

Transport in Malta part 1

Public Transport

For many thousands of years man had no means of transport other than his own two legs. In his own nomadic wanderings from place to place in search of food he carried his simple possessions over his shoulders or tied to his back.

Man eventually managed to capture and tame strong animals which he then used for carrying himself and his possessions.

Probably the first animal to be used in this way was the ox, later man used the donkey and finally the horse. From that time on in fact until the end of the 18th century when the steam engine was invented land transport depended on the use of animal power.

Many people, of course, travelled by land as well as by sea, and many goods had to be transported from villages to towns, from farms to markets, from markets to great houses, or to parts for shipment overseas.

The introduction of mechanical engines changed the whole cycle of means of public transport.

Alleys, lanes and roads from which horse drawn carts and cabs used to pass, drivers or motor cars found it difficult to manoeuvre on the surface of the road which was in a very poor state.

As time passed lanes, alleys were being altered into streets and proper asphalted roads constructed in a wide and at length so as motor vehicles could proceed in a more easy and smooth way.

Recalling way back in 1859, Malta had already some form of public transport. The pioneer of public transport in Malta was the Omnibus (In-Nemnemus).

The Omnibus was drawn by three horses and carried twenty two passengers who all travelled inside like in coaches. The fare was a shilling which was of course a great deal of money in those days. 'Omnibus' is a Latin word meaning 'for all' - the idea of the omnibus was that it should carry anybody who paid the fare. This sounds an obvious idea to us, but before this time anybody who was not rich enough to own his own carriage and could not afford to hire a cab, omnibus simply had to walk.

In 1883 the train was introduced and lasted forty eight years, then after the tram was also introduced that lasted for twenty four years.

By the 1870's ambitious railways plans were being drawn up and surveys carried out. Today it might seem unnecessary to contemplate the construction of a line within such a small area. But of course our scales of time and distance are very different from those in use in Malta in the 1870's.

A citizen of Valletta who wanted to go to Notable (Mdina) in the days before the railways, perhaps to pay a courtesy call upon one of the aristocracy, living in a courtesy call upon one of the aristocracy, living in the distinguished old city or to attend a religious festival faced a 2½ to 3 hours journey by horse carriage costing 7 or 8 shillings.

The railway smooth and rapid was a vast improvement upon horse carriage travel due to cheaper fare.

In the early days the Maltese called the train 'il-vapur ta' l-art' the land streamer and not the iron horse.

In the first few exciting months in the life of the Malta Railway people travelled by the country side through which the line passed in a less period of time taken to cross over from one destination to the other.

The total length of line was only about seven and a half miles and thus it remained for the fifty years of its life. It had originally been intended that there should be a network of lines giving a comprehensive service to the island of Malta.

An undated map prepared in the offices of Messrs. Wells Owen and Elives, consulting engineers to the Malta Railways Company Ltd. shows the extent of this network.

The Malta Railway

From a map prepared by Messrs. Wells, Owen and Elwes, Consulting Engineers of London, showing the plans for an island-wide railway, around 1875.

This however was a reflection of a contemporary tendency to 'rush in' on railways development. The line commenced in the centre of the city opposite the Grand Opera House and passed underneath the fortifications by a tunnel 1,000 yards long.

It continued six miles and five furlongs across the island through or near the towns of Msida, Qormi, B'Kara, Balzan, Lia, Attard, Żebbuġ, Mosta, Naxxar terminating at the city of Notable and served 100,000 inhabitants or 15,094 per mile of line.

The cost of the railways equipped and delivered to the Company in complete working order amounted to about £10,000 per mile. The line was opened throughout in the 1st March 1883.

The train consisted of two locomotives and eight coaches which travelled safely, speedily and comfortably from the centre of Valletta to the foot of this ancient Capital of the island so rich in historical memories.

The train line was never used for goods traffic but for parcels goods were carried as also was some mail.

Ballest wagons and platelayers trolleys were to be found on the line, but there were never any goods trains or goods wagons, and so the railway began its working life.

The time table at the opening showed seven trains during the day from Valletta to Notable and seven in the reverse (once) and Notable to Hamrun (once).

Very soon however there were financial difficulties. At first the takings were encouraging, amounting to £50 - £60 a day but as time passed these dropped to about £13 a day.

It is established that in its seven working years the Company lost £80,000 and adds the engines were in such a poor state that they had to be sent to the Drydocks for repairs and the Company incurred a debt of £4,000. The engine had frequently broken down once there was a breakdown in a tunnel and this evoked widespread protest. The great majority of passengers presumably were travelling in connection with their work.

In later years they did, although the prospectus pointed out that the line ran through a catchment area of some 100,000 people. Alternative modes of travel were very limited indeed.

The financial facts were inescapable. Government took the matter to the courts and as a result came to own the railway in accordance with the conditions of the contract and they were still anxious to see a successful railway in Malta in spite of the disappointments of the first years. A vigorous programme of expansion and improvement was launched and on the 25th February 1892 after having been closed since 1st April 1890 the railway began to run again and now it was to run for another 39 years before coming abruptly up against crushing opposition from new means of transport.

Later in 1905 the trams were introduced which lasted for 24 years. Omnibuses began to be run on rails. It took some time to develop a rail that would not be

dangerous to other traffic in the streets so it was not until that tramways become common in towns. Most of the early trams were pulled by horses but some were drawn by steam locomotives.

Others were pulled along by a wire cable running through a channel under the surface of the street. The wire was drawn by a stationary steam-engine at one end of the route and the tram was fastened to the moving cable by a device that could be loosed by the driver when he than either horse or steam trams. In the continent of Europe the street-car was still quite common.

Meanwhile various experiments had been made with buses driven by steam or electricity, these were never very successful and most buses were still drawn by horses until the early years of this century.

Then the internal combustion engine began to be used for buses just as the motorcar was beginning to replace horse-drawn carriage and other means of transport.

In the beginning of the 20th century in Malta motor cars were being imported and even before some sort of transport was imported, but it was in 1905 to safe guard and regulate traffic regulations were published and this kind of notice was published in the Government Gazette of 20th January where it was cautioned that no motor car could enter the city at Valletta and not even Victoria Gate.

In this period of time motor cars could only arrive where there was at that time the Customs. At this time, a road was being constructed from Floriana up to Marsamxett and so motor cars could arrive at Marsamxett Wharf where Ferry boats berthed. The Strand Sliema was always a centred place most frequented by people. What dominated The Strand in the past were the ferry boats or small rowing boats which would transport civilians or service personnel from various points Msida, St Julians, Valletta, Isla, Birgu and other stages. They used to carry ten passengers only and during bad weather they rarely used to work.

Dwelling construction in these various points increased rapidly and the need of better means of transport was felt on land by constructing new roads and by sea by means of new ferry boats and rowing boats for the use of the Marsamxett port and other ports. For this cause the Mattei Company constructed a ferry boat that started operating in 1882.

This ferry boat service served as a bridge between various points covering trips from Sliema to Marsamxett, from Senglea and Vittoriosa etc as this type of service continued on its normal routes more and more people

made use of these services to cross over to go to work or returning back home.

The capacity of these ferryboats amounted to about one hundred and thirty passengers at a time. In 1897 another type of ferryboats service started operating which was owned by Raffaele Polidano. These ferryboats use to anchor at the bayshore a strip of platform jutting out into the sea at The Strand and Marsamxett.

During bad weather this service did not operate due to strong winds and rough sea. Along the bay shore boatmen used to wait by stone steps to hire their boats which served as a water taxi in those days. This kind of service saw its end in the late 50's. Ferry boats still operate today but on a different scale. These ferryboats are being used as part of tourist attractions, transporting tourist on cruises in various sea port historical attractions.

Ferry-boat cruises is a means of transport carrying tourists on trips on site seeing and interesting way how to observe Malta from the sea point of view, seeing the magnificent fortifications and unique atmosphere as the ferryboat cruises slowly and the guide gives information to tourist of the historical fortifications and other places of interest.

These tourist ferryboats are registered under the name of 'Captain Morgan' situated at the Strand Sliema promoting exertions around the island and to the neighbouring islands Comino and Gozo during the summer months.

In the past there was also means of transport by sea between Malta, Comino and Gozo. This service was known to have started before the knights came to Malta regulated by sailing boats known by the name 'Id-Dagħjsa tal-latini' which played a big roll for many years serving the needs of the population of both islands in those times.

Id-dgħajsa tal-latini served to transport passengers crossing over to Gozo and vice versa at a prize fare of about six pence each trip, every time performing the trip. This sailing boat was used also for the shipment of goods agricultural and other necessary commodities.

Id-dgħajsa tal-latini was constructed of wood and had a triangular sloping sail called 'lateen'. Constructed to withstand the rough sea of the Mediterranean whilst performing countries crossing over from Malta to Sicily, Tunis, Egypt taking over merchants or other passengers. This transport came to an end and was replaced by other modern ships such as 'Għawdex' and the M. V. Mgarr.

The first motor vehicle regulation were published in 1908

consisting of 13 regulations published in English and Italian language among most these regulations read that no vehicle was allowed to enter Valletta except by the permission from the Commissioner of Police. There was a great need for vehicles of not more than 18 metres wide in construction to be granted permission only to be driven inside Valletta.

In the 1930 was founded the first Traffic Control Board which consisted of the following persons: Chairman Onor. W. Salamone, Col S.F. Newcomber, D.S.O. re. Sabatore Galea, Capt. Albert Micallef Eynaud and traffic manager and secretary of Board Capt.J.L. Muscat.

The traffic Control Board is still established till the present day with the aim of giving advice to the Government on traffic of vehicles and the transport of passengers and merchandise. In 1931 Ordinance X was published, dealing with the giving the authority to the Governor, proclaims to the Traffic Control Board that was established the previous year gave a certain power to this Board. This law gave also power to the Commissioner of Police to make regulations about vehicles and ferry boats for passengers.

In 1942 all Laws of Malta were revised and Ordinance X issued in 1931 was changed into Chapter 105 Laws of Malta. More regulations about vehicles were issued in 1933 that substituted those of 1929. In these regulations published in Maltese, English and Italian language showed the need of construction of motor omnibuses or as known (char-a-bancs). The notice of the Government Gazette of the 13th January 1948 new regulations were published by the Lux Press and became to be known as the official regulations.

Malta's public transport has pioneered a number of noteworthy developments in the course of its growth to serve the population of the island. Public transport is classified in different branches which show how means of transport function in Malta. Motorcar or ferryboat or other mechanical driven vehicle could only be owned and licence by one person. Motor omnibus is a means of transport which could be interpreted as any motor car, capable of carrying more then seven passengers, used against payment for the conveyance of passengers.

Ferryboats is also a means of transport which means any steam or motor-driven boat, launch or ship carrying passengers by sea from one part of the island to another or from one island to another and on which the passengers or any of them are charged separate fares.

To be continued in next issue.