

NATIONAL



The ceremonial procession of the Maltese nobility on the occasion of the visit of King Edward VII in 1903.



The Cospicua parish church damaged by war.



The Lower Baracca in Valletta c.1870

Photographic nostalgia



Malta, Valletta, Strada Reale c/w Strada San Cristoforo. Easter Sunday – date unknown

Spending a lifetime poring over thousands of photos, from the earliest calotype of the 1840s to the pre-World War II period, photographic researcher Joseph Piccinino came to realise there was a reason behind every photo. Each snapshot had an objective; the challenge for him was to find it.

Whereas today taking a photo is a very simple exercise in which the camera or mobile phone takes care of all the technicalities of focus, exposure, etc, it was a very different affair in the past.

“The photographers of the day felt urged to record street life for posterity”

Taking a photo was expensive and hard work. To walk around or travel with a camera in the 1880s, one needed a tripod made of heavy wood and metal. One had to study the ground for a steady footing and possibly a platform, then calculate the sun's intensity and work out the exposure for the bulky glass negative.

In the case of portraits, the photographer would pray that the sitter would stand still for the duration of the shot. When taking pictures of a general scene, one would hope that the ghosting shadow caused by movement would be at a minimum.



Well-dressed foreign visitors in full Victorian garb during a visit to a prehistoric megalith site. PHOTOS: FRANK-LEA ELLIS COLLECTION

While investigating his cache of old photos, the details slowly started to emerge.

Piccinino has always been fascinated by what the old shops sold and tried to make out the signs over the doorways, the adverts at their side and the wares in the shop windows. He was curious to find where chemists, grocers, cobblers, tea shops and tailors were located or where one would go for a haircut. And what if one needed to borrow some money? He found out it was not always at the bank.

He also compared the street scenes and ceremonies of today

with those of bygone days to find they are worlds apart. Similarly, while thousands resided in Valletta, many, especially those in the Mandragg area, lived in miserable Dickensian conditions.

Piccinino considers it remarkable that the photographers of the day did not limit themselves to their official commissions, portraits and events, but felt urged to record street life for posterity, leaving behind them photographs not only of the nobility and bourgeoisie, but also of those who struggled to earn a meagre living.

The researcher is now paying tribute to these photographers with an illustrated talk organised by heritage NGO *Filmkien għal Ambjent Aħjar*. Piccinino will reveal all the details he discovered while showing attendees photos of old city gates like Porta Marina, elegant Valletta shops and grand old palazzos that adorned both city and village streets, among others.

The talk will be held tomorrow at 6.30pm at the Phoenicia Hotel in Floriana. Those attending the talk may proceed to dinner at the hotel for a special price at 8pm. For tickets, log on to <https://ticketengine.faa.org.mt/>.



Revellers attending carnival celebrations in Valletta.



Piazza Assedio or Great Siege Square in Valletta c.1915