

## Is Tal-Braġġ under the axe?



These uncluttered views of Selmun and Mġiebaħ could be a thing of the past if development at Tal-Braġġ is approved.

Tal-Braġġ might not immediately sound familiar to many. It is a residential area on the fringe of Mellieħa, overlooking the picturesque Selmun promontory area and ostensibly falling within the infamous 2006 scheme 'rationalisation' exercise.

The site was offered to Tumas Group in lieu of another site at Tas-Sellum in Mellieħa which was struck off the list for development, initially on ecological grounds but it later emerged that the latter site was unsuitable for development due to its friable clayey nature of the land. As a result, the site at Tal-Braġġ, measuring some 11,000m<sup>2</sup> (equivalent to one-and-a-half full-size football pitches), ceased to be an Outside Development Zone site.

In December 2010 I was commissioned by the residents of the area to conduct a broad-brush survey of the area, and the outcome of the survey was submitted to the Malta Environment and Planning Authority for consideration. At the time, it was agreed not to resort to the media to highlight the case so as not to compromise the findings of the same survey.

Why the sudden change of heart? Persistent rumours have it that Mepa is positively considering the development of the area – whether such rumours are true or not is up to the authority to clarify.

The surveyed site presents a mosaic of agricultural land, steppe, garigue and disturbed land, being colonised in some areas by dense thickets of trees, including carobs, lentisc, almond, cypress, dwarf fan palm and the Mediterranean buckthorn.

I quote an extract from the report:

“Despite bearing the hallmarks of anthropogenic disturbance... the surveyed area is endowed with a small number of endemic species (e.g. *Anacamptis urvilleana* – an orchid species) and a considerable number of faunal and floral species listed in the Red Data Book for the Maltese Islands. A total of eight floral and 11 faunal species are also listed in different schedules of LN 311 of 2006, as amended, while nine tree species are listed in different schedules of the Trees and Woodlands Regulations.”

Ecological assets aside, the surveyed area also harbours a corbelled stone hut (*girna*), an extensive length of rubble walls which parcel the same area into individual agricultural plots, and a series of depressions with vertical, linear edges were observed in the rock surface near the present edge of development which, according to a local archaeologist, could well represent three individual ancient quarries.

Coming from a biologist this might sound like an oxymoron, but despite the site's proven ecological assets do residents of a particular area really need to go to such extents to ward off further development from their neighbourhood? Should the decision as to whether to preserve a site for posterity or not simply revolve around its ecological value?

A visit to Tal-Braġġ should immediately make one realise the importance of not encroaching further on virgin land from Tal-Braġġ towards Selmun and Imġiebaħ, and that Mario de Vasi Street should really cordon off further development, especially in the wake of the approval in recent months of the factory near Selmun. If one fails to realise such a sacrosanct maxim, then one must lack respect for this country.

## **Further onslaught planned for Mġarr**

No sooner had the dust churned up by the Mġarr petrol station outrage started to settle when news emerged that Mġarr is in for further large-scale development, this time of an industrial nature. An exhausted quarry in Mġarr at Tal-Qormija, just off the Mġarr-Għajn Tuffieħa road, has been earmarked for the siting of a micro-industrial park, in line with the policy approved by government in 2005 to provide more opportunities for workshops and industrial garages in 15 ODZ areas all over the island.

Nothing untoward in this, one might think, especially since a highly disturbed area (a quarry) is being used for the purpose so that no virgin land would be consumed. However, as always, concerns exist regarding overspill.

Will the envisaged industrial park spill over onto adjacent garigue areas? Will access roads to the quarry site, currently just a dirt track weaving through an area with olive and acacia trees, have to be widened to facilitate access, resulting in a further ecological impact?

Will the development result in groundwater contamination, through the spillage of petroleum products, thinners and paints, and the disposal of asbestos-containing parts.

A similar micro-industrial workshop hub is currently being finalised in the Santu Kristu area of Għaxaq and the footprint of the area is literally gargantuan – hence, these misgivings are legitimate.

Only a few hundreds of metres up the road from the earmarked site, mounds of construction rubble pepper the surrounding countryside at Ta' Mrejnu and Tal-Palma in a mish-mash of agriculture, industrial garages and construction development which has been allowed to spiral out of control over the years.