

## **Work at City Gate starts in earnest**

**by Noel Grima**

After lengthy preparation, work on the City Gate project has now started in earnest.

Over this weekend, the additions to the railway bridge will be dismantled and removed, Chris Paris from the Grand Harbour Rehabilitation Corporation and Jean-Marc Smith from Bovis told a group from the media on site yesterday.

The old railway bridge connected the train station (which later became the Yellow Garage) to the railway tunnel that goes all the way to the Sarria church and Argotti Gardens.

The bridge itself was built after the train service began. In fact, the service began in 1883 and used a wooden bridge at first. The stone bridge was built a couple of years later.

Much later, a few years before World War II and a short time before the train service was stopped, a concrete platform was added to one side of the bridge, thus making the bridge wider and perhaps stronger.

However, over time, this concrete addition has become dangerous and its removal this weekend is aimed not just at bringing back the original stone bridge but also to remove the danger that increased traffic could pose to people or cars passing underneath to reach the other side of Lascaris Ditch or the Lascaris War Rooms.

The Yellow Garage and the ditch on the Marsamxett side are set to be the main exit for trucks carrying the rubble from the demolition that will be taking place in Freedom Square, next to the opera house, and of the police station next to the church of St Catherine of Italy.

A big funnel has been set up in Freedom Square for all the rubble, which will drop down a chute some seven metres long into waiting trucks inside the Yellow Garage. The trucks will then exit through the ditch to Marsamxett.

This will avoid the need for trucks to cross Republic Street and disrupt traffic and pedestrians alike. It is a key commitment that Bovis and the project managers intend to keep, that pedestrian traffic through City Gate will continue all through the work, unless safety precautions forbid it. This is a huge difference from what went on when the present City Gate was

being built in the late 1960s, when pedestrians entering Valletta had to undertake a long, dusty and inconvenient detour through tunnels and bridges emerging at Castille.

Work on the demolition of shops in Freedom Square is now ready to begin. In fact, the screed on top of the side underneath Pope Pius V Street has already been removed (and one can see a hole on top of the corridor just outside what used to be Chemimart).

Down in the ditch, as people entering Valletta can see if they look over the balustrade, preparations are being made to ensure that this main entrance to the work site is as it should be. Yesterday, workers were setting up a facility to wash the trucks' tyres free of dust, while accommodation, toilets, a canteen, an office, etc are being set up next to the bastion wall for the workers.

Passage through the smelly staircase up from the Yellow Garage is being blocked and people will now have to use the tubular steps erected on that side of the bridge. To us, who used it to go down, it seemed a long descent, and will perhaps be more so to people climbing up.

The demolition of the shops in Freedom Square will only be the first part of the work, since the general aim is to turn the site into a proper construction site and begin the building of the new Parliament building there.

The demolition of City Gate itself will come later and passage through Pope Pius V Street will only be prevented at the very last stage of the work.

Those entering Valletta in the last few days must have noticed that hoarding has now encroached on the Grand Harbour side of the bridge. Actually, a third of the bridge's width has been enclosed. This is perhaps psychologically preparing people to adjust to a bridge that will be only one third of the width of the present bridge when the project is completed.

But there is a further intention behind the hoarding. Right now, it is being used for the passage of long trucks into the site (only at night, to minimise disruption).

When the time comes to begin the dismantling of City Gate, pedestrians will switch over to this corridor while the present open part of the bridge will be closed off and for work to be done there. Hence the commitment to keep City Gate open for pedestrians and such cars as are authorised to enter at all times during the work.

Over the coming days, in preparation for this, further tests will be carried out on the bridge. From the ditch, one can easily see traces of the three

bridges that have been built over the centuries.

The first bridge was the Tumas Dingli Bridge that rested on solid rock reaching some 10 metres above ground level and continuing with arches. When this bridge was later enlarged, in British times, it was enlarged equally on both sides. But when the Zavellani-Rossi City Gate was built, the bridge was extended only on the Grand Harbour side. It may be this last addition that resulted in the misalignment there is today between City Gate and Republic Street, a misalignment of some 1.5 metres.

Taxis and crowds

I entered Valletta through City Gate twice last week, and twice I had to jump aside as a taxi broke ranks from its Ordnance Street parking and ploughed into the incoming crowds, scattering them just to avoid having to go all the way around Valletta to exit.

It is the government's fault for having neglected City Gate for so long that all kinds of illegal and dangerous practices have been allowed to persist.

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