

# Lower Fort St Elmo and The Mortar Shells Fountain

Denis A Darmanin



Fort St Elmo with sentries on the roof of the Pinto Stores, 1857, © The British Library Board

The loss of Fort St Elmo during the Great Siege of 1565 taught the Order of St John an important lesson regarding the “*Sheb-el-Ras*” Peninsula. Whoever commanded the heights of this promontory could easily position numerous gun batteries and direct their fire onto most strongholds and fortifications within Grand Harbour. St Elmo also proved to be a costly and tragic error for the Order, located as it was on low ground at the tip of the peninsula, while the Ottoman gunners had the greater advantage of being on high ground and could thus rain salvo after salvo down on the fort until it crumbled and fell. In the aftermath of the siege, Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette reconsidered the earlier plans presented by Antonio Ferramolino in 1541, by Bartolomeo Genga in 1558 and by Bartolomeo Lanci in 1562, for the building of an entirely new fortified city on the peninsula.

As the members of the Order came from the cream of European nobility, and since the siege was held in high esteem by the monarchs of Europe – especially the Pope, help in the construction of this *Citta Nuova* was forthcoming. The Grand Duke of Tuscany favoured de Valette with the services of Gabrio Serbelloni; one of the most capable military strategists and engineers of his time, and the Dominican Pope Pius V sent his personal military engineer, Francesco Laparelli from Cortona, another of Europe’s finest, to help in the design of the new city. Assisting Laparelli were Baldassare Lanci d’Urbino and his able Maltese assistant Girolamo Cassar, who continued the work after Laparelli left Malta in 1570. The Pope also contributed large sums of money towards the construction of the city, as did King Philip II of Spain and King Sebastian of Portugal, while other monarchs sent weapons to arm the new fortifications.

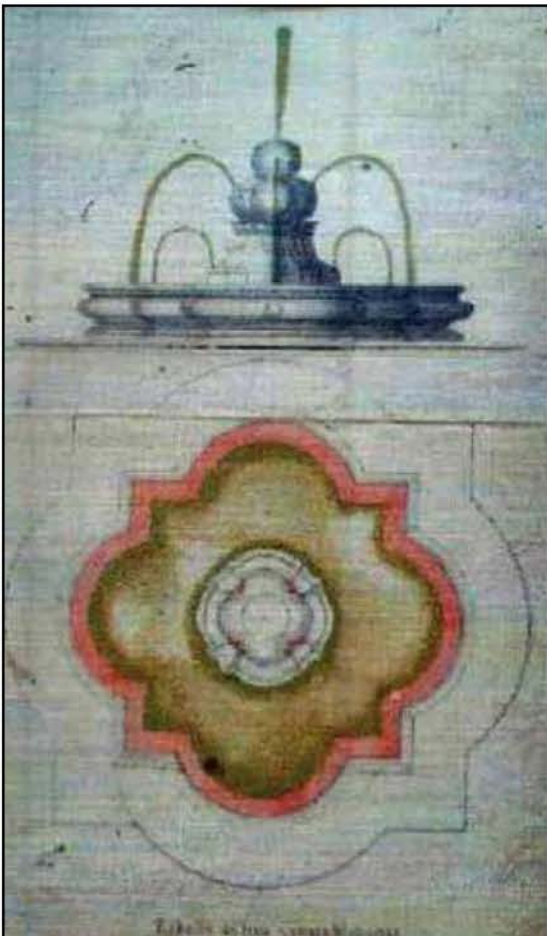
Another priority for the Order was the rebuilding of Fort St Elmo, which was to be physically independent from the new city. This was taken in hand immediately following the end of the Great Siege. The fort continued to be modified and extended over the years until it reached its present size during the 1680s, when it was enclosed with a vast apron of walls and bastions of a changing profile, known as the “Carafa Bastions” after the then Grand Master Fra Gregorio Carafa della Roccella.

In 1761, during the long reign of Grand Master Pinto (1741 – 1773), various barracks were built facing the *piazza* along the St Toscana Curtain within the ditch on the Marsamxett Harbour side in the lower section of the fort. The following year, 19 large vaulted magazines on three floors with bomb-proof roofs were constructed along the Carafa Bastions. These were intended to be used as magazines, for the storage of food and as a shelter for women and children in the event of a siege. Some of these buildings probably also served as a barracks for the *Reggimento di Malta*.

The esplanade in front of the Pinto stores and barracks was referred to as “Piazza Valletta”. Facing the magazines across the *piazza* is a fountain of unique and interesting architectural design which drew water from the Vendom reservoir nearby. The fountain, designed by de Tigné, is made of globigerina limestone and consists of a basin with an irregular oval pedestal at its centre, on each of the four recesses of which are hanging garlands of fruit. Resting in a pyramidal arrangement on the pedestal are four piled mortar shells: three at the bottom that support a fourth set above in their centre.

These mortar shells, sometimes also called bombards, are very similar to the ones towering on the pedestals flanking *Portes des Bombes* in Floriana. Each grenade had a pair of lifting handles, now broken, carved from the original stone block. In between, and corresponding to the fuse hole, are embedded tubes that sprayed water into the basin – the lower three to the sides and the shell above vertically upwards.

Plans of the fountain, National Library, Malta







The peculiar design of the fountain gives it a distinctively military character that links it directly to its surroundings. Actual mortar shells, which were hollow and made of iron, were a devastating weapon. They were packed with gunpowder, lifted by the handles into a large mortar and fired at the enemy in order to explode and cause maximum damage through pieces of flying shrapnel and fire from the blast.

Little is known of the use of the lower section of the fort between 1798 and 1800, during its brief occupation by French troops following the ousting of the Order of St John by Napoleon. When they took possession of Malta in 1800, the British were still at war with France and numerous troops were using Malta as a point of transit and a garrison force. The Pinto Barracks were ideally located and could easily serve as billet for an entire regiment and their dependents.

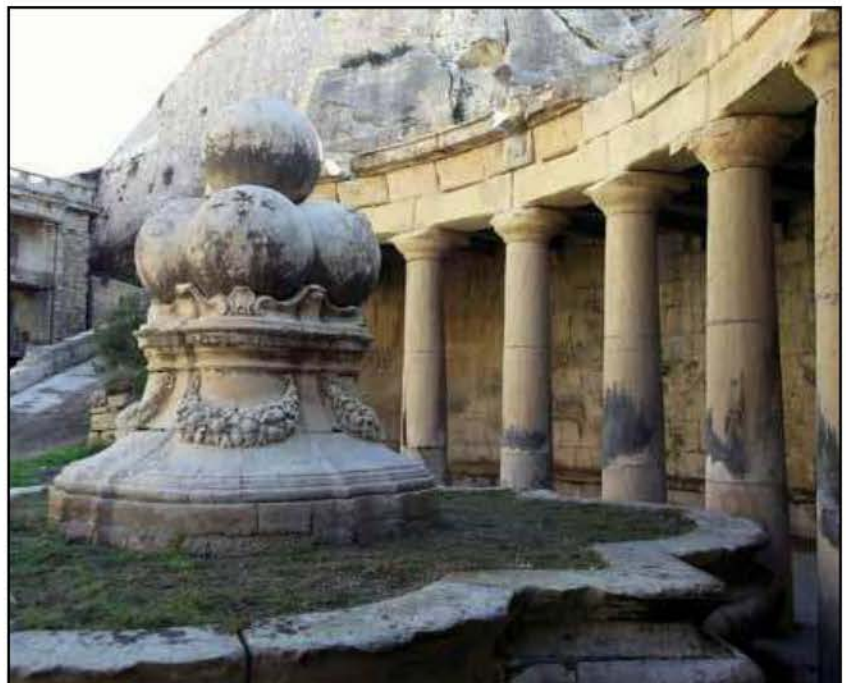
In the early years of British rule, a neo-classical exedra was added behind the grenade fountain. This features 12 Doric columns on the front and an additional two at each end and its design is attributed to Giorgio Pullicino (1780-1852).

During its use by the British military as a barracks and a fort, St Elmo was garrisoned by various regiments that were stationed in Malta. Numerous changes and alterations were made, according to the necessities of the times and for the defence of the harbour area. A veranda supported on cast iron columns was built abutting the façade of the Pinto stores facing the *piazza*, now referred to as the Lower Parade Ground. Casemates were converted into stores, cookhouses and ablutions, and quarters for officers were added. The exedra offered cool shade to officers and soldiers alike, especially during the hot summer evenings, while the water splashing in the fountain added to the atmosphere. The building overlooking the exedra at the rear was used by various regimental bands, which also used the terrace above the exedra itself for musical performances when they were not beating the dust of the *piazza* with their boots.

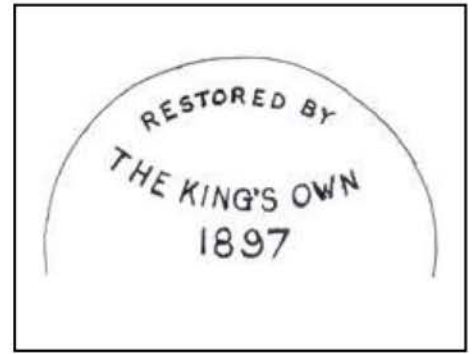
The fountain, exedra and later structural additions

During the Second World War, Fort St Elmo played an important part in the defence of Malta. It was here that the first casualties had fallen, all members of the Royal Malta Artillery. The fort was also instrumental in repelling and destroying the *Decima Flottiglia Mezzi d'Assalto* (X<sup>a</sup> MAS) of the Italian *Regia Marina*. After the war, the last elements of the British Army to occupy Fort St Elmo were units from the two Maltese Regiments – the Royal Malta Artillery and the King's Own Malta Regiment. Between the late 1950s and the early 60s, much of the fort was ceded to the Maltese government and the lower fort and Pinto Barracks were used as stores by various government departments. In the 1970s, the fort proper was handed to the Malta Land Force for use as barracks for the paramilitary Malta Pioneer Corps, but was vacated again in the 1980s until this part of St Elmo became the Malta Police Force Academy in 1987.

The fountain with the four mortars







In 1978, the Pinto Barracks and other buildings at Lower St Elmo were opened to be used as the setting for the film *Midnight Express*. Afterwards, the area was occupied by squatters and builders of carnival floats and the buildings, many of which had already deteriorated badly, suffered an alarming amount of damage and vandalism. The fountain had long lost its glory when it ceased to function many years earlier, with its basin becoming filled to the rim with rubbish and layers of dust, its joints wide open and void of any mortar, and many of its stones becoming dislodged.

top left:  
Recording of the  
restoration in 1879

top:  
Drawing of the inscription  
recording the  
1879 restoration

### A Commemoration

British infantry regiments were posted to various corners of the Empire as garrison troops, in transit to other destinations, or en route to any ongoing conflict. Malta was a major transit and victualling station, even more so following the opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869.

Wherever the British Army was based, it was renowned for erecting monuments to commemorate particular events, battles or members who had performed some glorious deed. Its regiments found the soft Maltese stone ideal for carving their badge, or an associated device, to commemorate their tour of duty in Malta and this is very evident at Sa Maison Gardens and the walls of many of the barracks they built and occupied.

With the Caldwell Reforms of the British Army in 1881, the 101st (Royal Bengal Fusiliers) Regiment of Foot and the 104th (Bengal Fusiliers) Regiment of Foot amalgamated to become the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions, The Royal Munster Fusiliers. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was stationed in Malta from 1882 to 1884 and was billeted at Lower Fort St Elmo. Their badge consisted of a shield with three crowns – the coat of arms of the Province of Munster in Ireland – superimposed on a flaming grenade, a grenade being the symbol of fusilier and grenadier regiments in the British Army.

Thus it must have felt logical that one of the mortars on the St Elmo fountain should be carved and converted to represent their regimental badge as a memento of their Malta posting. The badge was carved on the bottom mortar shell facing the barracks and although weathered and worn, it can still be seen that the badge consists of the arms of Munster within a laurel wreath bearing 10 battle honours, surmounted on a flaming grenade. Above the badge is a scroll inscribed "R. M. FUSILIERS" and below it another scroll with "LANDED IN MALTA" and underneath this a scroll inscribed "1<sup>ST</sup> AUGUST 1882".

**All photographs and drawings  
provided by the author**

Glengarry badge of the  
Royal Munster Fusiliers



Details of the badge carved on the mortar



Drawing of the badge carved on the mortar





The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The King's Own (Royal Lancaster Regt), was stationed in Malta between 1895 and 1897. Prior to their departure from the island, the regiment had the fountain restored – a fact that was recorded through an inscription carved on the upper shell of the fountain that reads: “RESTORED BY THE KING’S OWN 1897”.

Since the fort, barracks and parade ground were used by the numerous regiments and corps that served in Malta, elements from the Royal Regiment of Artillery were stationed at the fort to man the guns that defended the harbour approaches. The band of the Royal Artillery also chose the fountain to record their presence in the fort, as on another of the bottom mortars are carved the words “R. A. BAND MALTA”. Other graffiti on the grenades are not of a military nature.

At the time of writing, the exedra and fountain are in very poor condition, just like the rest of the lower fort area and barracks, although recently a number of planning applications have been submitted for the fort to be restored in phases. The *piazza* and barracks are again being used for film productions and by the builders of carnival floats.

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority scheduled the exedra and fountain as Grade 1 national monuments in 2001.

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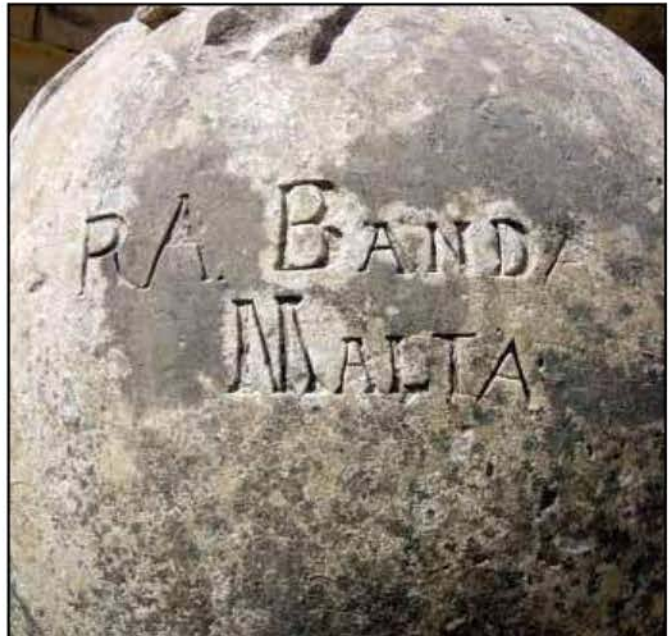
Author's Collection.



above:  
Details of the fountain's  
decorative elements



British soldiers quartered in Pinto Barracks, c 1890. Photo by Richard Ellis



Graffiti commemorating the R A Band