

LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY

Extracts from *Connecting the Harbour Towns O. F. Gollcher & Sons 1897-1959*

'Lanċa ġejja u oħra sejra'



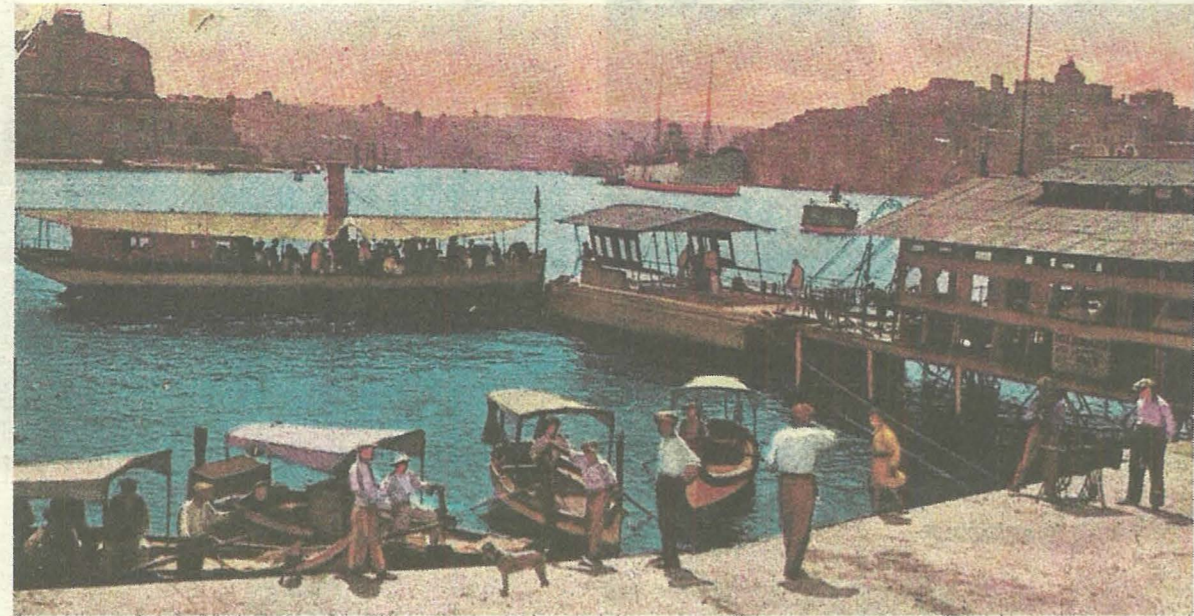
Overconfidence and crowding led to incidents. The Daily Malta Chronicle of February 13, 1907, reported: "When the Marsamuscetto pier was crowded with intended passengers for Misida [sic], the steam launch came alongside. Being the last trip of the evening and the number of passengers being to all appearances in excess of the accommodation, there was a rush for places during which some of the most determined of those who were in the rear pushed their way forward.

"A young lady named Miss E. Portanier lost her footing and fell into the water. Being between the launch and the pier, her position was a most critical one, so much so that a priest who witnessed the accident administered absolution to the unfortunate young lady. At this moment, a man named Crocifisso Sapiano promptly bent down and seized hold of the lady who had managed to support herself and succeeded in rescuing her."

Spitting was a pernicious local habit and the ferries were not spared. The Malta Herald of October 5, 1910, insisted on measures to combat this undesirable practice: "It would be a convenience if that part of the law relating to spitting on boats were made more generally known. Many of the public who cross the two harbours in the steam ferry boats are not in a position to read the Government Gazette and, therefore, are not aware that spitting is now a contravention."

It seems that the company acted at once because, on October 8, the paper reported: "The management of the steam ferry boats have put up a caution in every launch that 'Spitting is objectionable but absolutely prohibited by law, the punishment in case of conviction being a fine up to ten shillings'. The notice should therefore be more explicit."

The stream of ferries toing and froing between Sliema and Marsamxett ensured that anybody in trouble on



Dancing on water in the Grand Harbour.

the water would quickly find assistance. The Daily Malta Chronicle of May 28, 1915, reported the misadventure of: "Three gunners, William Gibbons, Richard Ryan and William Birron [who] were boating in the Marsamuscetto Harbour when by some means, the gig with which they were rowing suddenly upset, throwing the occupants into the water.

A passing steam ferry was prompt in throwing a buoy, which was seized by Gibbons, who was thereby enabled to sustain himself until further assistance was forthcoming. Meanwhile, Dghajsa No. 44, manned by Emanuele Vella and Giuseppe Maggi, hastened to the scene of the accident and picked up the other two men who were already in a state of exhaustion. The presence of mind and ready assistance rendered by the boatmen unquestionably averted a double fatality."

It was a hard life for the ferry crews until World War II. The men had to get the boats ready well before the start of the first morning trip; in the evening, they had to moor them at Marsa for the night. They looked out for passengers who boarded by the stern just as the boat was pulling out to the coxswain's cry of: "Ejja mmorru" (full ahead). There were no bow thrusters then; the bow line was withdrawn and the stem turned towards the open sea by ordering: "Sijja"

(reverse engines), followed by "Aqdef bil-mod" (slow ahead).

The coxswain was responsible for the three crew members: engine driver, stoker and the 'boy' who helped with the mooring, polished the brass, retouched the ochre paintwork and varnished the mahogany saloon. The crew looked askance at smokers and spitters, dogs doing their thing and passengers arguing about closed windows in the saloons. Leave was unknown, and the stoker and the boy slept on the boat to guard against intruders and ensure that the

"In the Grand Harbour, three ferries left the respective landing stages when the fourth approached the Marina; to watch the whole business was magical – a dancing act on water"

boilers had raised enough steam for the morning.

Travellers recalled the terror and the screaming when the occasional wash from the screws of a P&O steamer or a destroyer rocked the boat and chafed against the hull; they recalled the house flag being raised in the morning and the brass acetylene lamps lit in the evening. There was the collector in his cubicle on the pier, the waiting benches on either side of the rail separating arrivals from departures. The last trip of the day meant fewer passengers and time for stolen kisses and more in the saloon.

The saloon was too hot in summer; nothing could beat the gentle breeze under the canvas awnings. On Sundays, there was the bliss of half-hourly trips from Valletta to Sliema – and enough time for the *thé dansant* at the Chalet. [There was always] the smell of coal and oil, the hiss of steam, pistons throbbing and the ever watchful engine driver in his oily, boiler suit.

Was it true that the coxswains were all pipe-smoking Gozitan, former deep sea mariners, old seadogs? Some were serious, brooked no nonsense – it was a job that came with a lot of responsibility, after all. There were others who would let a child briefly hold the wheel, a captain for a minute. It seemed that there was always a ferry or two on the water. In the Grand Harbour, it was musical chairs: three

ferries at the Valletta Marina, Vittoriosa and Senglea. They left the respective landing stages when the fourth approached the Marina; to watch the whole business was magical – a dancing act on water. Three minutes from Senglea to Valletta.

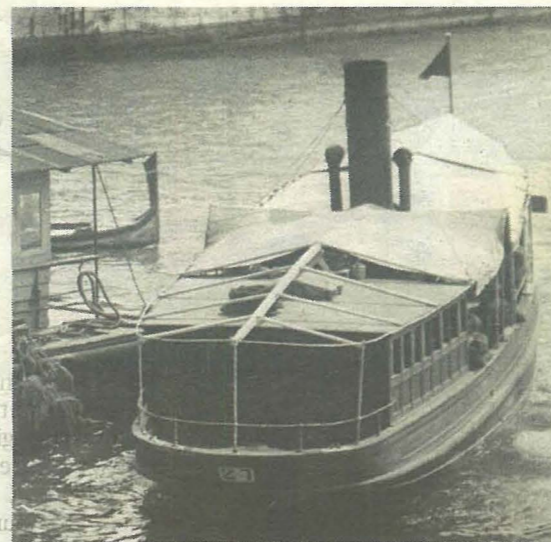
Six ferries at Marsamxett Harbour: two at Sliema, two at Marsamxett, two racing each other across the water; that was the source and inspiration for *Lanċa ġejja u oħra sejra* – a ferry is toing and froing from Sliema to Marsamxett. But was it true that a coxswain had once fallen ill and had to be attended by the crew? Did it really happen and was told and retold until it was turned into a ditty? Or was the song intended to reassure children and superstitious adults that the crew would take over if ever the coxswain should fall ill?

Ġużè Galea in *Xogħol u Snajja ta' l-Imghoddi* (2nd ed. 1972), cited a different fourth line in the ditty. Instead of the popular "Jidderiġi l-bastiment" (steering the vessel), which just about rhymes with "Marsamxett" in the second line, he gives "u l-bahri bis-sigarett" (the sailors smoked cigarettes), unlike the pipe-smoking captain in the previous line. The ditty ends with the singer/s advising or suggesting that (since the captain is no longer up to the job) he ought to be referred to an old people's home.

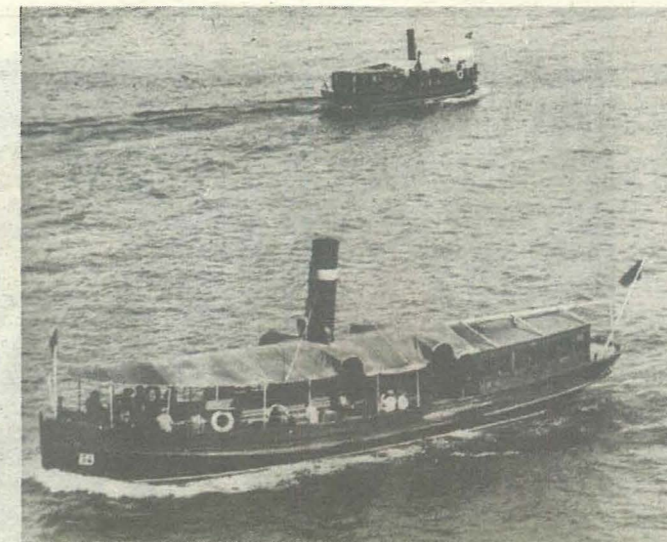
The ditty is the sole legacy of the ferries:

*Lanċa ġejja u oħra sejra
Minn tas-Sliema għal Marsamxett
Il-kaptan bil-pipa f'haġu,
Jidderiġi l-bastiment
Sewwa sewwa f'nofs ta' bahar
Il-kaptan hassu hażin!
Ma kellux min idur miegħu,
Daru miegħu l-bahri.
Għamillu karta, għamillu karta,
Għamillu karta għal tax-xjuħ*

The story of the ferries is not only about *Lanċa ġejja u oħra sejra*. Several anniversary stories published about the ferries in newspapers were cited in the text. Despite the loss of its premises in Zachary Street, Valletta, during War II, O. F. Gollcher & Sons retain models, ferry registration certificates, blueprints and other archive material from which important information was gleaned. The late James Gollcher wrote brief (unpublished) histories of his family's involvement in shipping and the ferry business.



The coxswains would cry 'Ejja mmorru - sijja - suq bil-mod' as the boats set sail.



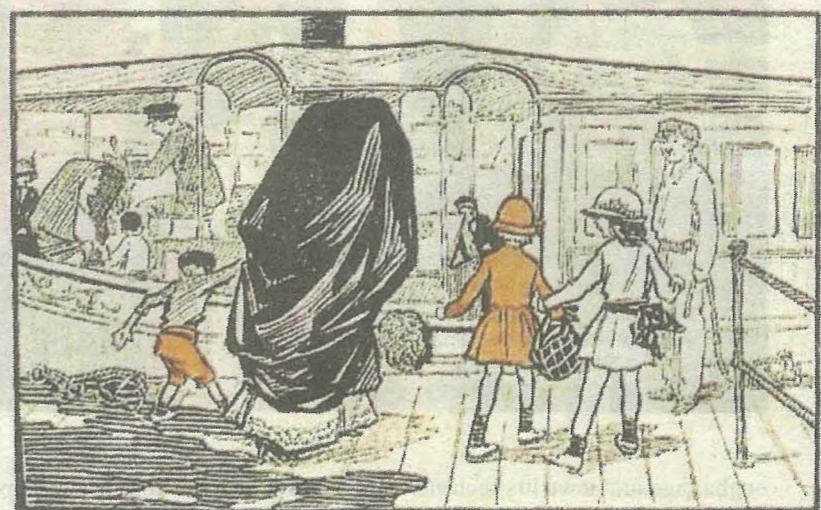
A ferry toing and froing much to the tune of *Lanċa ġejja u oħra sejra*.

Victor Wickman wrote about O. F. Gollcher & Sons in the *Mercantile and Industrial Gazette* of September 4, 1968. Joseph Caruana, editor of the *Friends of the Maritime Museum* newsletter since the society's inception in 1997, wrote two detailed articles on the subject: 'Harbour Steam Ferries', in *Newsletter Friends of the Maritime Museum - Malta*, April 2007, no. 46 (2/2007) and 'The Grand Harbour Steam Ferry Coy', in *Friends of the Maritime Museum - Newsletter*, no. 84, October 2016 (4-2016). Mark Banavage provided important details on the registration of the ferries.

The establishment of the ferry service at Sliema was described by Winston L. Zammit in *Tas-Sliema fis-Seklu XIX* (2000) and *Tas-Sliema 1901-1950* (2006) as well as *Is-Servizz tal-lanċ f'Marsamxett bejn tas-Sliema u l-Belt in Il-Pronostiku Malti* and 'Ferry service to start operating again after 32 years' in *The Times*, June 23, 1991.

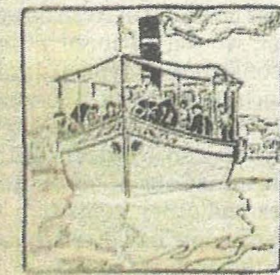
No. 109, *Malta fl-Antik* (Bygone Malta), in *Telstar u il-Berqa*, October 22, 1969, described *il-lanċ tal-pass* (the ferries). The late Herbert Ganado wrote about the role of the ferries in the expansion of Sliema in Vol. II, *Rajt Malta Tinbidel* (1974). Ġużè Galea recalled ferry operation in *Xogħol u Snajja ta' l-Imghoddi* (1972). The Marsamuscetto Steam Ferry Service has an entry in *Allister Macmillan's Malta and Gibraltar* (1915).

There were personal reminiscences. In interview no. 61 in *Lehen is-Sewwa* of September 12, 1953, Giovanni Maria Scicluna recalled his childhood at Sliema: 'Meta ġew il-lanċ, tas-Sliema kibret' (Sliema grew when the ferries arrived). Mgr Arturo Bonnici wrote *Lanċ u triqat* (ferries and streets), and *Lil kulhadd imiss ix-xorti* (every dog has his day), in *Lehen is-Sewwa*, October 24, 1970. In 'By Land and Sea in the Nineties', published in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, on March 31, 1963, Dunstan G. Bellanti recalled ferry rivalry and crossing the harbour in bad weather. Andre Zammit, in *Our*



Robert Caruana Dingli illustrated the ferries for *The Melita Readers, Book II*, by E.C. Parnwell (OUP. 1931).

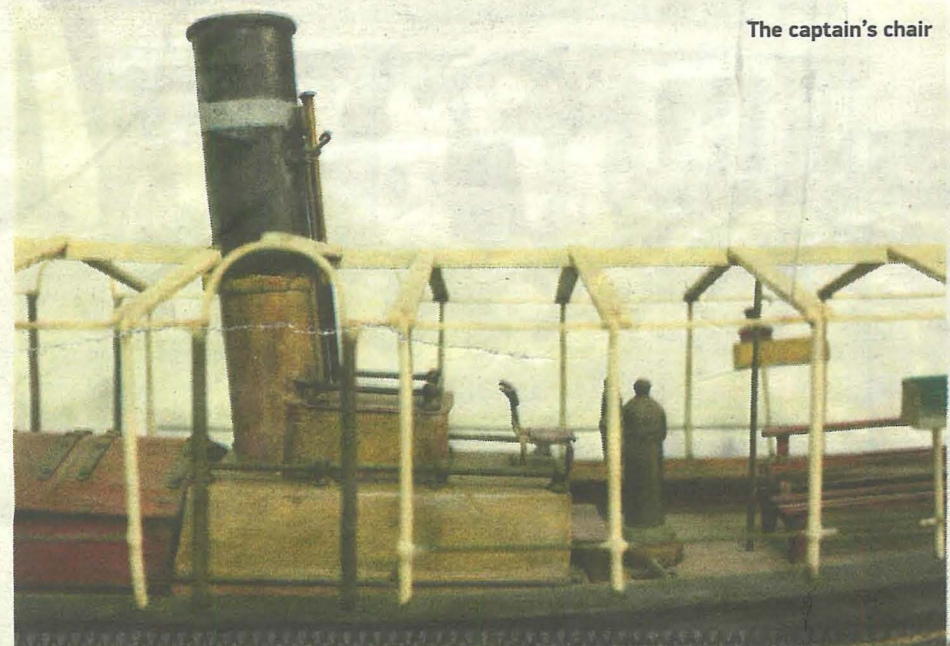
Tom and Polly and Bess are on the ferry. The ferry will carry them to Sliema.



Architects (2009), cited the commissioning of a study by Alessandro Mattei for the installation of a lift at Marsamxett. The struggle of the barklori (boatmen) against the ferry service in the Grand Harbour was described by Anton Attard in 'Is-Servizz tal-lanċ fil-Port il-Kbir' in *Pronostiku Malti* (1995) as well as by Duminku Degiorgio: *Xi tagħrif fuq it-traffiku f'Malta fl-art u l-bahar - il-barklori jagħmlu 'battalja' għall-ghejxien* (some information on transport by land and sea – the

boatmen fight for their livelihood), in *Iż-Żmien*, on September 22, 1969.

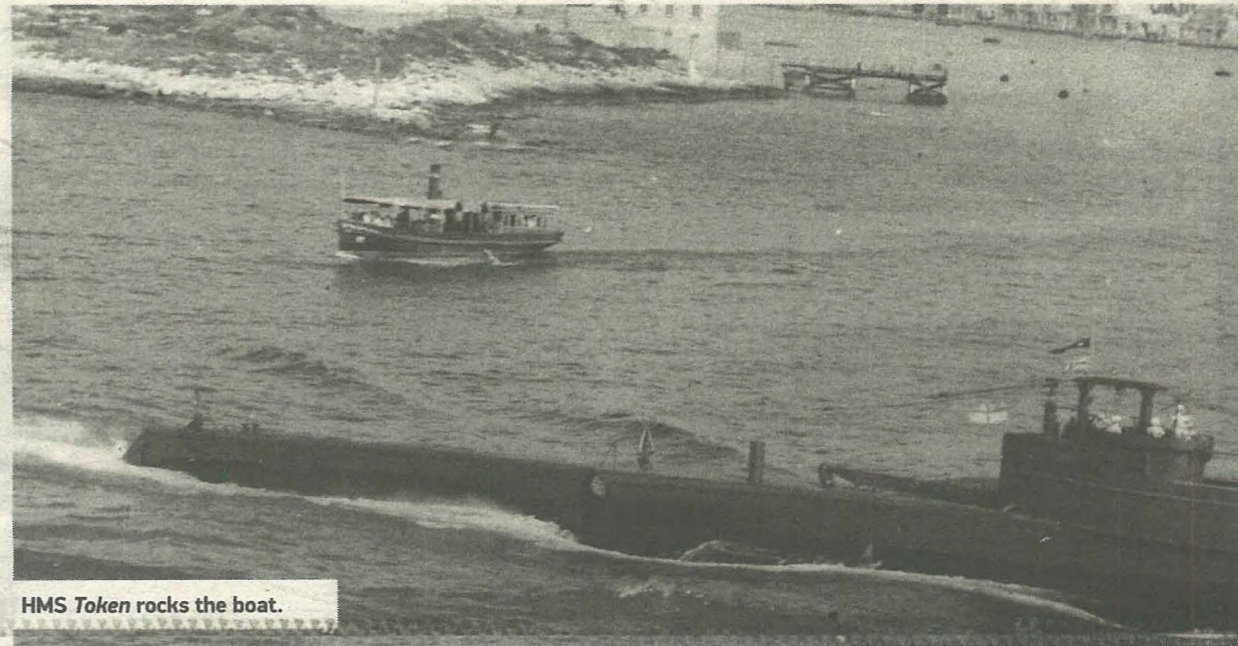
This is the concluding excerpt in this series reproduced from the author's 2019 book *Connecting the Harbour Towns O. F. Gollcher & Sons 1897-1959*, sponsored by Gollcher Company Ltd on the occasion of their 165th anniversary. The previous excerpts were published in the following editions: January 5, 2020, December 29, November 17, November 3, October 20 and August 20, 2019.



The captain's chair



A short walk to the Chalet from the ferries.



HMS Token rocks the boat.