

## CONNECTING THE HARBOUR TOWNS (3)

# The ferries' heyday prior to World War I

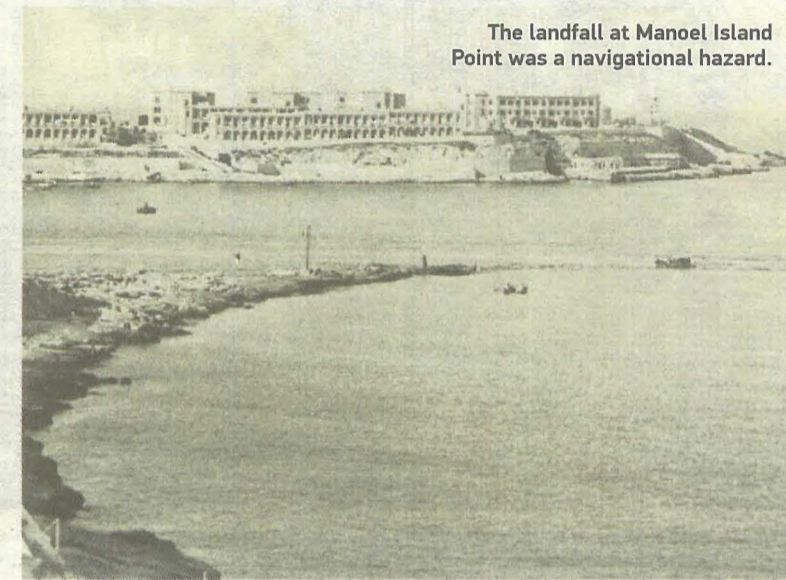
In this third in a series of articles, **Michael Cassar** provides concluding extracts from his recently published book *Connecting The Harbour Towns O. F. Gollcher & Sons 1897-1959*.

The boatmen (*barklori*) returned on the offensive with a vengeance late in the evening of April 1, 1909. Some 400 people, comprising *barklori*, families and friends, gathered at Jetties Wharf, Marsa, where the four Grand Harbour Steam Ferry Service Company (GHSFC) 'Admirals' were moored for the night. They first attacked the Marine Police station on the wharf and then attempted to board *Admiral Lambton*, the first ferry at the quay. The crews of the other three launches banked with the *Admiral Lambton* cast off the mooring ropes and sailed to the Customs House.

The crew of *Admiral Lambton* failed to repulse the attackers, who ran amok on the ferry, damaging fittings and exploding a small gelignite bomb which set the deck on fire. A police contingent arrived, put out the fire and arrested 26 protesters. Raffaele Polidano thanked the police for their timely intervention, which, if unchecked, would have exceeded the £150 damage caused to *Admiral Lambton*. Interestingly, there is no reference to the incident in the *Rapporti Generali*. The following morning the 26 protesters were charged in court but were released owing to insufficient evidence.

The *Daily Malta Chronicle* of July 9, 1909, addressed problems at Marsamxett where: "The largely augmented traffic in Sda San Marco, Valletta, following the opening of the new road at Marsamuscetto, has told very noticeably on the lava paving of that street, which is badly in want of chipping. Almost at all hours of the day the street is crowded with vehicles, showing that recent improvements in that neighbourhood have been greatly to the advantage of drivers as of the public generally. But the increased wear and tear has to be reckoned with, and already it is observed that horses have to be driven with caution owing to the worn and slipping surface which invites accident."

The Marsamuscetto Steam Ferry Service (MSFS) launched *Carmen* at its Marsa yard on June 12, 1909; it entered service on July 26. On August 3 the National Steam Ferry Boat Company (NSFBC) signed a contract for the purchase of the Malta Customs Department coastal patrol launch *Lina*, which was similar in design to the company's own ferries. It was delivered on the following day and overhauled at the shipyard. *Ceres*, coxswain Giuseppe Scicluna, Antonio Zarb, engineer, Salvatore Buttigieg, sailor, and Emmanuele Sghendo, boy, collided with the Dockyard tug *Victory* off Manoel Island on the 6.30am trip to Msida. The subsequent enquiry by the Customs Department blamed the coxswain of *Victory* and the Commercial Court fined its coxswain £20 and the sailor £7.10s.



The landfall at Manoel Island Point was a navigational hazard.



O.F. Gollcher & Sons had a slipway and repair yard at Hay Wharf next to the P&O landing stage at left.

Apart from the ferries, the floating pontoons required regular maintenance, especially after being battered by stormy seas and from damage caused by the ferries when they moored. The pontoons were then unshackled from their anchors and chains and towed by the ferries to the slipway for repairs and alterations. Pontoons were held in place by two anchors and several fathoms of chain lashed to the shore. Access from the pontoons to the fixed piers was on wide wooden gangways. Waiting benches and seats lined the sides of the enclosed piers and the floors were covered with decorated Maltese tiles.

**"In 1913, the Marsamxett-St Julian's summer service started on July 17. Ferries ran from 5.15am to 6.15pm"**

*Lina* entered service on April 6, 1910. It was employed on a trial basis on the Marsamxett route on June 6 but was later employed as a fishing boat on behalf of the company. The fishermen were allowed to retain the catch from the first three trips; thereafter the *Rapporti Generali* lists the earnings from the sale of fish and the profit made by the company from each trip. In 1911, it also made the occasional excursion. No one of the passengers seemed to mind the smell. On September 2, 1911, it was chartered for three months (extendable by another three) to G. Portelli. The company provided the engineer, who was paid by the charterer.

The *Malta Herald* of July 5, 1910, reported Polidano's offer to Stella

Maris parish: "Mr R. Polidano, manager of the National Steam Ferry Boat Coy, makes it known that the company desires to render some service to the parish church of Stella Maris, Sliema, have gratuitously conceded the use of the SS *Gleneagles* for a pleasant trip round the island with a stay of about two hours at St Paul's Bay. The proceeds from the trip will be devolved to the requirements of the parish church. There will be a band on board and refreshments will also be obtainable." Both companies hired launches for private excursions. On August 22, *Euterpe* was hired for £2 for an excursion to St Paul's Bay.

*Lina* was sold to Libya-based Italians for £800 on March 16, 1912. It sailed for Benghazi on March 20 but never made port as it sank 180 miles off Malta on the following day. *Admiral Lambton* damaged its propeller after striking the Marina landing stage on May 29, 1912. The Customs Department suspended the coxswain Agostino Aquilina for a week. On July 2, 1912, A.G. Calleja, manager of the MSFS, of 5, Strada Annunziata, Sliema, advertised that the company flagship *Britannia* was available for hire for picnics or other trips. The company added *Glory* to the fleet in 1912.

In 1913, the Marsamxett-St Julian's summer service started on July 17. Ferries ran from 5.15am to 6.15pm. The ferries made stops at Balluta and Spinola, the single fare costing 2d. (tuppence). The *Daily Malta Chronicle* of September 20 announced the excursion to St Paul's Bay by the MSFS *Britannia* on the occasion of the village feast: "The pretty little hamlet which centres the historic surroundings of St Paul's Bay will be aroused from its quiet seclusion by the animated proceedings which will mark the feast of The Seven Sorrows, which is usually observed with sacred and secular significance. The La Valette Band will play a musical programme. The commodious steam

launch *Britannia* has arranged a very convenient itinerary for visitors, proceeding from Marsamxett and Sliema.

*Stella* was taken out of service on September 24, 1913, for inspection by Italian buyers. The contract was signed on the 25th between the GHSFC and a number of Sicilians from Syracuse. It was sold for £700, and left for Syracuse on the following day. The *Daily Malta Chronicle* of September 27 reported its departure: "An interesting event was witnessed when the steam launch *Stella*, which was purchased by an Italian company from the Marsamuscetto Steam Ferry Service Coy (the owners were actually the GHSFC) left for Syracuse in charge of an Italian crew and flying the flag of that nationality. The launch, so well-known during its long and faithful service, had a very hearty send-off from its old surroundings having been built in Malta about three years ago."

The gap left by the sale of *Stella* did not last. The *Daily Malta Chronicle* of

October 20 reported that: "The enterprise of the National Steam Ferry Boat Coy (Blue Flag), ably represented by its courteous manager Mr R. Polidano, is to be commended on the addition of a large launch which is being built by Messrs. Fratelli Gatt. The boat, which is to augment the company's fine fleet, will be very spacious and commodiously fitted. The fast engine and machinery brought out have been ordered from England."

According to an unpublished fleet list, the ferry was completed the following year as *Admiral Mitchell*. In 1914, Francis Herbert Mitchell (1875-1046) was captain of HMS *Eclipse*. He became *Admiral Superintendent Malta Dockyard* in 1928. The jury is still out on this ferry — the GHSFC could not have anticipated his promotion by 15 years. Furthermore, the ferry contracted with Fratelli Gatt on October 17 and reported by the *Daily Malta Chronicle* of the 20th was delivered as *Emily P.* In 1914, the companies' joint fleet comprised: *Aurora*, *Bellona*, *Ceres*,

# to World War I



Improved access to the ferries enhanced the importance of Strada San Marco (at left).

*Daphne*, *Euterpe*, *Admiral Beresford*, *Admiral Lambton*, *Admiral Bromley*, *Admiral Drury*, and *Emily P.* There is no mention of *Admiral Mitchell* in the *Rapporti Generali* for that year.

*Admiral Drury* was the second of the name. The 1907-built ferry was lost during a gregale while berthed at Hay Wharf on January 19, 1914. It broke its moorings and was wrecked on the rocks at Manoel Island. The ferry's loss was attributed to negligence of the coxswain, Carmelo Sghendo; the machinery was salvaged.

Perhaps it was partly because of the recovery of the most expensive part of the ferry that on February 21, Polidano entered into a private contract with Fortunato Cassar for the construction of a replacement by Nicola Mayer at Marsa. On March 27, Miss Maria Alexia Polidano presented the builders with a banner inscribed: "Admiral Drury. On June 9, Fr Luigi Maria Gatt, OP, parish priest of Our Lady of Porto Salvo, Valletta, blessed the ferry, and Miss Polidano

broke the traditional bottle of champagne, after which she presented Fr Gatt with a memento: an inkwell and a silver pen. The ferry was then towed by *Daphne* to Sliema for public exhibition before entering service on August 1, 1914."

The final addition to the NSFBC fleet before the start of World War I was *Emily P.* The contract had been drawn up by notary Francesco Schembri Zarb on October 17, 1913, between Eduardo Montebello Pulis, administrator of the NSFBC, and Paolo and Enrico, Fratelli Gatt, of Vittoriosa, to construct a launch for £610 to be paid: £100 on contract; £100 on commencement of work; £250 on launching; the balance on delivery.

On January 3, 1914, Miss Emily Polidano presented the builders with a banner inscribed: "Emily Polidano. The launching took place on May 20; Mgr Angelo Portelli, OP, blessed the ferry before the young lady broke the traditional bottle of champagne."

Mgr Portelli (1852-1927) was the Apostolic Administrator of the diocese after the death of the Archbishop Bishop Mgr Pietro Pace. After the launching, Miss Polidano presented Mgr Portelli with a bouquet and two silver napkin rings inscribed with her name and the date. Mgr Portelli told the assembly of guests, including the Polidano sisters, shipyard and company employees that he would always remember the occasion, it being the first time he had launched a ship.

The ferry was registered on July 30 in the name of NSFBC of 2, Strada Marina, Tigné. It sailed from the builders to Marsamxett on August 5. On September 1, it replaced *Gleneagles* on the Gozo mail run; it was chartered by the General Post Office to undertake a single daily mail trip for £2. Coal and crew expenses were borne by the company.

(To be continued. The first two parts of this series were published on August 18 and October 20.)



Mgr Angelo Portelli (1852-1927), in white, next to Mgr Pietro Pace, blessed some of the new ferries.



A 1980s photo of the Marine Police Station at Jetties Wharf, which had been set on fire in 1909.