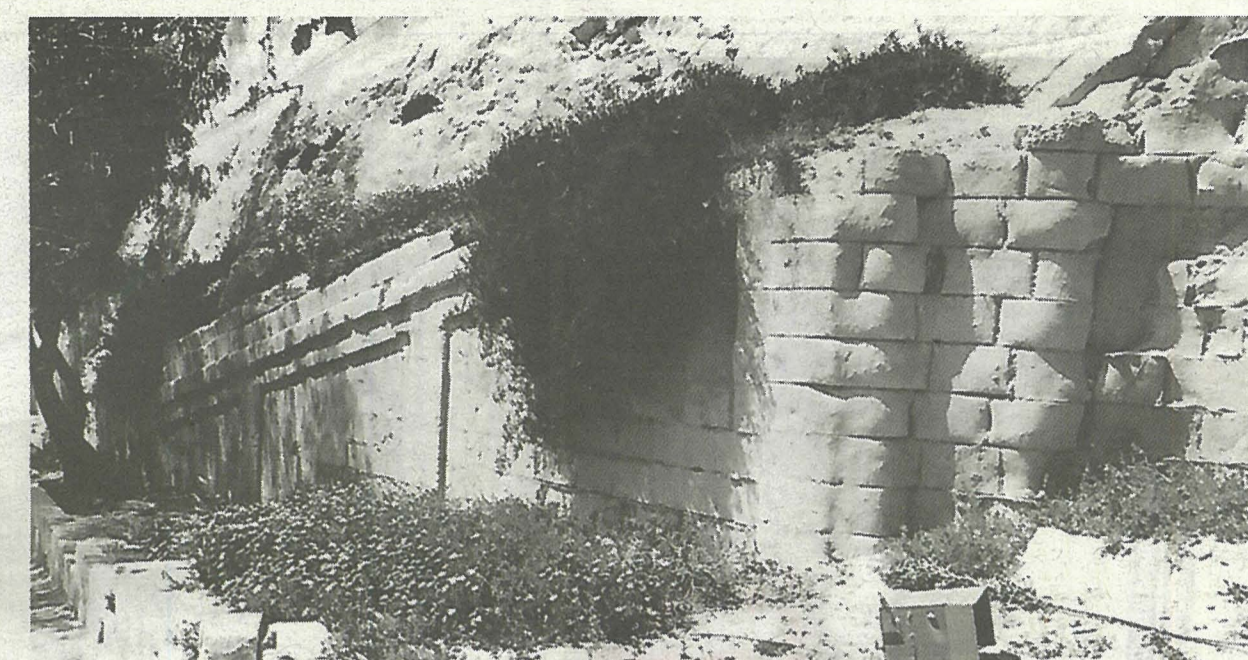


The remaining Perellos Stores, the former Consegna, Barriera and Imgherbep Point.



1978: Demolition work revealed part of the former Consegna...



...And uncovered the remains of a garden.

A terse account of a most interesting part of Valletta

From the Customs House to Imgherbep Point (Part 3)



MICHAEL CASSAR

Hidden and hemmed in between the stores and the bastion wall was a flight of steps that provided a short cut from the Barriera to Porta di Monte. In 1710, nobody could have guessed that Nix Mangiari Steps would acquire quite a reputation in the 19th century. Poverty and unemployment characterised the first decades of British rule, and spawned hordes of beggars, who first targeted those freshly released from the Barriera.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge attributed 'Nix' to the Low German *nichts* meaning 'nothing' (no money). Uttered by those who refused to give alms, it was turned on its head by beggars to indicate 'nothing' (to eat). Coleridge could not explain how *nichts* was introduced (some said it was by British soldiers who had served in Holland), but: "it became the common vehicle of both solicitation and refusal, the Maltese thinking it an English word and the English supposing it to be Maltese."

Mendicancy was not unique to Malta, and travellers everywhere were warned against giving alms; however, the narrow street and intense importuning made it a choice: to give alms or step on bare, dirty feet. In *Letters from Malta and Sicily* (1830) George Waring described mendicancy: "The beggars in Valletta are certainly a very great annoyance, and are most importunate in their petitions, in which the words 'Carita, miserabile', and 'nix mangi' are frequently repeated. We might be charitable here at a very small cost, for a single 'grana' a little copper coin, of which 12 are equal to a penny, is all the poor unfortunates ask for; but our friends have cautioned us never, upon any account, to bestow even that smallittance, as in that case there should be no end to our persecutions."

"Nix mangi means 'nothing to eat', the last word being an abbreviation of the Italian *mangiare*, but where the 'nix' comes from I cannot tell you. One day a little chubby-faced boy ran after me crying 'Nix mangi nix mangi!' Though at the same time he had crammed his

mouth so full of raw turnip that he could hardly give utterance to the falsehood. From the constant repetition of the word 'nix mangi' or 'mangiare', one of the steep streets leading down to the Grand Harbour, is commonly called 'Nix Mangiare Stairs', though I am not aware that the beggars are more numerous here than in some other parts of the town."

In *The Story of Malta* (1893), Maturin Murray Ballou described how beggars targeted passengers arriving on the P&O steamer; it was harvest time for them (the beggars), they had made a careful study of the business and turned it into a fine art. The Nix Mangiari Stairs were: "the congregating place of an army of mendicants of every species – men, women and children – who exhibit all manner of deformities, both real and artificial, as well as every grade of dirt and squalor. In landing and making one's way to the main thoroughfare of the city, it is necessary to run the gauntlet of this horde of poverty-stricken people."

"Imgherbep Point, shipping hazard and scene of welcomes and heartbreaking separations... is perhaps the only part of Mount Sceberras to have escaped human intervention"

The begging continued in the 1920s with cries of: "Oh, signore! Mi povero! Miserabile! Nix padre, nix madre, nix mangiari for sixteen days per Jesu Christo." The 16 days were always in English but the statement was contradicted by the chubby faces of the children.

Before World War II, the First And Last Bar was just that: the first bar if you were coming from the Barriera and the last, if arriving from the old fish market. There was something missing, also thanks to Governor Sir William Reid, between the bar and the Barriera. In 1853, the false screen of stores was

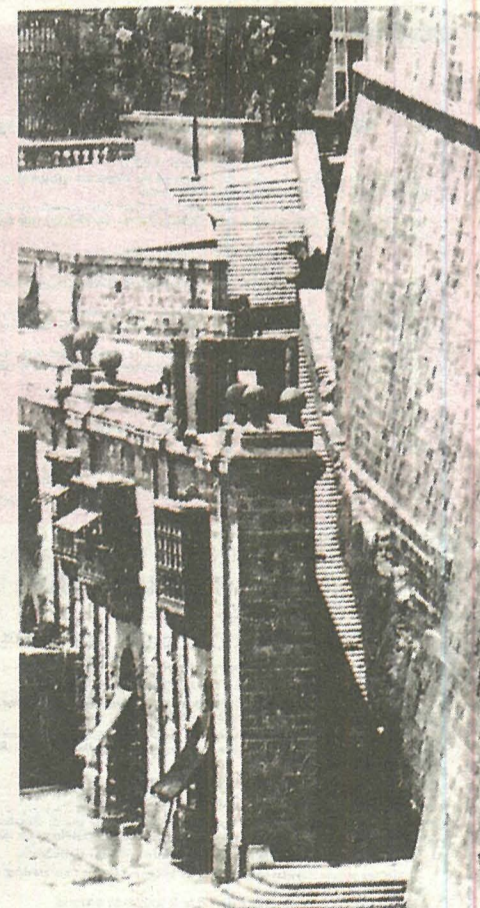
demolished; how they would have prejudiced the defence of the island beggars belief. Their extent on the bastion wall can still be gauged from the uneven weathering of the stone.

The greatest loss was the Chapel of Our Saviour midway in the screen. When the chapel was built, Grand Master Ramon Perellos adorned it with the high relief bronze of Our Saviour by Stefan Alessandro Algardi, which he transferred from Ta' Liesse on April 26, 1713. The bronze had been cast for Fra Alessandro Zambecario. Crews of galleys at the Barriera and others leaving for the corso prayed at the chapel. Giuseppe Hyzler transferred the bronze *Salva Nos* to the pediment of St John's Co-Cathedral, where it adorned the façade until replaced with a copy.

The remaining 14 stores beneath St Lucy Curtain formed part of the Barriera and Sanitary Office complex. The Barriera was a parlitorio for some 2,000 people, an open area for verbal, non-physical communication between residents and new arrivals. In inclement or hot weather its business was conducted inside the Sanitary/Fumigation Office, the Consegna or Bureau de Santé, in whose main hall was an inscription in marble: *Haec Fecit Populorum Amor* (The love of the people has done this). Dr Paul Cassar described it in 'Malta's role in maritime health' in Lombard Bank (Malta) Ltd's annual report of 1989.

The Consegna was painted by Abraham Louis R. Du Cros. A painting attributed to Giovanni Schranz showing a frigate arriving in a storm, also shows the Consegna. The adjacent stores attached to the Consegna included the Nevaio, a depot for ice from Mt Etna. Packed ice reached Malta by *speronara* from Riposto, near Catania. The contractor, who was obliged to supply ice throughout the year, operated from La Niviera, at 41-43, St Barbara Bastion.

In 1827, Andrew Bigelow (*Travels in Malta and Sicily with Sketches of Gibraltar*, 1831) described the Barriera thus: "The packet being in quarantine there was no landing save at the Barriera (called also, the Parlitorio), an office erected on a point of land near the head of the port... a short flight of stairs leads up to it; the building is accommodated with wings; but the front of the body is open having only a bar railing... The latter is marked into several divisions which is a salutary precaution to prevent contact between those of different terms of allotted quarantine... A space two yards wide, fenced off by another



Nix Mangiari Steps extended to the Porta di Monte until 1884.

railing parallel to the first, occupies the entire centre of the Parlitorio.

"Your friend stands behind the second line of defence, and attendants walk in the space reserved with a pair of formidable tongs to receive the letters or papers which may be offered. They first take them to a fumigating grate, before delivering them to the person designated. My letters (for Eynaud, the American consul) were transmitted a *la mode*, though I confess it was something mortifying to see them, when on reaching his hands, brown as the fumes of sulphur can make them."

The Barriera bollards were still in place until the 1930s but the arched verandah of the Consegna was converted into stores with tenements on the first floor, probably at the time

of Reid. By the beginning of the 20th century there were two bars and the timber depot of Giovanni Bugeja on the site of the verandah. Bugeja had a large bronze letter 'S' in his office – acquired when sections of the ill-fated Sardinia of 1908 were broken up at Barriera Wharf.

The façade (*Haec fecit*) of the main hall remained intact. In 1908, eight Perellos stores held wine and spirits in bond. The men looked forward to (tipsy) days when they bottled wine and spirits from casks. Four stores were reserved for petroleum.

Stores 24 to 29 were later leased to W.D. & H.O. Wills for the manufacture of cigarettes. The company employed scores of single women who took their break on the wharf, much to the delight of sailors on the ships.

The end of the Barriera bollards came in the 1930s when a new fish market was built to replace the original by Despuig near Ta' Liesse. This was inaugurated by Sir Charles Bonham Carter on December 3, 1937.

Marble inscriptions in English and Latin on side panels recalled the Barriera, the project started by Bonham Carter's predecessor, Sir David Campbell, and a quote from Matthew 13, 47-48: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was full, they drew to the shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away."

Which is exactly what used to be done; discarded bycatch as well as tuna, swordfish and shark guts drew other fish to the wharf, which were caught by amateur fishermen. The fish market was damaged during the war but reopened in 1948. In 1959, an annex was built on the remaining Barriera site to house the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. The fish market was closed down in 2015 following the move to new premises at Marsa.

In 1978, the new road breached St Christopher Bastion beneath the Lower Barrakka Gardens and cut through what remained of the Consegna. The excavations revealed part of a garden wall, which probably used to form part of the residence of the Sanitary Commissioner.

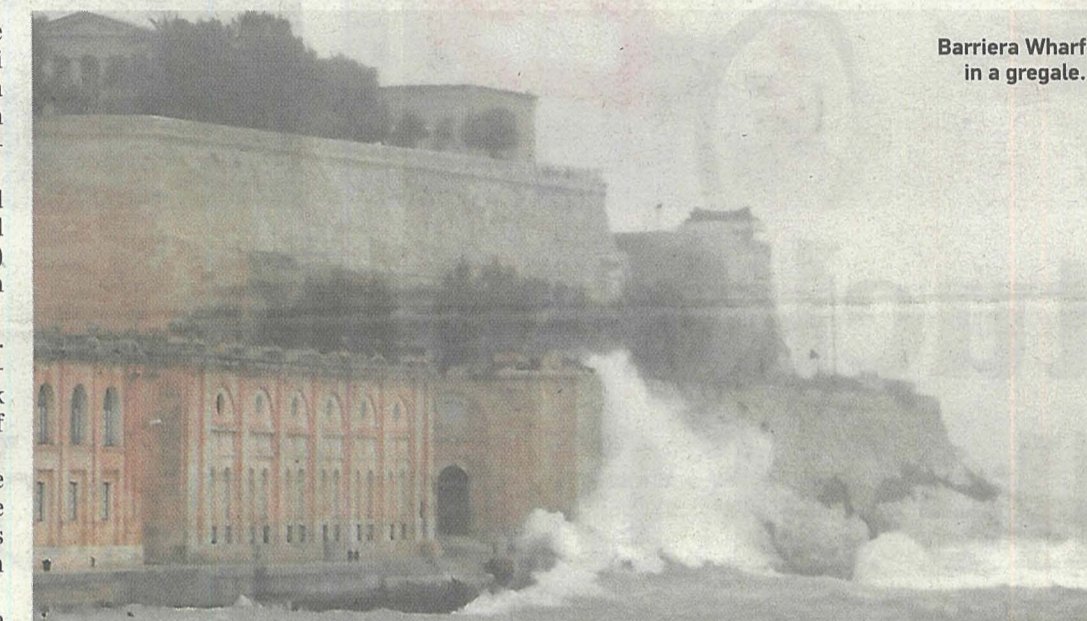
The road turns left at Imgherbep Point, shipping hazard and scene of welcomes and heartbreaking separations. It is perhaps the only part of Mount Sceberras to have escaped human intervention. Many a ship has come to (minor) grief here, including the largest ever, the 342-metre *Star London* on April 21, 1991. On the top of the bastion is the World War II Siege Bell Memorial inaugurated in 1992 by Dr Vincent Tabone and Queen Elizabeth II.

Postscript

My paternal grandfather Spiridione Cassar, who married Domenica Said of Nadur on September 30, 1900, used to live in a tenement in the former Consegna. I like to think that several other people have their own story to tell about the area from the Customs House to Imgherbep Point. In the meantime, remember William Henry Davies' counsel: "A poor life this if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare."

Michael Cassar is an eclectic author whose fascination with his motherland's rich heritage has led to the production of several books and articles.

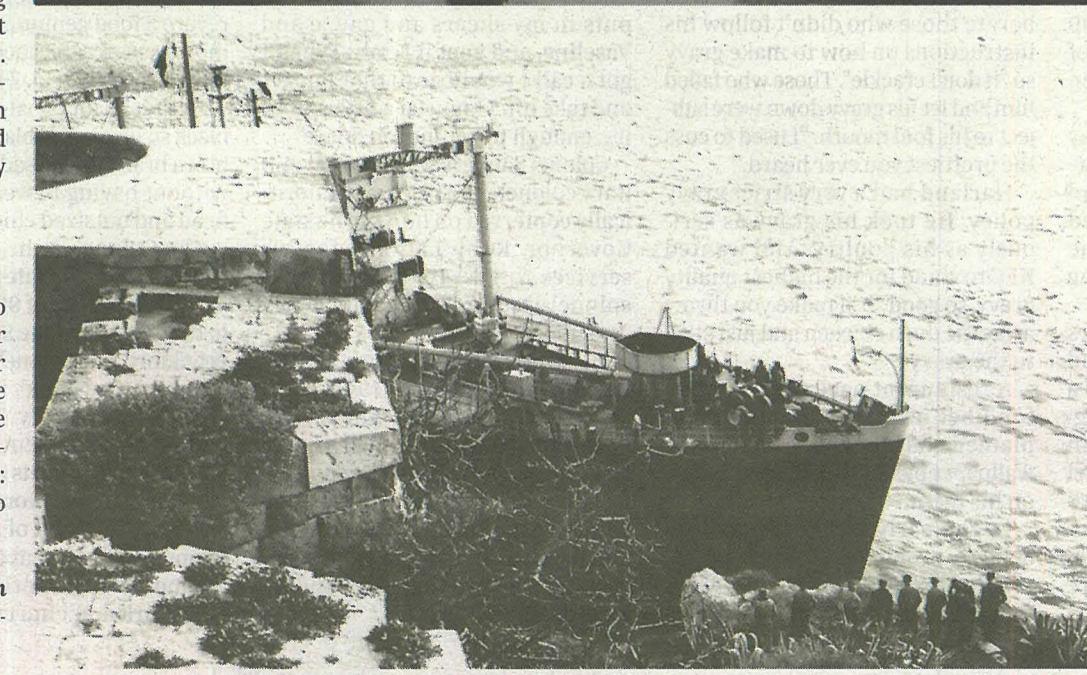
(This is the conclusion of a three-part article.)



Barriera Wharf in a gregale.



Lonely bollard from the former Barriera.

Neither the first nor the last: *Wave Monarch* aground at Imgherbep Point on February 13, 1956.