

THE TELEGRAPHS IN MALTA DURING THE VICTORIAN ERA

By Giovanni Bonello LL.D.

Spoilt as we are by split-second communications world-wide, it is virtually impossible for us to imagine what it must have been like in the 1840s to receive or transmit messages and information over very long distances. A person who wanted to communicate with far away places had only one way open to him: the mail. No telephone, no radio links, no fax machines, no teleprinters, no telegrams, no satellites, no fibre optics. Just a slow-moving letter that could take weeks or months to reach its destination.

The discovery of electricity was to be a veritable turning point. A few visionaries, in an age of great scientific curiosity and experimentation, had the intuition that electricity could be disciplined to carry messages.

In 1837, Charles Wheatstone and William Cook patented the first telegraph system, which, however did not overcome the practical problems of crossing the seas. It was to be Samuel Morse (1791-1872), a talented painter from the USA, who married theory with practice and perfected electric telegraphy (tele = distance + graphos = writing). On May 24, 1844, Morse transmitted successfully the first telegraphic message from Washington to Baltimore "What God had wrought". It is ironic that the Morse code, which bears his name, was probably invented not by him, but by his partner Arthur Vail.

After Morse's successful demonstration, the new invention spread rapidly. The revolutionary reality that persons could communicate in seconds over great distances was nothing short of intoxicating. Six years later the first submarine cable had already been laid between England and France. In 1866, the Atlantic was spanned successfully for the first time.

Fig. 1. N° 7 Marsamuxetto Road, Valletta. From the earliest times one of the principal telegraph stations in Malta. Used by the Mediterranean Extension, by the Malta and Alexandria and finally by the Eastern. This photo is dated March 3, 1881 in pencil on the back, and also bears the manuscript indication "H. Agius Photo" (Horatio Agius was a leading photographer of the time). Five persons are visible on the balcony, probably the dependants of the Eastern or the Mediterranean Extension who worked there. The part of the shore opposite this building is known to bathers to this day as "Il-Cable"



**THE MEDITERRANEAN (EXTENSION)
TELEGRAPH COMPANY (LIMITED.)**

MESSAGES may now be forwarded by electric telegraph from Malta to any telegraph station in Europe. Rates for 15 words.—London, £1. 8. 1., Paris, £1. 3. 9., Marseilles, £1. 1. 3. For 25 words.—Berlin, £2. 2. 9., Vienna, £2. 0. 9., Constantinople, £3. 0. 9., Galatz, £2. 12. 9. For further information apply at the Company's Offices, Strada San Paolo, where messages will be received.

TH. ANDREWS, Superintendent.

Fig. 2. An Advert in the Malta Times and United Services Gazette dated December 22, 1857, informs the public that "messages may now be forwarded by electric telegraph to any telegraph station in Europe". This seems to establish the date of the first public telegram from Malta as December 22, 1857

From the north, the electric telegraph cobweb spread as far down as Cagliari in Sardinia, then an independent state. Malta, was in the 1850s still cut off.

These were the turbulent times of the Crimean War, which had started in March 1854. Originally France and England had declared war on Russia over Turkey to stem Russian expansion. On January 26, 1855 Sardinia joined Great Britain and France. The Crimea was distant, communications between the allies and the front, poor.

This was the background against which G. Bonelli, the Director General of the electric telegraphs in Sardinia, conceived the grand plan of linking telegraphically Cagliari to Malta, and thence to Alexandria and the Dardanelles. He sensed that England would be interested, and that it would not be too difficult to convince his British counterparts about the manifest advantages to both sides.¹

In a letter in French to Governor, Sir Villiam (sic) Reid, from Turin, Ingenier Bonelli offered to effect the connection. For £60,000 he would in six months connect Cagliari with Malta, then on to Candia where the cable would branch off, on one side to Alexandria and on the other to the Dardanelles, where Sardinia and Britain were allies in the war. If Britain opted for a Cagliari-Malta line only, he would do it in two months, and Britain's contribution would only be £10,000.²

The Governor of Malta, forwarded Bonelli's proposals to Lord Panmure of the War Department³ who was quick to reply that no permission had been granted by the British Government for "the project initiated by Mr Bonelli", but was equally

quick to note that the line from Cagliari to Malta offered very important advantages. "It is right that the Maltese, as well as the Imperial Treasury, should bear its part." How far was the Maltese Government prepared to cooperate? What conditions were to be required of the Sardinian Government in 'conceding' to it the right to lay the proposed line?⁴

Governor Reid replied by forwarding the draft of a Resolution to be proposed to the local Council of Government. I believe the Resolution to have been drafted by Adriano Dingli, later Sir, as his signature appears at the bottom. The draft Resolution stated that the Council of Government was of the opinion that the (Sardinian) proposal offers important advantages to the inhabitants of these possessions, gave *carte blanche* to the Governor to negotiate the deal, with only two limitations: to ensure for the inhabitants of Malta the same privileges as the Sardinian Government may deem fit to grant to its Sardinian Subjects, and, secondly, a financial provision. Malta was prepared to contribute any sum not exceeding one-tenth of that provided by the Imperial Treasury, provided this was not in excess of £6,000 for the whole project, or £1,000 for the Cagliari-Malta line only.⁵

In the following dispatch, the Governor informed Lord Panmure that a unanimous Council had "cheerfully" agreed to the Resolution, being strongly impressed with the important advantages that will accrue "as well as the danger of the commercial position of these islands being materially impaired should some other line be adopted for connecting the East with the West without touching Malta".⁶

Reid then hinted that the Indian Treasury might also be persuaded to contribute to the £60,000 requested by Sardinia. He adds an interesting aside. Though the money was not wholly available in the local budget, the deficiency could be made good "from the deposits made through the Courts of Justice and the Savings Bank". Generally he left it to H.M.'s government to negotiate with Sardinia to ensure all possible advantages "to this chiefly commercial community", stressing that among the conditions there should be the right to send messages in cypher and a general precedence of Government messages.⁷

Finally the Governor put forward a personal recommendation that was destined to reappear in later correspondence. Where was the submarine cable to emerge? The nearest and most obvious point would have been the western coast of Gozo. The Governor is strongly opposed to this. "I think that the wires should be brought from the sea direct into the fortress of Valletta, as they would by these means be more secure from malicious and hostile attack".⁸

The point of emergence of the cable from the sea troubled Reid. On July 9, 1857,

he wrote with some alarm to Secretary of State Labouchere: "Having read in the local newspapers an advertisement", he observed that the land connection was to be made at Fort St Julian. This is not good enough. The coast tower of St Julian is five miles distant from Valletta, and this is dangerous. "The point which appears best suited is that under St Elmo".⁹

His concern must have been deliberately leaked to the press. "A most important suggestion made by His Excellency the Governor will no doubt also be adopted — namely to lay a branch cable at a short distance off the mouth of the Grand Harbour, and to carry it to Fort St Elmo, for in the event of a Continental War, which however we trust is far distant, the cable could easily be cut away by an enemy at the landing point near St George's Bay".¹⁰

The following year, a long and detailed Memorandum, dated August 30, 1856 from the Lord Commissioners of the Treasury, reached the Governor, on "the proposed establishment of an electric telegraph with Malta and the Ionian Islands, and through them with Egypt and India". It dealt with financial considerations.¹¹

It took another year for the Government to receive a copy of the conditions, dated July 8, 1857, of the contract about to be completed between the Treasury and the Mediterranean Extension Telegraph Company, for the prolongation of the telegraph from Cagliari to Malta. It is not quite clear what had happened in the meantime. Originally a statal enterprise, by this time the venture had been privatised to a commercial company specially constituted for this purpose. The 'conditions' covered an arrangement for 25 years. The UK Government guaranteed a 6% return on the £120,000 capital invested by the Company. In practice this meant that the Government would pay £7,200 annually or so much as would be necessary to make up, with the other receipts of the Company, a dividend of 6%. Government would pay for making use of the telegraph according to the usual tariff rates agreed upon and not to be increased without the Government's consent. Government had the right to appoint one official Director in the Company.¹²

Sir John Pennefather, who as Lieutenant Governor was subordinate to Reid, but who as Commander-in-Chief of the military was the superior of the Governor, informed Labouchere that he had circulated the Conditions of the Contract to the

Fig. 3. The original of one of the earliest telegrams sent to Malta, dated May 27, 1858, only five months after the inauguration of the service. Addressed to Scicluna & Sons (later known as the Cisk) it was carried through the line established by the Mediterranean Extension in December 1857. This, and all other early incoming telegrams, are written through a carbon paper, on flimsy blued paper printed in red

MEDITERRANEAN EXTENSION TELEGRAPH COMPANY
[LIMITED]

No. ~~1111~~

Valletta Station.

Thursday the 27 day of May 1888

Received the following MESSAGE:

TO
Name Sciucuna sons

Address Malta

London 26th 2. 30 p m
Malta 27th 1. 16 a m 940

Received in Mercké calme, feris
invariables navire Brodigham
mis dans Malte avarie
chargement bils Galatz nous
appartient protéger notre
intérêt. Envoyez copie prova
fortune.

[Handwritten signature/initials]

Name Milas.

Address _____

No Inquiry respecting this Message can be attended to without the production of this Paper.

Chamber of Commerce, and promised to afford all the assistance in his power to the Agents of the Company on their arrival in Malta.¹³

As the material works were about to be commenced, more and more of the exciting news started appearing in the local newspapers. The press reported that Mr Andrews, the Superintendent Engineer of the Mediterranean Extension Telegraph Company, had arrived in Malta with a staff of clerks to prepare the requisite instrument rooms in the old Borsa (St Paul's Street, Valletta). The *Elba*, having the electric cable on board, was to have left Birkinhead on the 16th October and was expected to start laying the cable immediately on arrival at Cagliari. In about a week's time, the paper said, "we hope we may be enabled to inform our readers of the success of an important undertaking which will connect our Island in Telegraphic Communication with the Continent of Europe". Hints are given that the cable to link Malta with Corfu was also on board the *Elba*.¹⁴

The cable from Cagliari would land at "Dragonara Point, between St George's and St Julian's" and thence the wires would be carried across the country upon posts from 18 to 21 feet high to Sa Maison, at the foot of Marsamuxetto Harbour.¹⁵

The resident Engineer, Mr Andrews, was meanwhile busy laying the wires from Sa Maison along the Marsamuxetto bastions, to the Jews Sally Port, and thence up Strada San Nicola to Strada San Paolo, on posts at a distance of about 100 feet, to the Old Exchange. The Civil and Military authorities had given every facility to the Company.¹⁶

The press report added that "our worthy Superintendent, the Hon. Admiral Sir Montague Stopford, had dispatched the Frigate *Desperate* to Cagliari to assist the *Elba*. It also informed its readers that the wires to the city would be changed as early as possible, and a subterranean line would be used in their stead."¹⁷

The paper then suggested that "as it is not without the bounds of probability" that one of the European states (which?) across which the telegraph passed, may in future be an enemy, "it would be desirable for our Government to lay a similar cable via Gibraltar to England".¹⁸

Looking forward, the newspaper foresaw "no doubt" many other lines to Sicily, Alexandria, Tunis, "and co". "The Governor's proposal to centre all telegraphic offices in the Old Exchange is an excellent idea". It reminded readers that 600

Fig. 4. Shortly after the Mediterranean Extension linked Malta with Cagliari and Corfu, a second venture, the Malta and Alexandria Telegraph started operating. This is the original of one of its earliest telegrams, received through it in Malta from Tripoli on March 12, 1862

PREAMBLE

MALTA & ALEXANDRIA TELEGRAPH,

Inst. Am. Va Station Malta

No. _____

Foreign No. 66 At 8.45 a. m. on March 186 2

No. of Words 20 Received the following TELEGRAM:

REMARKS. From Nepali dated 12 Time 5.50 p. m.

To Annabile Grech

Address Strada Sant. Mikal
Malta

Estate è vicino ma
se credito necessario
assicurarlo fatto per
3 mesi.
Amabile Gajigi

No inquiry respecting this Telegram can be attended to without the production of this Paper.

Malta and Alexandria Telegraph.

Telegraphic Despatch.

Amabile Grech

Malta

Fig 5. An early envelope used by the Malta & Alexandria to deliver the telegram illustrated in Fig 4. It is sealed at the back with the handsome oval red wax seal of this enterprise

shares of the Company at par were available for purchase at the office of Notary George Page.¹⁹

A report on the Prospectus of the Mediterranean Extension Telegraph Company Ltd, purposely set up for this venture, was published a few days later. 12,000 shares at £10 each, deposit £2. 10s. 0d. per share. The chairman of the new Company was Mr P Samuel Gurney. Object of the Company was to extend the telegraph from Sardinia to Malta and Corfu "and to effect a junction at the latter island with the system which is about to be immediately carried out, for establishing telegraphic communication between England and India, via Alexandria, Seleucia, the Persian Gulf and Kurrachee. This would be offering an alternative route to India and Australia, to Britain and the East India Co., besides affording France and other south European countries direct communication with the East."²⁰

Among many advantages, the Prospectus said, "it will establish between England and the important government station and port of Malta, at present touched by the majority of vessels navigating the Mediterranean... communications to and from Malta are so numerous and important as to justify the belief that the telegraph would produce a very considerable revenue".²¹

The line would be 700 nautical miles long, and arrangements had been made with the telegraph companies at either end for the onward transmission of messages. The Government-guaranteed dividend of 6% was emphasised.²²

To entice investors, they are assured that responsible contractors have been employed who had assumed all the risks and were bound to hand over the lines in complete and efficient working order. "Shareholders are effectively protected from every hazard".²³

The Prospectus added that the submarine cables communicating Piedmont to Corsica and thence to Sardinia had never failed in perfect communication since they were laid down in 1845, and gave every promise of permanent durability free from all costs or need of repair.²⁴

500 shares were being reserved for applicants in Malta, available from Notary Page, at 43 Strada S. Giovanni, Valletta.²⁵ For some unknown reason, these were

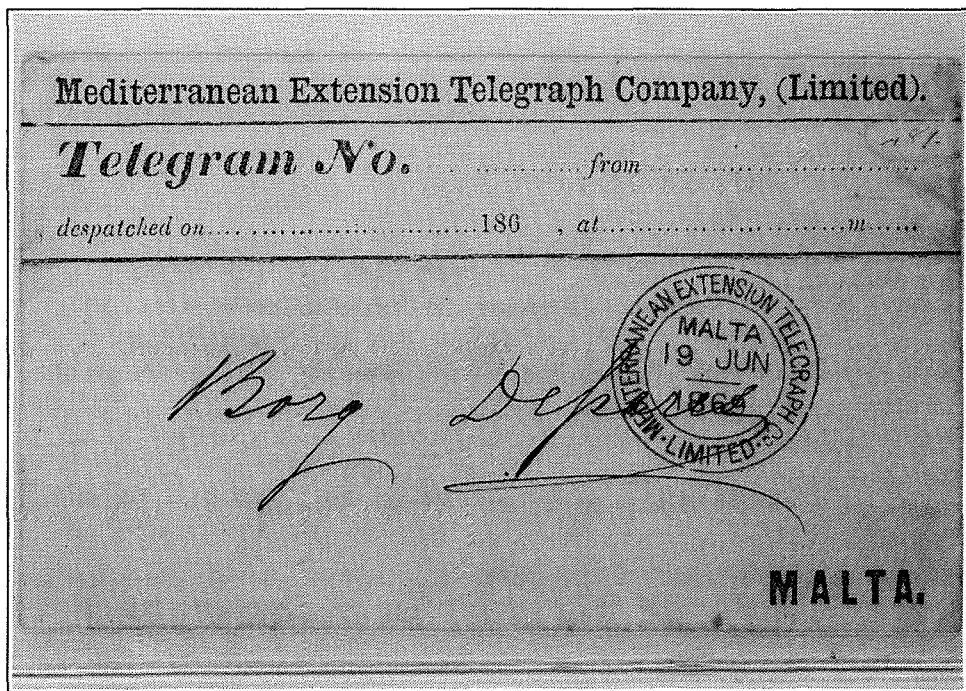


Fig 6. An envelope used by the original Company, the Mediterranean Extension, with a superb circular date stamp, June 19, 1869. On the back these envelopes carry an embossed seal of the Company. These have been seen in red on ivory envelopes, and in blue on rust envelopes

not instantly taken up by investors in Malta. An advert over four weeks later was still offering a “limited number of shares reserved for applicants at Malta and Corfu”.²⁶

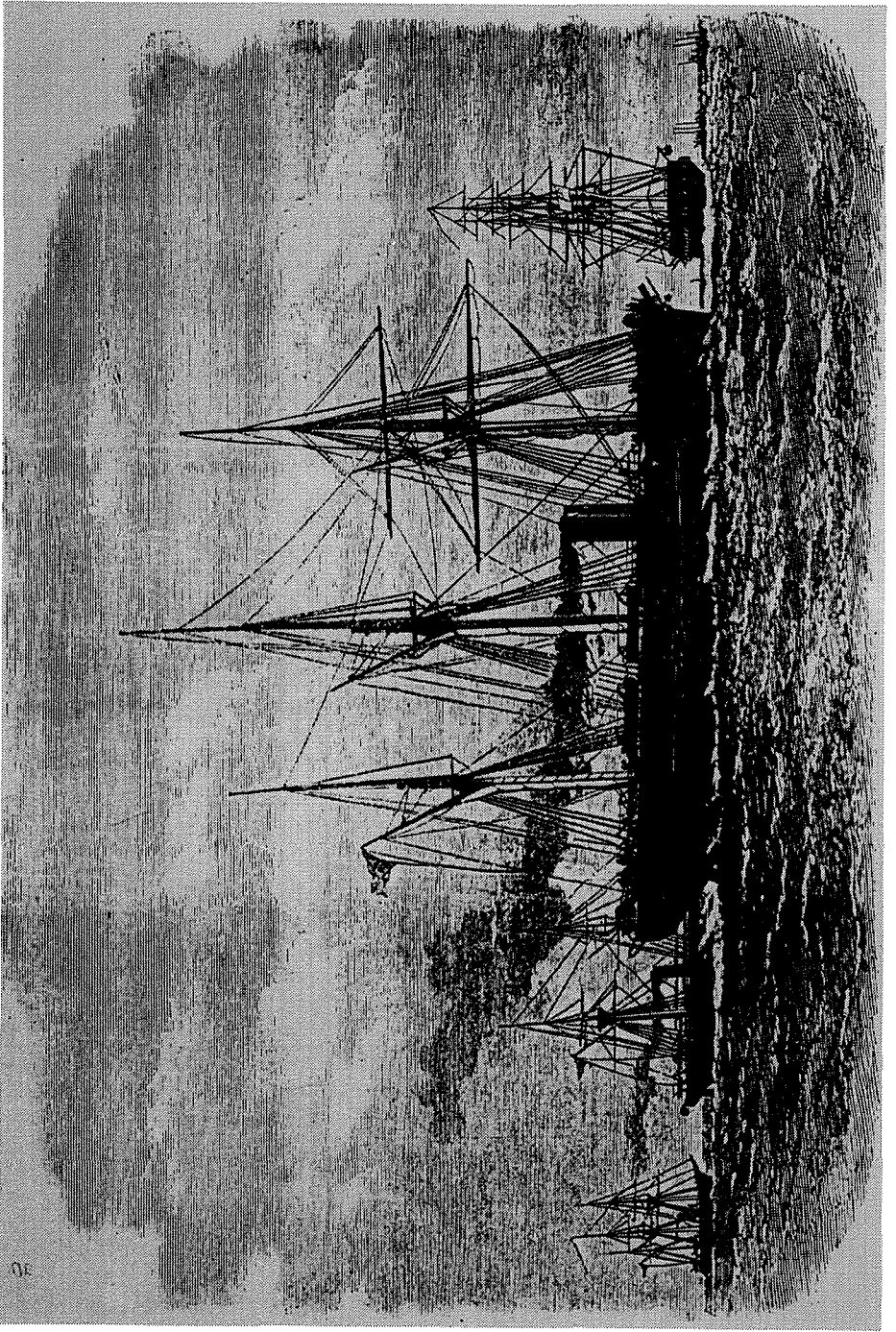
The great day was fast approaching. On December 20, 1857, Governor Reid personally sent the first telegram to London. The historical, if prosaic, message said: “At what o’clock is this received in London?” Unfortunately, the first transmission was a bit of a flop. It took two hours ten minutes to reach London as it was delayed one hour, “Corsica continually giving the signal ‘Wait’”.²⁷

The telegraph office must have been first opened to the public on or just before December 22, 1857. An advert in that day’s press informs the public that “Messages may now be forwarded by electric Telegraph to any station in Europe”. The long-awaited moment when the world instantly shrunk, had arrived. The rates, quite expensive ones, were itemised. Messages were to be received in the Company’s offices, Strada S. Paolo. The advert is signed by Thomas Andrews, the engineer responsible for laying the cable from Cagliari.²⁸ (Figure 2).

The press was well gratified with the results. “We are glad to find that the telegraph connecting the Island with the Continent and with England is now in good working order”. To exemplify the new wonder, the paper recounted how Her Majesty’s dispatch vessel, the *Coquette*, had on Wednesday arrived with news from Bombay. The Indian news were immediately relayed by telegraph to the home government and the leading London journals. Within four hours of the vessel’s arrival, the dispatch of the news to *The Times* in London had been completed. From London, telegrams reached Malta in less than one hour. From Malta to London it was much slower — two to three hours. Why?²⁸

The Sardegnna-Malta-Corfu link was only the beginning of an enormous expansion programme which pivoted round Malta. To give a few examples, in 1859 a cable was laid between Malta and Sicily. The same year, the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Co. Ltd laid a cable from Malta to Alexandria, via Tripoli and Bnghazi. At first this line seems to have been reserved for official use by the British Government, but it appears that some time later it was opened for use by the public.³⁰

Fig. 7. “Laying the submarine cable between Malta and Alexandria”, a wood engraving after sketches by F. Hyndman, Paymaster of HMS Newport, published by The Illustrated London News in November 1868. The operation was considered important enough to feature in a leading London periodical. A long article accompanying the illustration recounts in detail the difficulties met by the Chiltern and the Scandera, the cable-laying steamships, in the the undertaking completed between September 26 and October 4. The operation ended with a “grand success”. The previous cable, laid in 1858, was constantly breaking down due to chafing against the rough rocky seabed. The new cable was



18
K
Dr

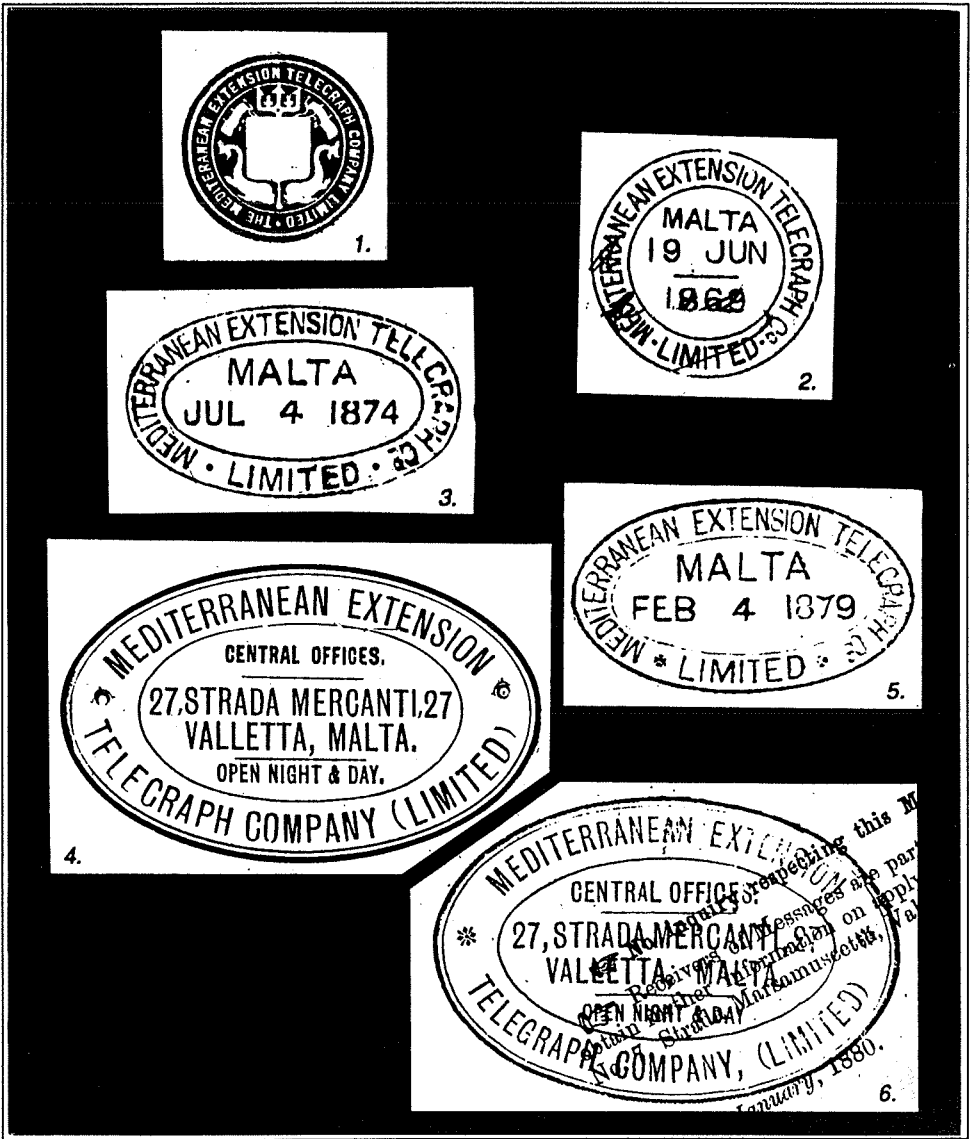


Fig 8. The seals and handstamps used by the Mediterranean Extension. Sets 3 and 5, 4 and 6, differ mostly in the decorative rosettes separating the oval lettering

This was the first step towards an intensive linkage between Malta and Alexandria. In 1868, and then in 1870, the Anglo-Mediterranean Telegraph Co Ltd. laid down two other cables. In all, five cables joined Malta to Alexandria, and another five to Gibraltar. Referring to Malta's quintuple link with Alexandria, the President of the Eastern and associated telegraph Companies could say in 1888 "Forty million pounds of capital have been sunk at the bottom of the sea; but where it had sunk, it lived".³¹

The time was long overdue for the Government to protect by legislation the precious submarine umbilical cord with the rest of the world. Only a few days after the inauguration, the press reported that already twice the telegraph wires had been vandalised "in the lower part of the town, it is believed by some ill-disposed person or persons... Our present laws are inadequate to meet offences of this nature, and some special provisions should be enacted to prevent crimes of this description". Editorially, it was suggested to follow the example of other countries with the promulgation of a special law which punished with well-merited severity, all malicious attempts.³²

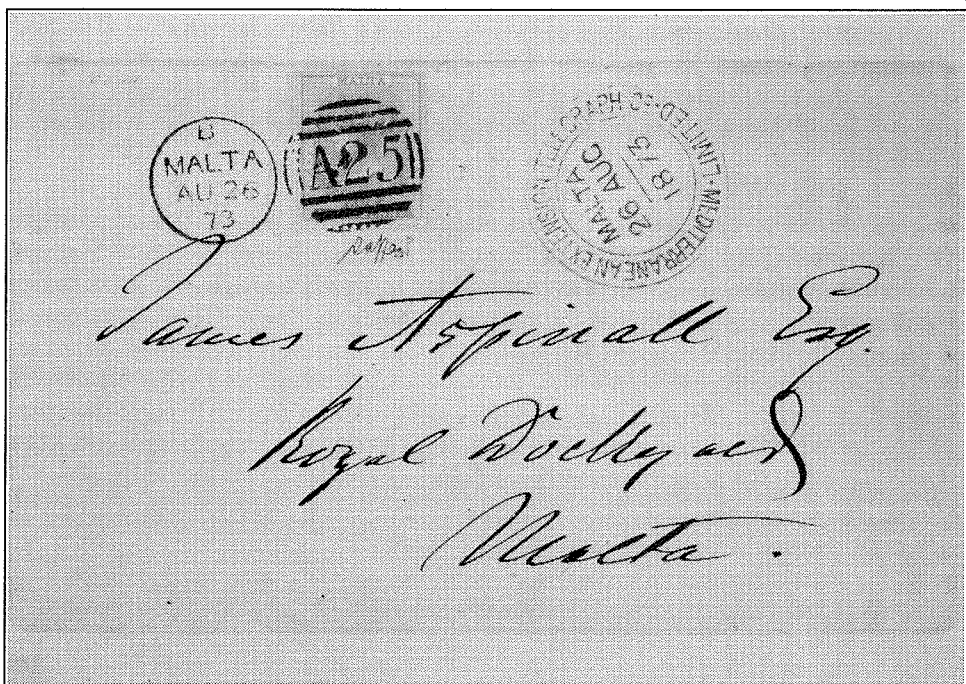


Fig 9. When the post married the telegram. An 1873 envelope, carrying both a halfpenny yellow tied by the A25 duplex, and the Mediterranean extension circular handstamp

On July 4, 1859, such a law was enacted: Ordinance III of 1859 "*For the better protection of Electric Telegraphs*". It was a short statute which made it a criminal offence to disturb overland and submarine cables. It was directed against whosoever should touch any wire of any electric telegraph, or should throw anything on any such wire, etc., even though no damage shall appear to have ensued.³³

Similarly hit by the sanction of the law was any person who "shall cast anchors, or shall fish in the harbours, bays or coasts wherein the cables of electric telegraphs are laid, except in places which may be designated by the Superintendent of the Ports, shall be liable to criminal punishment and for any damage caused."³⁴

It was possibly in consequence of this, or a subsequent enactment, that large boards showing capsised anchors painted in white on a black background were, until recently, prominently displayed where telegraphic cables came ashore, to prohibit the dragging of anchors which would have caused great damage to the cables.

International telegraphy was becoming more and more of an everyday reality. But telegraphy had possibilities even outside the sphere of international communications. Edward Rosenbusch, the ingenious and energetic Engineer and General Superintendent of the Mediterranean Extension Telegraph Co., was always on the alert for marketing the minor side-products of this revolutionary invention.

In 1862, the press published a feature which illustrated this marketing strategy: "We have received an invitation from Mr E. Rosenbusch to inspect several interesting specimens of telegraphic apparatus, lately brought out by him from Paris, with the object of introducing them into use in Malta. They consist of the ordinary Morse printer improved by Breguet, as used in all the telegraph offices in France, and different sets of rotation telegraphs, which any schoolboy having a knowledge of the common alphabet can easily manipulate... Through the recent enlargement of the telegraph establishment in Malta a source of employment has been opened to the young men of this Island, which would make it desirable that the study of electricity and magnetism and its applications, should form part of a regular course of instruction in the University".³⁵

The paper then adds that Mr Rosenbusch proposed at the same time to submit to the Military Authorities specimens of metal-covered and combined India-rubber

Fig 10. An early receipt of a telegram sent from Venice to Malta via Sicily, dated January 3, 1860. This telegram cost 13.4 florins "in valuta austriaca"

Ricevuta

delle competenze esatte per l'invio del Telegramma Nr. 128 con 19 parole
 da Palermo per Malta via Cava. Sicilia

Impostato il 27 1882 alle 2 ore 10 minuti 2 meridiane.

Furono pagati		Furono depositati	
a. per tassa della Lega		a. per competenze di staffetta	
b. " estera	<u>2 449</u>	b. " spedizioni con espresso	
c. " di moltiplicazione		Somma depositata	
d. " inoltro oltre la linea		Aggiuntevi le tasse come contro	
e. " per la risposta		In totale, valuta austriaca	
Somma in valuta austriaca	<u>13 499</u>		

Ricevuti

~~13 499~~ 13 499

Dall'Imp. Regia Stazione del Telegrafo

Ricevuto da Capponi

Non si accorda alcuna compensazione per un qualche svantaggio derivante forse dalla perdita, nullificazione o dal ritardo di dispacci.

and gutta percha insulated telegraph wires, which would prove very useful in establishing temporary telegraphic communications in target practice and such like, the cable being so light and flexible as to allow of its being coiled round a drum and moved about as required, and at the same time well protected from any outward injury. It is especially adapted for military purposes, as it dispenses altogether with the old system of movable posts and insulators; and it may also be used under water".³⁶

Four years later, Mr Rosenbusch was again in the news. "We are glad to see", reported the press, "that the modern appliances of science are being adopted in our little city. In addition to being well-lighted by gas, and having electric clocks, which very few capitals in Europe can boast of, as well as telegraphs across the harbours connecting the Palace with the principal forts, and others between the naval establishments, we have now to notice the introduction of private telegraphs by mercantile firms for their special use".³⁷

The first private telegraph is identified: "Mr Rosenbusch, the energetic and intelligent telegraphist who has the credit of having introduced these appliances of electricity into this city for domestic and commercial purposes, is now engaged in laying a line to connect the offices of Messrs G. Scicluna e Figli with the Marina, where a particular branch of their extensive business is chiefly conducted. We hope to see the spirited example set by Messrs Scicluna," the newspaper concludes, "followed by other leading merchants, the more so, as when the new harbour comes into general use, the adoption of telegraphic communication will effect a considerable saving of time and trouble and will, in fact, become a matter of absolute necessity".³⁸

I recall reading an amusing newspaper report, of which I have mislaid the reference, about Mr Rosenbusch offering to hotels in Malta a system of telegraphic communication between the rooms and the reception area. Each room would have its little transmitter (possibly in nature of a buzzer) linked to the reception desk. This would overcome, said the notice, the inconvenience of bells ringing continuously in hotels, clamouring for attention and disturbing the other guests.

Edward Rosenbusch was still teeming with ideas. Realising the commercial potential of ships and persons restricted to the Lazzaretto wanting to communicate with the outside world, he had a station installed on Manoel Island. On September 3, 1871 large posters were distributed advertising the telegraph

Fig 11. A telegram from Malta to Scutari on the Bosphorus, through Monastir in North Africa, dated January 10, 1867

SUBLIME PORTE.

MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES.

ADMINISTRATION IMPÉRIALE
DES TÉLÉGRAPHES

Modèle N° 1



Bureau de *Scutari*

De *Malte* Pour *Scutari*

Le *10 Janvier* 1807

Transmis par *Monastir*

Commencé à *11 h 37 m.* du *m*

Fin à *11 h 40 m.* du *m*

Signature du Stationnaire

Gabrich

Vu

Par le Chef de Station soussigné

N° d'arrivée *24*

Réexpédié à

à *11 h 15 m.* du *m*

Le *10 Janvier* 1807

Signature du Fonctionnaire

Ch

N° DU DÉPÔT	NOMBRE DE MOTS	DATE DU DÉPÔT	HOURS	MINUTES	MAJIN DU SOIR	VOIES	INDICATIONS ET TAXES
<i>243</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>1</i>		

News Delosyno

post Scutari

*Dote capitale Cuccu pour messe
mess se mess l'union avec l'indite
porta l'opra s'ingale gram val
l'ona*

Camillon

J. C. C.

10 Janvier 67

Chabaty

✓

Mediterranean Extension Telegraph Company Limited.

Telegraphic Communication between the Quarantine Establishment in Marsamuscetto Harbour and Valletta.

Telegrams are received at this Company's Station, 7 strada Marsamuscetto and the "Borsa" for transmission by telegraph to the Lazzaretto, where arrangements have been made for their delivery.

Tariff per telegram of 20 words exclusive of address and Signature One Shilling and if with Reply prepaid One Shilling and Nine pence.

Captains of Ships and Passengers detained in Quarantine are now offered the rapid means of intercommunication by telegraph with the town of Valletta and Countries abroad, for which the Officer in Charge of the Telegraph Station at the Lazzaretto will levy the following charges.

Telegram of 20 words exclusive of address & signature to *Valletta* including Delivery by Company's Messengers and to Localities beyond Valletta, the cost of means of conveyance, additional One Shilling.

Telegram of 20 words as above if with Reply prepaid £—1. 9.

Telegram of 20 words including name and address of Sender and Receiver to Destinations *abroad* will be taxed with the above charges in addition to the Rates as per the Company's published Tariff.

For further information, please address The Telegraphist in Charge of Quarantine Telegraph Station at the Lazzaretto or the Mediterranean Extension Telegraph Company Limited.

EDWARD ROSEBUSCH

Engineer & General Superintendent

Malta 3rd, September 1871.

COST OF A TELEGRAM OF 20 WORDS FROM MALTA TO

London 9s. 8d., United Kingdom 10s. 5d
 Austria 7s. 3d., North German Confe-
 deration 7s. 3d., Belgium 7s. 3d, Baden,
 Bavaria, Wurtemberg 6s.5d., Corfu, Cor-
 sica, France 7s. 3d., Greece 8s., Italy 4s.
 10d., Netherlands 7s. 3d., Norway 9s.8d.
 Portugal 10s., Spain 9s. 3d., Russia of
 Europe 11s. 3d., Turkey of Europe 8s.,
 Turkey of Asia 11s. 3d.—14s. 5d, Swe-
 den 9s. 3d., Denmark 8s., Switzerland
 and Sardinia 5s. 8d.

Fig 13. The back of a Mediterranean Extension envelope, probably late 1860s, advertising the tariff for 20 words. The rates are much lower than the ones in the first advert (Fig 2)

service between the Lazzaretto and Valetta: 20 words for one shilling; nine pence more with reply prepaid (Fig.12). In 1873 Rosenbusch was one of the most active promoters of the new railway venture.

But Rosenbusch was not alone in fostering the dissemination of telegraphy. Mr Gibson, the Government Inspector of Telegraphs, is also on record with some bright ideas. The first was linking Malta by submarine cable to Gozo. "A useful proposal has been made by Mr Gibson, Government Inspector of Telegraphs" said the press, "to establish telegraphic communication between Malta and Gozo, by submarine cable across the Straits of Frieghi (?) in connection with land lines to be laid between the capitals of the two Island and the principal casals. Mr Gibson has offered to supply the local Government with the necessary *materiel* from the surplus stores belonging to the Malta and Alexandria Telegraph. All that the local Government will be called upon to provide is the manual labour for fixing the posts for the land wires along the route, and to allow the men now employed on

Fig 12. Section of a large 1871 poster (37x47cm) in English and Italian, advertising the introduction of a telegraph service between Valetta and the Lazzaretto on Manoel Island. One of the many initiatives of Edward Rosenbusch

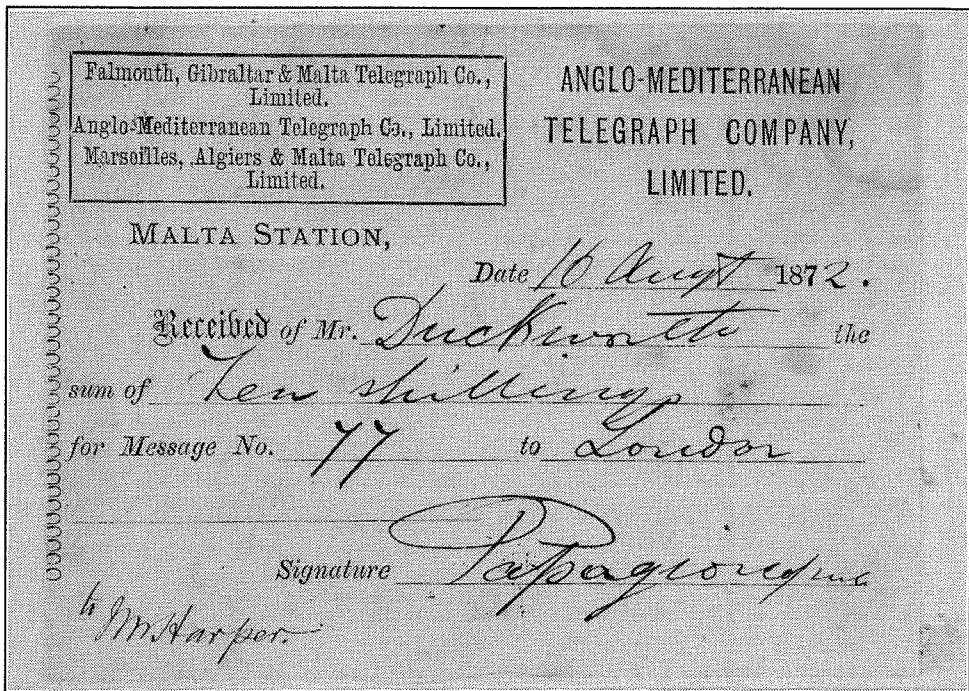


Fig 14. In 1872 several Telegraph Companies operating in Malta amalgamated into one large common enterprise: The Eastern Telegraph Company Ltd., which was to retain its predominance well into the next century. Here shown is a receipt for a telegram dated August 16, 1872, possibly from the transitional period immediately preceding the merger. Four different Companies are listed in the letterhead

semaphore service to be taught how to work the modern line".³⁹

Alas, the Malta-Gozo telegraphic line was to remain a festering sore for long. Nothing came out of Mr Gibson's proposal. In 1869 another public outcry was registered. "We hear that Mr Emmerson", said a press report, "lately proposed to Government to connect, at his own risk and expense, by electric telegraph, not only the Islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino, but also all the villages of these islands. For some unknown reason, probably with reference to defences, the Government has declined to entertain the proposition. It is much to be regretted that no telegraphic communication exists with Gozo, which prevents agents of steamers receiving early intelligence of thick weather of the approach of their vessels, or of disasters on the coast".⁴⁰

The report adds: "The flags of the Government Signal-Station at Gozo having, from not being used, become moth-eaten, and the authorities being unwilling to replace them, puts Gozo, in matters of communication, in bad weather at a greater

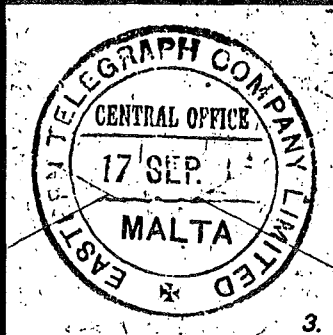
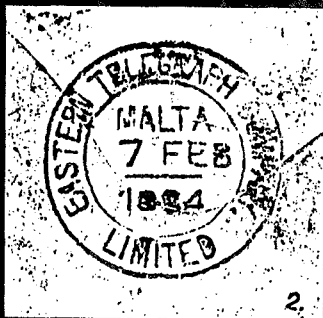
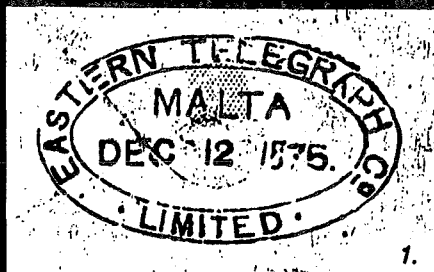


Fig 15. The date stamp and logos of the newly amalgamated telegraph company, the Eastern, established in 1872. The date of N° 3 is 1885. N° 4 was only used for a relatively short time. The slightly modified new graphic design (N° 5) was in use well into the following century

distance from Malta than Suez. On the recent break-down of a steamer, not many miles from Gozo, we are indebted to the Telegraph from Alexandria for the first intelligence of it, which was conveyed tither by a passing steamer".⁴¹

Then some meagre consolation: "Since the above was in type, we learn that the Government, yielding to the representations of the Mercantile Body, has consented to provide two new sets of flags for the Signal-Station at Gozo, and that a vote of £25 will be brought forward for this purpose at the next sitting of Council to be held tomorrow, 21st instant".⁴²

Eight more years had to elapse idly before Malta was finally linked to its sister island. It is ironical to reflect that for 20 years it was much easier and faster for Malta to communicate with the most distant places in the world, like Russia and Buenos Aires, than it was to send a message to Kercem!

Only 20 full years after the introduction of telegraphy in Malta, in January 1877, were lines between Malta and Nadur finally established or made available for civilian use. It appears that this was not a strictly commercial service, but that civilians were allowed to use the military lines. Messages for Gozo were received at the Palace *Turretta*. The delivery was not by private courier as with the commercial companies; the police took care to forward the telegrams to the addressee, provided he lived at a convenient distance.⁴³

Up to then, reliance had been placed on the military semaphore (the telegraph, as opposed to the electric telegraph). During the sitting of the Council of Government of April 21, 1865 Dr Sciortino asked why £46 for two persons employed on the *Giordan Hill* in Gozo to transmit signals, had been deleted from the previous year's budget. The Superintendent of Ports answered cryptically that the two persons had been removed "by order of the military authorities". What if some ship was in distress, was there no way to communicate? Yes, replied the Superintendent. There was a new military telegraph (a semaphore) in Gozo situated in a better position than the previous one.⁴⁴

Mr Gibson also thought of expanding the line to Sliema. Here is how the press reported the event: "A telegraphic line was laid between the Telegraphic Office in Town, and the residence at Sliema of Mr Gibson, the Government Inspector of Telegraphs. This will enable that officer to be in constant communication, not only with the Office in Valletta, but also with the intermediate stations between Malta and Alexandria, when necessary; and serve, besides, for experiments of a scientific nature".⁴⁵

This line is partly aerial and partly submarine. The submarine portion, which is

Fig 16. Telegram from Athens to Malta, dated September 17, 1885, carried by the Eastern

Receiving Form.

THE EASTERN TELEGRAPH COMPANY, LIMITED.

Inst. From

K

MALTA STATION.

Foreign No.

2735

No.

20

No. of Words

9

At

2:45 p.m. on

17

of

9

1895

REMARKS.

Received the following TELEGRAM:

From

Athens

dated

17/9

Time

via

To

Hsin Jerhat

Address

Malta

Prezzo Corrente

1719 Conforme Qualita

Leonardos

Client's Initials

H

No Inquiry respecting this Telegram can be attended to without the production of this Paper.

The Public are expressly requested to take Notice that Telegrams are only forwarded by this Company on the condition that no responsibility is assumed for delay in transmission or delivery, or for non-transmission or non-delivery, or for mistakes from whatever cause they may arise.

Waterlow and Sons Limited, Printers, London Wall, London.



Fig 17. A typical Eastern Envelope used to deliver incoming telegrams. This is handstamped on the back, July 26, 1879

one of the cables belonging to the Royal Engineer Department kindly lent for the purpose, crosses the harbour from the Government Cable Tank at St Rocco, to Fort Manoel, thence to the Steps at Fort Tigne, and is connected with the office, on the one side, and with Mr Gibson's house, on the other by wires raised on posts.⁴⁶

"We may add that Mr Gibson has asked us to say he is willing to forward to town, at any hour of the night, or in rough weather, any message of pressing importance, in cases of sickness or other sudden emergency".⁴⁷

The telegraph had become an indispensable part of Malta's life. The Principal Secretary, in the sitting of the Council of Government of January 21, 1867 requested a vote of £144. 12s 7d. for postal and telegraphic expenses. He justified the exorbitant vote, by reason of telegrams sent to foreign Consuls, during the absence of the Governor, to seek to keep the dreaded cholera epidemic from Malta. The expenditure was approved.⁴⁸

It is not easy to enumerate exhaustively how many Telegraph Companies were

Fig 18. A Gozo telegram, dated August 21, 1880. After 20 years of vain efforts, Malta and Gozo were finally linked in 1877, not by a private venture but only through a concession of the military telegraphic service

MILITARY TELEGRAPHS.

Dated Stamp of

Inquiries respecting this Telegram, or application for repetition of the same, may be made at the Delivering Office; but any complaint as to its delay, etc., should be made in writing, and addressed to the officer in charge. In either case this form must accompany such inquiries or complaint.

N.B.—The time at which a message is written is only telegraphed through if it be entered on the original telegram by the sender.

21. 8. 80

Handed in at the *Army* Office at *N. 30. 1. 4* here at *11. 31. 4* m.

Charged to pay *d.*

Delivering Office.

From

ballega

To

Supreme Sinerco

Time at which message was written by sender

Justo Ma bene preparato

e tutto

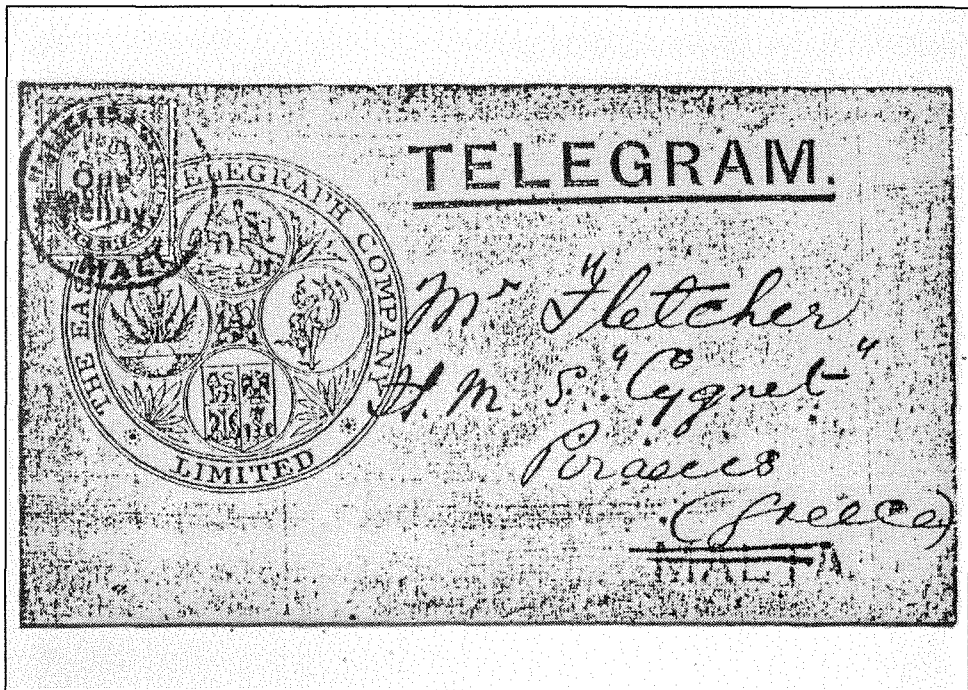


Fig 19. Another envelope for delivering incoming telegrams that went through the mail in July 1902, sent by post from Malta to the Piraeus in Greece

operating to and from Malta before they merged in 1872. Besides those already mentioned, in 1870 we find two other Companies starting business in Malta. The Falmouth, Gibraltar and Malta Telegraph Co laid a cable to Gibraltar which was joined to one extending to Lisbon and the UK.

Similarly, the same year the Marseilles, Algiers, Malta Telegraph Co., laid cables from Malta to Algiers (Bone) which bridged over to Marseilles. Also operating in Malta was the Anglo-Mediterranean Telegraph Co. Ltd. All these Companies, together with the British Indian Submarine Telegraph Co. Ltd. merged in 1872, to form the Eastern Telegraph Company Ltd. which together with the original Mediterranean Extension Telegraph were to remain sovereign of the communications system of the British Empire in Europe, Asia and Africa, well into our country.⁴⁹

In 1873, discussions between the Eastern and the Mediterranean Extension on the joint use of the Corfu-Otranto connection failed. In a half yearly report the directors of the Mediterranean Extension stated that business was better than the previous six months, but also that the Greek Government was defaulting in payment. Although representations had been made to the Greek Director of

Telegraphs, these “have not been attended with success, and that consequently the distribution of the dividend had to be postponed”.⁵⁰

The Telegraph enterprises operated in Malta from various offices. The Mediterranean Extension Telegraph Co Ltd. started its existence in 1857 in the old Borsa in St Paul’s Street, Valletta. In the 1860s the Malta and Alexandria Telegraph is described as operating on the bastions overlooking Marsamuxetto. This probably was the handsome palace, N° 7 Marsamuxetto Road, where most of the telegraphic activity was concentrated up to the end of the century, and which was later to host the principal Masonic lodge in the Island. (Figure 1).

In the late seventies other telegraphic offices are recorded: 95a Strada Santa Lucia, Valletta, is an old edifice, corner with West Street, where the Wilson Bar is now located. Also active were the offices in 27, Strada Mercanti, Valletta, a building demolished during the war, across from St John’s, where the Galea fu Filippo drapery and the Footjoy Shoe Shop now stand. An 1880 form lists four addresses of the Eastern. Besides Marsamuxetto and Strada Mercanti, it mentions the Borsa (the Exchange Building in Kingsway) and the Harbour extension Branch office (probably in Marsa).

To these must be added other stations, eg the Lazzaretto, and the Military stations which served the public, like Nadur.

In 1897 the Eastern bought a large plot of land at St George’s and built the new main offices. This pleasant building, known as Mercury House, was later taken over by Cable and Wireless Company and eventually by Telemalta.

Acknowledgements:

I have been unable to come across any published work dealing systematically with Maltese telegraphy, except the two excellent articles by William O. Cutugno “Early Telecommunications in Malta” in issues N°2 and 3 (July 1990) of Il-Linja, the inhouse journal of Telemalta workers, which contain some valuable information.

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