

# Lazaretto of Malta

by Anthony Camilleri

Since the fourteenth century some European governments have attempted to prevent the introduction of plague and other epidemics by insisting on quarantine (from quaranta giorni or 40 days' seclusion), for persons from infected areas.

Suspect goods normally would be destroyed or, if valuable, fumigated in various ways. An infected ship in 1523 gave rise to an outbreak of plague in Birgu. The town was circled by a quarantine barrier, and the ship itself and all its cargo were burned and destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

From early times the suitability of Marsamxett Harbour for the purpose of isolating ships was recognized. The little island in the middle of the Harbour being an ideal place for the segregation of contaminated cargo, passengers and crew. The beginning of the sixteenth century brought much activity into the harbours of Malta and, with its greater risk of the introduction of contagious diseases thus appropriate measures had to be taken for the protection of the population. It appears that ships arriving from the North African littoral were directed to anchorage at Marsamxett Harbour,<sup>1</sup> where they had to remain isolated for a certain period for purification. Quarantine was then unknown and the period of isolation was referred to as a period of purification (*purgazione*). Health guards were also posted in harbours and bays and coves wherever vessels could be illegally berthed.

In 1623, a case of plague occurred in the household of one of the Guardians of the Port. The contagion spread rapidly and infected other persons. The Commissioners of Health acted with alacrity; they sent all the patients and contacts to the Lazaretto, with the result that the disease was overcome after a loss of only forty five dead.

Another outbreak occurred ten years later, in 1633. The infection was traced to a trader whose house stood near the Harbour Gate (now Victoria Gate) in the vicinity of which ships arriving from the Levant were moored. The whole family was infected and the disease spread into the countryside, but prompt precautionary measures were adapted and the infection did not assume epidemic proportions.<sup>2</sup>

The islet was subsequently developed as a '*Lazaretto*' of San Rocco (a chapel dedicated to St. Roque the Protector against plague was also erected) and Quarantine Station by the Knights of St. John in 1643 for the disinfection of incoming goods and mail against cholera which was widespread throughout Europe at the time.

The principal officer at the Lazaretto was called '*Purificatore*'; he was appointed by the Grand Master on the recommendation of the Commissioners of Health and exercised wide powers. The Lazaretto was to become the island's isolation hospital for contagious diseases.<sup>3</sup>



## AVVISO

**ANTONIO BORG** è stato fucilato sta mane alle ore nove in esecuzione d'un giudicato inappellabile del Supremo Tribunale in data di jeri, fondata sul essere stato jeri medesimo esso Borg scoperto d'aver nascosto la malattia pestilenziale da cui era da qualche giorno attaccato con manifesti sintomi, in contravvenzione all' Articolo 320. del Proclama del primo corrente Agosto, il che serva a tutti di salutar esempio per non commettere sì esecrabile delitto con cui si espongono a gravissimo rischio le vite de' propj simili.

Malta, Segreteria del Governo 17 Agosto 1813



Grand Master Lascaris took definite steps to develop the little island in the middle of Marsamxett Harbour as a regular quarantine station. He negotiated an agreement with the Church Authorities, as the islet was the property of the Cathedral of Mdina. The order acquired possession of the islet in exchange for lands at Fiddien, a fertile valley west of Mdina.<sup>4,5</sup>

Soon after the acquisition of Bishop Island, now Manoel Island, the Grand Master ordered the erection of suitable accommodation for the reception of patients and contacts, further buildings were put up from time to time and in 1670 Grand Master Nicholas Cottoner made improvements to the Lascaris Buildings which were just in time for the worst outbreak of plague ever to affect Malta.

On 24<sup>th</sup> December 1675 Anna Bonnici the eleven-year-old daughter of Matteo Bonnici a prosperous wholesale merchant from Valletta, suddenly fell ill with a high fever. The Proto Medicus, or Government Chief Physician, Gio Domenico Xeberras found her suffering from “an acute and malignant fever with a few red spots and a small pustule in the right side of the groin”.<sup>6</sup> The girl died on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1675, being the first victim of the plague. Only Mdina, the old capital, the small village of Safi and the sister island of Gozo remained free of the plague.

The demand for beccamorti was very great; indeed some men were compelled to enroll for this hideous job.<sup>7</sup> When no beccamorti were available, families buried their dead in their own garden or courtyard. The pay of a beccamorto varied from two to eight tari daily.<sup>8</sup> At the time two tari were equivalent to the pay of a skilled worker, while eight tari daily were earned only by a few. It is understandable, however, why these high wages were offered to the beccamorti: they were defying death in the face; in fact many of them did meet an untimely end. They were called upon to perform various duties during the plague; they nursed the sick, served food to hospital inmates and fumigated infected houses. But their main task, as their name implied, was the carrying and burying of corpses in rural chapels or in the infetti cemeteries.

In the meantime all trade with Sicily and the Italian mainland was suspended. The epidemic died out in August 1676, but not before taking, 11,278 victims out of an estimated population of 70,000.

The quarantine regulations used by the Council of the Order were very comprehensive and strict; they were incorporated in the Statute Book of the Order and were enforced by an authority called the Commissioners of Health. The staff under the Commissioners of Health consisted of Guardians of Health, some of whom did duty afloat; others were employed at the Lazaretto. They exercised wide powers and made stringent regulations which implied severe punishment, even the penalty of death for those who disobeyed the health regulations.<sup>9</sup>

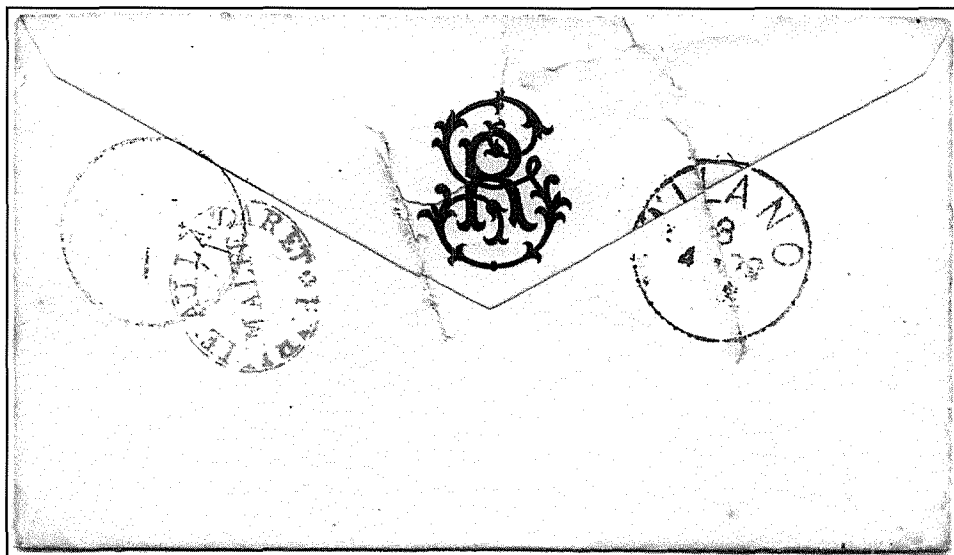
The Order always maintained the quarantine service in a state of efficiency. A complete record was kept of every ship subject to quarantine restrictions.<sup>10</sup>

In the archives of the Council of the Order one often meets with records relating to the management of the Lazaretto and to matters of quarantine, as well as measures authorized by the Council following advice by the Commissioner of Health such as quarantine restrictions for passengers and period of quarantine for ships arriving from the Levant.<sup>11</sup>

In 1785 extra precautionary measures were adapted to prevent the spread of plague from an infested French ship that had arrived in Malta. In the same year assistance was sent to the inhabitants of Lampedusa where an epidemic of plague was raging and precautionary measures were taken concurrently with the dispatch of assistance.

During early British rule the same sanitary and quarantine precautions continued to be observed and proclamations were issued from time to time, first by Captain Alexander John Ball R.N. and later by his successors. On 7<sup>th</sup> November 1804, Sir Alexander Ball appointed a “*Comitato di Salute Publica*” for the Islands of Malta and Gozo. Other “*Comitati di Salute*” followed from time to time.<sup>12</sup>

When on the 5<sup>th</sup> October 1813 Sir Thomas Maitland (1759-1824) took over the reins of government, as the first fully fledged British Governor of Malta, he was saluted by a devastating plague epidemic. The situation was grim indeed and desolation reigned supreme over the entire island of Malta.



1879 (26 March) cover from Tripoli addressed to Milan franked by “ESTERO” 1878 20c orange tied by rectangular lozenge of dots accompanied by circular “TRIPOLI DI BARBERIA/POSTE ITALIANE” dated 26<sup>th</sup> March and “P.D.” all struck in BLUE. Disinfected at Malta with oval “PURIFIE AU LAZARET \* MALTA” struck in blue and slitted. Milano arrival single ring handstamp dated 3<sup>rd</sup> April on reverse.

Anno III

Costantinopoli, Lunedì 22

# L'INDICATORE

Questo foglio viene pubblicato  
ogni sabato.

Il prezzo dell'abbonamento è sta-  
bilito a 42 Colonna. per dodici mesi  
6 per semestre, e 3 per trimestre.

PURIFIE AU LAZARET  
\*MALTE\*

3885

Abbiamo trasferito la pubblicazione del presen-  
te foglio al 22 per avere allegato dei Bastimenti e

## GIORNALE

di Scienze, Arti, Varietà.

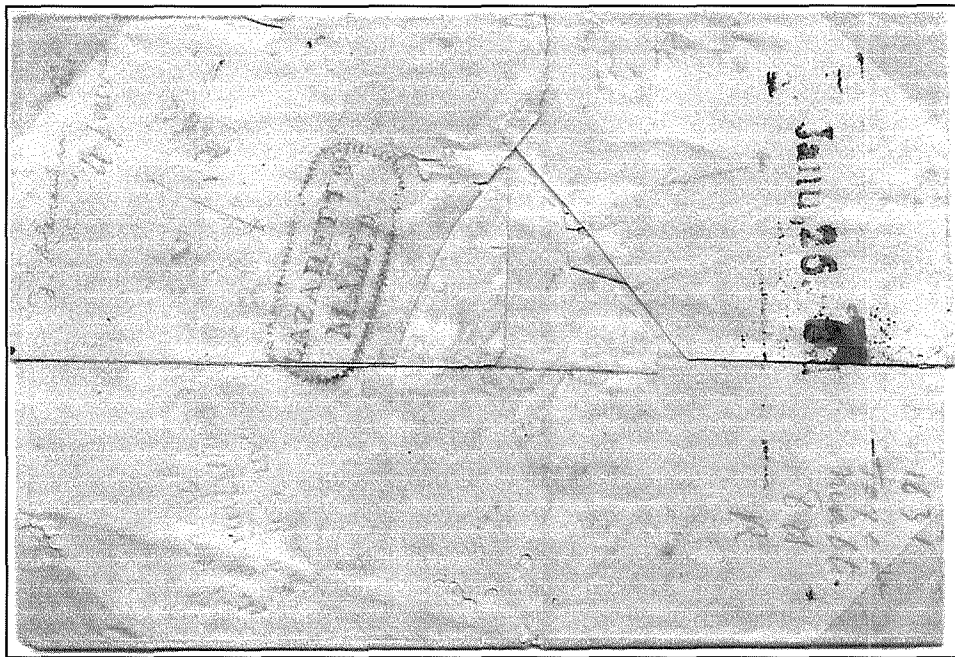
del Danubio Sera Perce  
ieri e passeggeri

1844 newspaper 'L'INDICATORE BISANTINO GIORNALE' dated the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1844 in Constantinople with disinfection slits and handstamped with two-line "PURIFIE AU LAZARET/ \*MALTE\*" in black.

Over the past two years there was a question. Where this handstamp was applied – In Malta or at Marseille.

According to K. F. Mayor *Disinfected Mail* page 278, Lit. Thomas Waghorn, after a serious diplomatic incident agreed with the British & French post office that an agent of the French post office would reside at Malta and he would proceed with all the details of disinfection. He would apply the circular cachet, with the wording: "PURIFIE AU LAZARET MALTE."

The infection was introduced by the British Brigantine San Nicola arriving from Alexandria on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1813.<sup>13</sup> As part of her crew had already died of plague on her voyage to Malta, the Yellow flag with a Black Ball in the middle, the sign indicating the actual existence of plague abroad, was hoisted.<sup>14</sup> The San Nicola entered harbour on the 29<sup>th</sup> March and after the ship was properly sealed and isolated, the Captain and the crew transferred to Lazaretto, the Isolation Hospital. After thirteen days however the ill fated ship was permitted to leave the Island and sail for Alexandria.<sup>15</sup> The first victims were two members of its crew, Captain Antonio Maria Muscara and the sailor who attended him were taken ill on the 1st April. Both died on the 7<sup>th</sup> April. This was followed by more deaths, the first on the 14<sup>th</sup> April, the victim being the daughter of Salvatore Borg a shoe maker from Valletta.<sup>16</sup> The disease was not diagnosed until the 4<sup>th</sup> May when her mother also died. By the end of May the pestilence had spread to Mdina and other parts of Malta.



*1831 entire letter from Alexandria to Malta showing oval strike “Lazzaretto/Malta’ and straight line “Janu, 26, 8d’ both just struck in black across join on reverse.*

In an effort to control the spread of the disease the entire country was put under medical surveillance. Martial Law was declared, movements within the islands were severely restricted, infected houses were sealed off, the theatre and other public places were ordered to shut and even the Law Courts had to close.

Nonetheless the sickness continued to make progress bringing in its stride untold miseries and an alarmingly high mortality rate. Soon there were no more undertakers and convicts had to be employed to clear infected houses and bury the dead.<sup>17</sup>

Conditions were becoming desperate and in order to relieve the pressure at the Lazaretto, the little island of Selmun at St. Paul’s Bay was turned into a quarantine station and temporary hutments were erected for the reception of sick and suspected crews of vessels performing quarantine and for the purification of goods.<sup>11</sup>

From Malta the epidemic was transmitted to Gozo reputedly in a box of clothes furtively introduced into that island. Only the walled town of Senglea miraculously remained unscratched. This was attributed to divine intervention and to commemorate the event a statue of the Madonna, sculptured by Vincenzo Dimech and paid for by Salvatore Debarro, was placed in the centre of the town.

The epidemic raged for eighteen months and mowed down 4,572 victims out of a population of over 100,000 people. The Government notified its arrest on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1814.<sup>18</sup>

The cholera epidemic of 1837 did not spare Malta either and claimed 4,152 victims. It was diagnosed on the 9th June 1837 at the Ospizio Hospital in Floriana. Up to 10th October 1837 a total of 8,785 cases are known to have occurred in Malta and Gozo of whom 4,152 died. The population at that time being around 120,000.

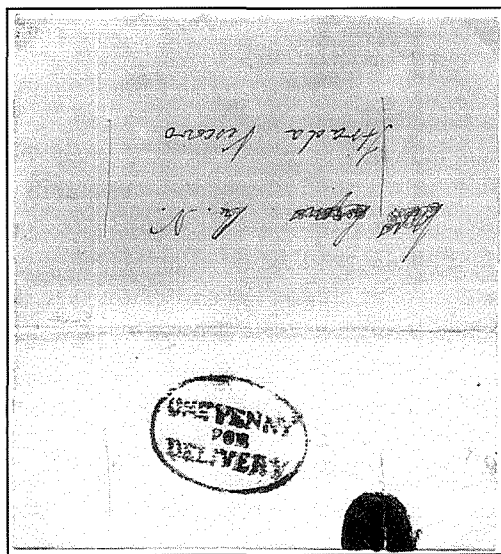
Although the Island was free from epidemic outbreaks the risk of introduction of contagion was ever present. Between 1810 and 1841 twelve ships arrived with infection on board, and several deaths occurred amongst the crew at the Lazaretto; sometimes members of the Quarantine staff and other contacts fell victim of the infection (1819 - 2 deaths, 1821 - 12 deaths, 1835 - 6 deaths, 1837 - 4 deaths, 1840 - 2 deaths, 1841 - 25 deaths). In view of the constant dangers, quarantine restrictions had to remain tight.

In 1837 regular French steamship services began to operate between Alexandria and Marseilles. Malta was selected as a quarantine station for westbound mail, and disinfection procedures and hand stamps, modelled on those of Marseilles, were adopted. The British Government also agreed to correspondence from India being disinfected there and a British official was ordered to accompany each mail from Alexandria to Malta to witness the process. The French Post Office Agent would then apply the appropriate cachet to letters which had been treated.<sup>19</sup>

The Lazaretto was very strict in the disinfection of letters. Letters sent from the Levant and from the Barbary Coast were subject to double disinfection – slit by two parallel cuts for fumigation and then slipped for an instant in vinegar.

At the Lazaretto there were special chambers each about five feet high and two feet wide built in the thickness of the walls for the fumigation of mail. Each

chamber was partitioned into two intercommunicating spaces: the upper in which there were racks and trays for holding letters, and the lower in which



*Wrapper with addressee – ‘Mrs. Lyons R.N.’ – crossed out in blue ink, addressed to ‘Strada Vescovo’ in Valletta and having oval framed “ONE PENNY/FOR/DELIVERY” applied in black on the flap. The wrapper has disinfection chisel-slits and the address panel is toned – presumably by disinfection – at the Lazaretto Quarantine Station.*

*This mark is thought to have been used for local delivery from the Lazzaretto as it has only been recorded originating from there in 1830 and 1836.*





there was a container for the disinfectant,<sup>20</sup> the sulphur being burnt inside the lower partition and the fumes dispersed into the upper partition. In former times fumigation was effected by sulphur fumes. Later on letters were disinfected by nascent oxygen resulting from the addition of formaldehyde to potassium permanganate. Letters were slit or perforated before being exposed to the fumes and were kept closed inside the chamber for thirty-forty minutes. Metal tongs were used to handle 'unclean' mail held over the fumes and these occasionally left their impression on the paper. An appropriate 'cachet' or 'wax seal' applied by the Health Authorities certified this procedure of purification.<sup>19</sup>

In 1911 cholera broke out yet again this time on the occasion of the immigration of nearly 2,000 refugees, mostly of Maltese nationality, from Tripoli and Benghazi following the outbreak of war between Italy and Turkey. Hundreds of these refugees who had no relatives or friends in Malta were temporarily housed at the Lazaretto, but on the sixth day of October they were transferred to Mgieret where tents had been erected to receive them in a field adjacent to the Poor House, the camp being administered and supplied with food from this institution. On 15th October the first case surfaced and the disease spread to the Poor House and then, gradually and unevenly in various localities, giving rise to local outbreaks. The Poor House, Żejtun and Qormi were most severely hit. Gozo escaped the infection. The epidemic came to an end after 67 days, the last case occurring on the 20th December. One hundred and sixteen cases were reported, of whom 85 died.<sup>18</sup>

Some alarm was raised in 1925 when smallpox was introduced into the Island; there was a brisk spread of the disease which however was rapidly contained. 104 cases were notified, of which 9 proved fatal. Compulsory vaccination as provided by the Sanitary Ordinance of 1908 was enforced over all the population and proved highly effective to cut short the incidence<sup>20</sup>.

In 1936 the Lazaretto was roused into feverish activity for the last time. Plague was introduced in Malta and threatened to invade the Island. The patients were only 36 but for thirteen months their admission into hospital as well as the isolation of their contents caused a good deal of work and worry. That was the last flutter of the Lazaretto grim and foreboding as known to past generations. Two years later the Second World War was declared and the Lazaretto lost its pristine influence and individuality.

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# Maltex 2008

7, 8, 9 November  
Phoenicia, Floriana

The Exhibition will be inaugurated on the  
**6th November at 6pm**  
by the Chairman of Heritage Malta Mr. J. Said,  
and blessed by The Rev. Mgr. Lawrence Gatt,  
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to Mr. H. Wood, 52 St. Dominic Str. Sliema SLM 1405,  
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