

IL-FORTINI

The Former Parade and Football Ground at Vittoriosa

By Denis A. Darmanin

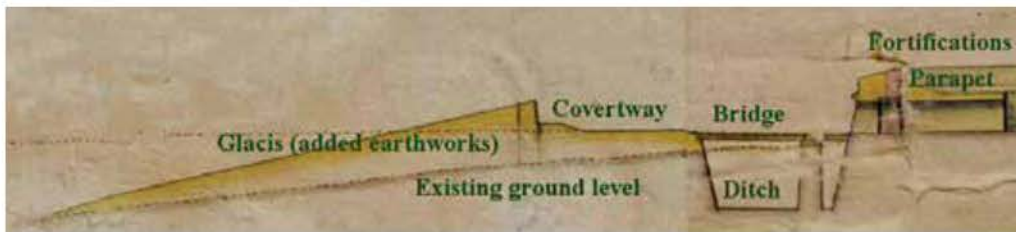


Fig. 1. Cross-section of the outer works. Glacis, covertway, ditch, bridge and the actual fortification. Stephen C. Spiteri, Fort Manoel, ARX, https://issu.com/arkitettura/docs/arx_occ_papers_4_2014.

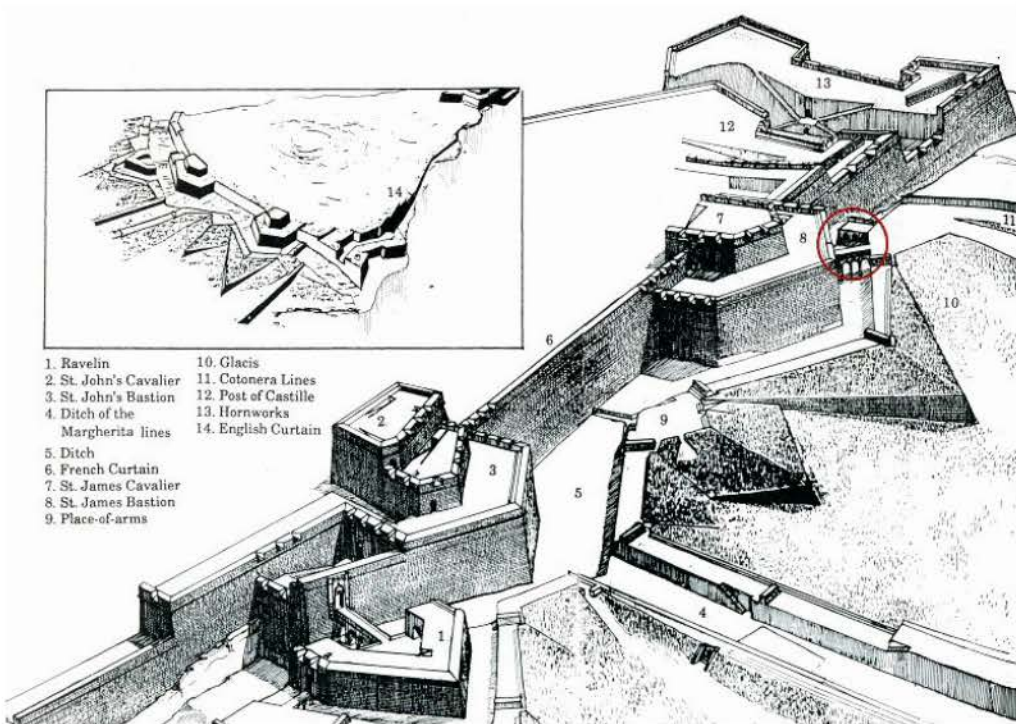


Fig. 2. The Vittoriosa landfront fortifications, with the glacis, spurs and place of arms marked as 9 and 10, and connected by a covertway. From: Stephen C. Spiteri, *The Knights' Fortifications: An Illustrated Guide of the Fortifications Built by the Knights of St John in Malta* (1989; 1990). The Fortini Gate bridge is circled in red.

The area that comprises the former Vittoriosa Stars football ground, some government flats and adjacent carparks, was once part of the glacis on the Vittoriosa landfront. Today the former football ground has become a temporary car park and a Sunday open market.

A 'glacis' in military engineering is an artificial earthwork that gently slopes upwards and blends in with the natural ground, ending in a ditch, in front of a castle, or in later low-lying fortifications.¹ It served against the undermining of the fortifications, to hamper

escalades and for the defenders to have clear view of open ground in order to repel attacking forces.

'Fortini' is an old Maltese term referring to a small fort or stronghold. Many seniors in the Marsamxett area of Valletta referred to Fort Tigné as 'il-Fortina' (the little fort), due to the small tower-like central structure in the middle. At Vittoriosa, it is likely that the term was used because it referred to the St James tower or cavalier, located across the ditch at the rear of this area.

The area was known by locals as the 'prexxa' (Italian: breccia), as it was the location where the Ottomans had breached the defences of Vittoriosa during the Great Siege



Fig. 3. St Lawrence Demi-Bastion, part of the glacis with the passage to Capuchin's Gate at centre left, and the Post of Castille. From: Stephen C. Spiteri, *The Knights' Fortifications: An Illustrated Guide of the Fortifications Built by the Knights of St John in Malta* (1989; 1990).

Fortini was also used by the the British military to refer to certain former structures of the Order of St John along the Margarita Lines and the Cottonera Lines, and to other barracks constructed by the Royal Engineers along them.

Originally, this area formed part of the glacis around the landfront fortifications and the ditch of the city on the Kalkara side, that was breached by the Ottomans in their last major assault on the city between 19–21 August during the Great Siege of 1565.² These parts of the fortifications, including the Post of Castille, were so badly battered that they had to be rebuilt. The area was known by locals as the 'prexxa' (Italian: *breccia*), as it was the location where the Ottomans had breached the defences of Vittoriosa during the Great Siege. They were repelled with heavy costs, and were included in the general repairs that followed the siege.

After years of great neglect, these entire Vittoriosa landfront fortifications, including the outer works, glacis, spurs and covertway, were rebuilt, first by the French architect *Bali François René Jacob de Tigné* and later by Charles François de Mondion.³ The Order of St John linked this part of the enceinte to the Cottonera Lines with a small casemated battery overlooking Kalkara.

The works required the renovation and strengthening of St James Bastion, a two-tiered pentagonal bastion with St James Cavalier towering behind it, the length of the French Curtain that links St James Bastion and St John Bastion, and all the way to the point where the present Margarita or Firenzuola Lines commence. A sally port, Capuchin's Gate—or as locally known '*il-Mina tal-Fortini*'—penetrates St James Cavalier and connects to Triq San Dwardu.

Due to its topography, the area from the San Salvatore Gate to the former Margherita Gate, was originally a depression and formed part of the valley that originated in the Zabbar area, along the north-western parts of Cospicua and along to the sea in the area known as '*ix-Xewkija*' in Kalkara. In order to link the Cottonera Lines (1670–1760s) to the Post of Castille in Vittoriosa, a small section of the present Triq San Dwardu and of the football ground, probably had their levels increased with fill.

The entire length of the Vittoriosa enceinte and beyond the ditch saw little changes or developments, if any. From the records

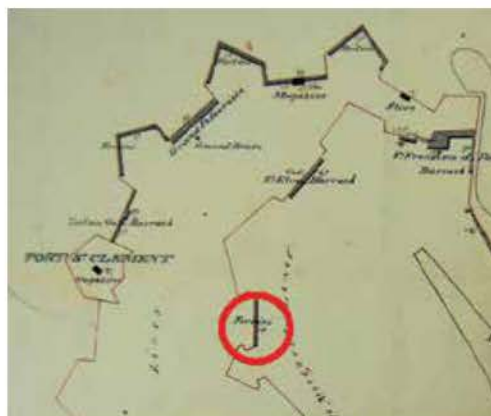
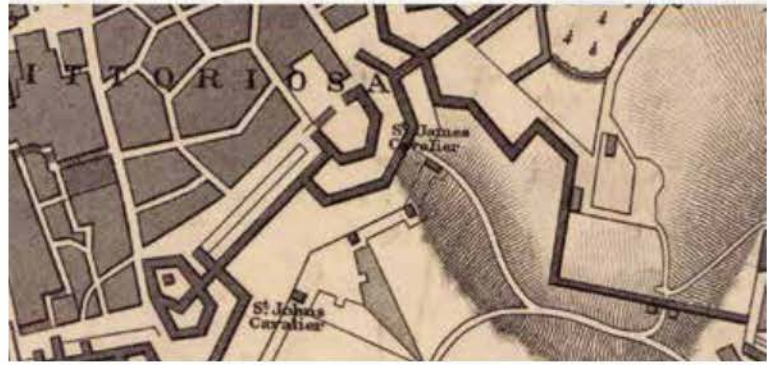
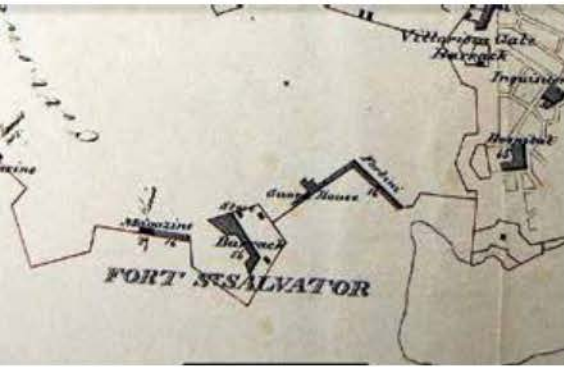


Fig. 4. Section from the British Army's 'Cottonera District' map with military barracks and establishments, c.1850. Note the bastions and line indicated as 'Fortini', circled in red. AMOT Records at National Army Museum, UK.



consulted, that span to the mid-nineteenth century, there does not seem to be any indication of defensive or infrastructural works in this area, other than armament. Other British military and naval maps and plans also show this part of Vittoriosa. Not all of them indicate the use, but most do show that the glacis, place-of-arms and covertway were still *in situ*.

In 1853, a proposal was made by the military to build a garrison chapel and school for the soldiers of the Cottonera District. The proposed site was close to the present Cospicua Local

Council offices, formerly a British Soldiers and Sailors Rest. It seems that authorisation for its building was recommended for a site just outside Capuchin's (Fortini) Gate, along the path leading to what later became Triq San Dwardu.⁴ However, in 1865 the garrison chapel was erected on the first proposed site within the Margarita Lines at Cospicua, along with another identical garrison chapel near the Upper Barakka garden in Valletta.⁵

During the second half of the nineteenth century, a good section of this area was levelled off by the British Army to create what was

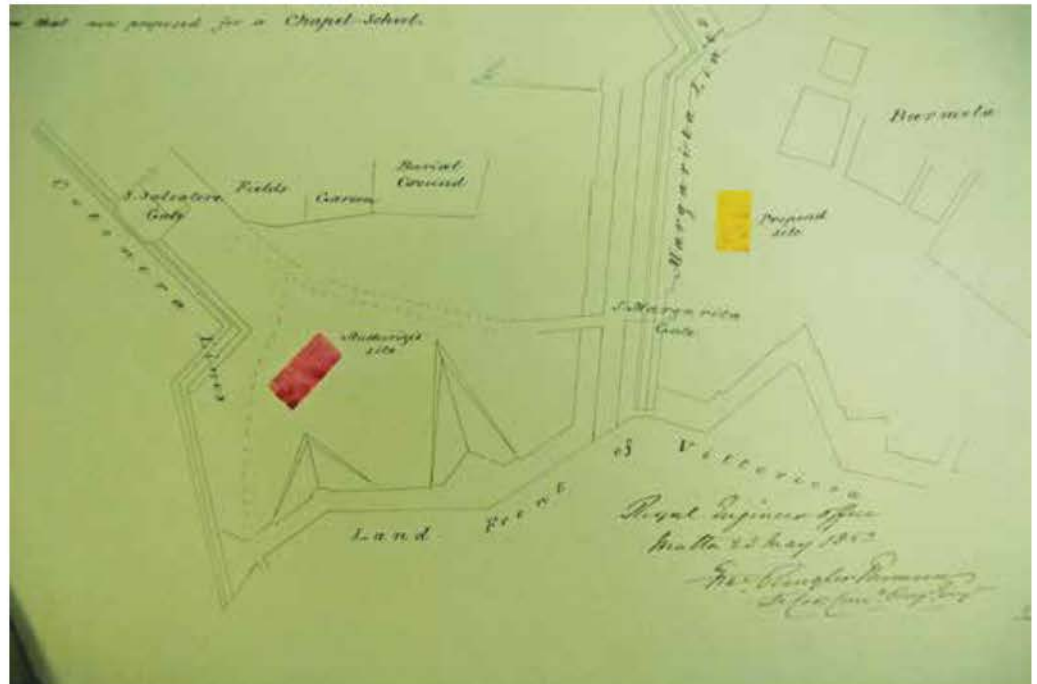
Fig. 5. (top left) Section from Royal Engineers map showing the quarters along St Lawrence Demi-bastion and the San Salvatore Curtain c.1850, the latter listed as 'Fortini', hence the modern name. British Army Medical Services and the Malta Garrison 1799–1979, <https://www.maltaramc.com>.

Fig. 6. (top right) Section from Admiralty Chart No. 974, 'Malta-Valletta-Harbours', 1888. American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.



Fig. 7. (left) Section from Royal Engineers map dated 1852 that still shows the glacis, spurs, place of arms and covertway. National Archives (UK), Kew, London.

Fig. 8. Map indicating the proposed and authorised locations of the intended garrison chapel in 1853.
National Archives
Malta, Rabat.



In October 1941 and April 1942, bombs fell on the parade ground, on St Lawrence Bastion and on the near-by Knights Armoury, St Roque's cemetery and Fort Salvatore.

known as the St Lawrence Parade Ground, to serve the numerous soldiers stationed at Fort San Salvatore and the various barracks at Vittoriosa. It is assumed that any defensive works on the edge of the ditch across to St James Counterguard were demolished in the process.

Existing plans show that the spurs that had extended to a short distance from the covertway, were also demolished. Spurs were usually built and reinforced from quarried stone and off-cuts and were probably constructed on the ground levelled with rubble. During these same works, a boundary wall in the form of a parapet was erected at the edge of the counterscarp, possibly from recycled stones, to eliminate any danger of falling into the ditch, which is alien and not a defensive structure.

There is also photographic evidence that reclamation works were ongoing in the area during the later years of the nineteenth century, possibly utilising rubble from the demolished structures. It was the general practice that the first choice for infill was to recycle any building rubble in the vicinity.

Fig. 9. Land reclamation and other works along Triq San Dwardu and the valley. Photo: Richard Ellis Collection.



Works by the military were continued and the glacis and covertway facing the right side of St John's Cavalier and the French curtain were demolished in 1904 by the Royal Engineers' office, and workshops were built. This development destroyed half of the defensive works beyond the edge of the Vittoriosa ditch, including and remodelling the rear and the counterscarp. Much later, the passage in the glacis leading to Capuchin's Gate was partially dismantled on one side.

The Grand Harbour area was heavily bombed during the Second World War because of the naval dockyard and many other installations and establishments. A large part of Vittoriosa, this area and the fortifications, received a share of the damage.⁶ During October 1941 and April 1942, bombs fell on the parade ground, on St Lawrence Bastion and on the near-by Knights Armoury, St Roque's cemetery and Fort Salvatore.⁷ The lower part of St Lawrence Bastion that was heavily bombed, and San Salvatore Curtain were later rebuilt incorporating a large arch under which passes the road that today leads to Kalkara seafront.

By this time the military had long relinquished the use of the parade ground, although until the outbreak of the war it was still used for sports activities. In around 1947, plans were being made for the ground to be used by the Vittoriosa Football Club, which was then still heavily damaged. An application seems to have been submitted in 1950, but it remained pending. Another application was made by the Malta Playing Fields Association, further encroaching on the remaining glacis



Fig. 10. (top left) Early 19th-century site plan showing the extent of the area belonging to the War Department and the buildings of the Royal Engineers offices on the site. CD Office, Works Department, Floriana.

Fig. 11. (top right) The façade of the main building of the former Royal Engineers offices.

In the 1970s, work commenced on the building of a number of government housing flats, between the football ground and the Royal Engineers office.

towards the War Department area, but approval was not granted until December 1953. The permit was issued in the following month.⁸ In May 1950, another deed was signed by government and third parties for the lease of a small plot in the south-east corner of the area, for a kiosk to be built.

Work also commenced on the upper level of St Lawrence Demi-Bastion for a Boys Secondary School, which was badly needed to replace the use of large buildings built by the Order of St John within Vittoriosa. In the 1970s, work commenced on the building of a number of government housing flats, between the football ground and the Royal Engineers office, that had been returned to the Maltese government. In order to acquire enough space for the project, another section of what was left of the glacis and adjacent land, were cleared to accommodate the new properties. Shortly afterwards, the remaining space between the football ground, the ditch and the passage from the Fortini Gate, was resurfaced to be used as an access road and car park. ■

NOTES: 1. Glacis – Réseau des sites majeurs Vauban, sites-vauban.org; 2. Ernle Bradford, *The Great Siege: Malta 1565* (Penguin, 1966); 3. Stephen C. Spiteri, *Fortresses of the Cross: Hospitaller Military Architecture 1136–1798* (Heritage Interpretation Services, 1994); 4. National Archives (UK), Kew, London, unpaginated; 5. Malcolm Borg, *British Colonial Architecture Malta 1800–1900* (PEG, 2001); 6. Lorenzo Zahra, 'Malta During World War II: Vittoriosa Under Blitz', *Heritage: An Encyclopaedia of Maltese Culture and Civilization* 66, (Midsea Books, n.d.); 7. <https://www.naval-history.net/xDKWD-Malta1941.htm>; 8. Related files at the National Archives: C. 1853/50, P.W. 3116/50, O.P.M. 275/53, Police East 134/53, P.W. 1894/51 and O.P.M. 458/51.



Denis A. Darmanin has written widely on military and historical topics, with a special interest in uniform buttons.