



The Infirmary at the time of the Order

Mention of the Birgu hospital was made in the Order's Chapter held in 1538 when Grand Master D'Homedes decided to enlarge it. This resulted in the erection of an additional storey on top of the whole building, still bearing the name of this Grand Master, *Piano d'Homedes*. The Order's historian Bosio also refers to the sanitary and hygienic provisions made in the same year in the hospital. In 1560 during De La Vallette's reign the Order felt the necessity of improving the facilities as the situation was becoming intolerable. Further works were also commissioned by the Order's Council.

During the fierce fighting of the Great Siege of 1565, the wounded were attended to in this hospital. As the onslaught at Fort St Elmo proceeded, the wounded were transported to the hospital at dead of night across the harbour and into Birgu through the sally port, *it-toqba*, in the nearby Post of Allemagne.

In 1569, directives were issued to enforce more cleanliness and to regulate the expenditure.

The house at no. 19, Observer Street, close to the Holy Infirmary was the official residence of the Superintendent of the Hospital, the *Prud'Homme* as he was called. He was always the Grand Pillier of the French Langue which was entrusted with the administration of the Order's hospital. Indeed, the *Prud'Homme's* residence was joined from its backside to the Auberge de France.

The Benedictine nuns

Despite the erection of a large Infirmary in Valletta, commenced in 1572, the Vittoriosa Infirmary

continued to function for several years. Various utensils and tools used in the wards at Vittoriosa can still be seen at the National Museum in Valletta, proving that the hospital was well equipped and run.

The Holy Infirmary at Vittoriosa closed its doors during the Grand Mastership of Lascaris (1635-1657). The Benedictine nuns, who had been at Vittoriosa since 1604 and who until then occupied the old Magisterial Palace at Vittoriosa, submitted a petition to the Grand Master for their transfer to the vacant hospital. This was granted and the deed was signed in 1643. On completion of the necessary modifications to the building, the nuns made their solemn entry into the new premises in 1652.

Building of St Ann's Church

The nuns desired to have a bigger church that was accessible to the public. This was ready by 1652 after part of the old Infirmary had been demolished for the purpose. Thanks to the munificence of Lady Dorell, the church was rebuilt in 1679, this time to a more pretentious design by Vittoriosa-born architect Lorenzo Gafa'. The nearby door to the *parlatorio* or parlour provides the present entrance to the complex.

The architectural style of the church is Corinthian. It is square shaped and is dominated by a low dome. A chain of sculptured angels in high relief by Gafa' adorns the internal facade. Mattia Preti's painting representing St Anne and St Joachim hangs on the main altar in place of an older painting brought from Mdina by the nuns which is still preserved in the monastery. The main altar executed in intricate marble sculpture is the work of Gafa' and bears the escutcheons of Bishop Alpheran de Busson. The two latticed windows on each side of the main altar join the church to the nuns' reserved choir.

The two side altars are dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and to St Michael, and the paintings above them are the works of Maltese artists Rocco Buhagiar and Francesco Zahra, respectively.

An organ balcony rises opposite the main door. It is a pity that a unique 17th century organ with manually operated bellows was heedlessly disposed of some years back. A spacious gallery called the upper choir overlooks the church and is used only by the nuns.

A memorial inscription over the main door recalls the church's dedication and its erection by the benefactress Lady Dorell as thanksgiving for her being spared from a deadly epidemic in 1675. Another marble tablet inside the church commemorates its consecration in 1787.

The church treasures include rich, old vestments and various antique silver objects which are displayed annually for the feast of St Benedict on 11 July.

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Vittoriosa

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Seat of the Order at Birgu

A massive quadrangular building adjoining St Anne's Church in Vittoriosa was the first hospital to be built by the Sovereign Hospitaller Order of St John in Malta.

When the Knights of St John set foot in Malta in 1530 after seven years of wandering following their expulsion from Rhodes by Soleiman the Magnificent, they settled in Birgu. The old maritime city of Birgu, although chosen as the seat of the Order, could hardly offer sufficient accommodation to the *Sacro Convento* which included Knights Grand Cross, Bailiffs, Priors, Commanders, Knights, Chaplains and many other members. Besides the Order's entourage, many Greek families who lived in Rhodes and wanted to get away from Ottoman dominance, accompanied the Order and settled in Birgu.

A spate of feverish activity ensued to resolve the accommodation problem. Many houses had to be taken over and enlarged to suit the Order's needs and others had to be built to secure a place for everyone in a restricted area called the *Collacchio*.

Site for the Infirmary

To abide with one of its principal founding vows, that of looking after and curing the sick, the Order hastened the building of a Holy Infirmary, or *Sacra Infermeria*, as the hospital was called by the Knights. From the limited space available at Birgu, a healthy site was selected overlooking the harbour entrance and facing the fresh north-easterly wind. As the area was built-up, a number of houses had to be requisitioned and demolished to make way for the new edifice.

The foundation stone of the Holy Infirmary was laid by Grand Master L'Isle Adam in November 1532, two years



after the arrival of the Knights in Malta. The Grand Master, whose Magisterial Palace was at the time in Fort St Angelo, paid personal attention and showed active concern during the construction to ensure its early completion within one year. In fact the hospital was ready and started to function in 1533.

The Order's Infirmary wards, medical and administrative quarters, offices, pharmacy, chapel, refectory and kitchen are fairly well preserved. These are set around the cloister on the side of St Scholastica Street. Similar to the Order's hospital at Rhodes, the ground floor served for the storage of provisions, equipment and laundry.

Main doorway

The western side of the building suffered considerable defacement in 1901 when that part of the building was pulled down and replaced by six three-storey residences in St Scholastica Street which were purposely built to screen off the nuns' apartments from the tenants on the opposite side of the street. As a result, very little of the interior can be seen from outside. In the process of the alterations, the main doorway of the hospital and its open air waiting room were also demolished. According to an old picture in monochrome, the doorway was in Gothic style and had a bass relief in the centre with the letters I.H.S.

The Interior

The present entrance is now from a side door adjacent to St Anne's Church. A wide gallery or *loggja* leads to the principal staircase to the wards on the upper floor. The *loggja* faces the *cortile grande* or garden. In its centre there is a reservoir for rain water. This cistern was actually the quarry from which the stones for the building of the hospital were cut. A wonderful sight is offered by the orange grove and vines creeping up the surrounding pillars of the silent courtyard. Overlooking the courtyard is a sculptured coat-of-arms of Grand Master L'Isle Adam. At one end of the courtyard a wide vaulted hall, rectangular in shape, was used as a refectory, and now serves as the nuns' kitchen. It has an access to another courtyard, the *cortile basso*, which leads to two small chambers known as *i carceri*, the prisons, since these served as a lock-up.

On the north side of the building there is the former chapel, now converted into a dining hall by the nuns. The chapel was remarkable for its elegance with its different capitals sculptured in distinct designs and ornaments, most of which were erased.

Several structural alterations were effected on the original hospital design when the nuns moved in around 1652 to suit the requirements of the convent, the major change being the pulling down of a number of wards to make place for the erection of a new and more spacious church.

On the back facing the seafront, the building is divided into a central and two lateral sections, the area in between forming two open balconies and terraces.

