

From Blood Rock to Barriera Wharf

Joanna Spiteri Staines



An anonymous 18th century painting of the Grand Harbour showing Fort St Angelo on the left and Barriera Wharf in the centre, with Valletta behind it.

Blood Rock by James H. Jackson is no literary masterpiece. I must however secretly admit that I could not put it down and raced through the script, at the speed of the dreaded Janissaries, right through to the early hours of the morning.

The roguish figure of Christian Hardy, together with his sweetheart Maria, creates a personal relationship between you as the reader and the terror of the Great Siege centred round the city of Birgu.

I grew up with Ernle Bradford's *The Great Siege: Malta 1565*, however the Great Siege and the threat of invasion simply remained an historical fact.

Blood Rock broke new ground in that for the first time I empathised with what our forefathers must have experienced. Particular tracts describing the superhuman efforts to protect the city walls at all costs gave new meaning to the stones that still make up these fortifications.

For two centuries Malta remained at great risk from Turkish invasion. The city walls of Vittoriosa and Senglea and later those of Valletta were necessary to protect the inhabitants and make invasion more difficult. No wonder the Order had a specific council for the continual maintenance of the fortifications.

The political turmoil between the various European powers and the Ottomans rendered all maritime activity in the Mediterranean risky. However, the victory of the

Christian forces at the Battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571, brought with it, for the first time, the hope of peace and security.

Alof de Wignacourt, Grand Master from 1601 to 1622, started building activity outside Porta del Monte (since 1882 known as Victoria Gate) with the simple but important addition of a supply of fresh water in 1615. This water also supplied the new fountain adorned with the bronze statue of Neptune sculpted by Leone Leoni in the image of the Genoese admiral Andrea Doria, who gave it to the Grand Master Doria in 1584.

A small stone cannon at the base of this fountain and now in the Maritime Museum in Vittoriosa, supplied water to small seacraft within the little inlet below the Neptune fountain known at the time as Porto Pidocchio.

The building of this fountain was accompanied by the building of the chapel of the Blessed Virgin of Liesz. This development promoted maritime activity, and although the fear of Turkish invasion was always present, the mercantile nature of both the Knights and the Maltese business community invested in trade with the East.

Grand Master Paul Lascaris (1636-1657) followed suit in 1642 by building a row of stores immediately outside Porta del Monte.

This building activity was enhanced by the construction of a road running parallel to the seashore and penetrating through the rocky spur upon which rested the Bastion of St Peter and St Paul. This promenade extended to beneath the Capuchin monastery – currently the end of Pinto Stores.

Lascaris turned this rocky spur into festive gardens then known as the Sultan's Gardens, complete with vedettes overlooking the water's edge and a staircase linking the gardens to the sea. The threat of Turkish invasion by then must have been remote.

It is therefore not surprising that the resourceful Grand Master Ramon Perellos (1697-1720) carried on with further construction of facilities for trade with the East. Business must have been booming.

His first building along the stretch of rock below St Barbara's Bastion, skilfully built at the water's edge, consisted of the erection of a quarantine building in 1656.

The Knights took drastic measures to ensure to prevent outbreaks of infectious diseases, especially the dreaded plague, from reaching Malta. Such measures often included the burning of ships and quarantine for all passengers if the logbook showed the vessel had called at a port suspected of harbouring the disease.

This quarantine building gave its name to this stretch of shore, Barriera Wharf, as a result of the barrier of a wooden boardwalk put up to segregate passengers entering the quarantine building from people on the foreshore.

Lithographs of the period clearly show the column stumps that would have held up this boardwalk and one lonely column survives.

However, Perellos invested further in a magnificent stretch of stores that ran below St Barbara's Bastion. The stores consisted of a high-vaulted ground floor for storage and a first floor for residential purposes. This crescent was typical of the period and Wilhelm Schellinks portrays the harbour of Messina as also having had magnificent buildings of this kind along the water's edge.

Perellos's stores predate those of Pinto by about 80 years and although they do not contain the sculptural adornment of those of Pinto, they are equally magnificent. Today, however, Barriera Wharf is in a pitiful state.

It is a great shame that in the 19th century British naval engineers seeking to fortify the harbour demolished the central wing of these stores. This wing was simply a screen and was constructed only to create the sweeping crescent shape.

Pinto Stores also lost its central section; however this time it was the result of enemy air raids in World War II. It is only with the reconstruction of the central part that we can appreciate the original baroque crescent shape reflected in the water.

Further masking of the beauty of the Perellos Stores came with the construction of the fish market buildings in the 19th century.

Barriera Wharf now is in the news again. It is being earmarked as the next stretch of shoreline to be given attention as a result of the need for a new quay for the large cruise liners that visit our shores.

I welcome the news that the buildings in front of Perellos's grand stores are to be demolished. The vision of this shoreline must be anchored in the great beauty that it once had when it stretched along the shoreline, proudly defiant of Turkish invasion.

Today's invasion of tourism does not bring with it terror and violence. I hope that the intended vision for this Valletta waterfront is the result of a sophisticated entwining of today's mercantile needs with our treasured past.

The rehabilitation of the Valletta waterfronts was the subject of Architect Joanna Spiteri Staines's Master's thesis presented at the Scuola di Restauro, La Sapienza University, Rome, in 1998.

Ms Spiteri Staines has worked with Architecture Project for the past 18 years.

She is also one of the council members of Din I-Art Helwa.

She will be giving a lecture entitled 'Barriera Wharf' at Din I-Art Helwa, 133 Melita, Valletta, on Thursday at 6 p.m.