

British coat of arms gets facelift

Juan Ameen



Photo: Matthew Mirabelli.

The stone coat of arms over the Main Guard in Palace Square, Valletta received a much-needed facelift after over two centuries.

Using a special plastic mix, restorers and stone experts from the Valletta Rehabilitation Project carefully rebuilt the coat of arms, muzzle and tip of a horn of the unicorn, all of which had fallen victims to the natural elements.

The restoration of the sculpture, found on the building across the President's Palace, was done in record time - two weeks - by three people, VRP CEO Claude Borg explained. The Main Guard restoration forms part of the square's overall revamp.

Works began about six months ago and, since then, the square that for so many years has served a car park has been repaved and is being refitted with lamp posts, benches and water jets. It is expected to be officially opened on December 6. Although the final touches had still to be made to the coat of arms, the work was almost done, Mr Borg said.

Another item dating back to the time of the British - a clock right under the coat of arms - was also restored. The timepiece was taken apart and cleaned and parts of it

were changed. After years of not working, it started ticking away on October 4, Notte Bianca. The square was built by the Knights and was originally called Guardia della Piazza. The central building served as the guardroom of the Regimento di Guardia, the Grand Master's personal guards, but was later the guardhouse for the British Governor's soldiers until the 1960s, with the first floor used as the officers' mess.

In 1814, the British added a portico in front of the entrance that is crowned by a sculpture with the British coat of arms flanked by a lion and a unicorn. Below the carvings is an inscription in Latin dated 1814 recording Malta's request to become a British settlement.

When the Main Guard building became the Libyan Cultural Centre in the 1970s, the coat of arms and inscription were covered up by a wooden structure.
