letters received from various parts of the Levant it appears the Turkish Government is arming a great number of men and the very ready offers that were made for the arms I sent to Alexandria seem to warrant a conclusion that a larger quantity of guns would answer well there if forwarded quickly. If you could send a parcel of common guns from 20/- to 30/- each, most of the former price, bore 7/8oz and something longer than plain fowling pieces, light as the price will afford, I could put them into hands that would make the best of them".

Mr Sewell then turns to corn. The great plenty last year and its scarcity in Europe "has thrown an immensity of wealth into Alexandria". He toys with the idea of leaving Malta and moving there, as "the business of Malta is reduced to nothing". But he opts for staying in Malta for two reasons: its convenience for communications with almost all the other places in the Mediterranean, and the safety in case of war with any of these powers.

More guns are ordered: 1 dozen Turkish guns for £5 to £7 each with well browned round barrels, blue steel mountings, locks blued and gilt and stocks inlaid with silver. There is no occasion, Sewell adds, for twist barrels and patent breeches, so (long) as the gun has a neat appearance and is light – such things he observes' not being known in Turkey.

Perhaps a few Turkish pistols might answer, writes Mr Sewell, plated on copper mounts, blued and gilt barrels, and locks bore 7/8 oz, pistol 22 inches long, black stocks and inlaid. Prices £2.5s, £2.10s or at most, not higher than £3 per pair.

This letter took about six weeks to reach London. It is postmarked on arrival: Foreign Post Office, June 28, 1817.