

## Works to restore Auberge de Castille to former grandeur

by CHIARA BONELLO

Before its establishment as the Office of the Prime Minister in 1972 the Auberge de Castille was home to the Knights for many years, served as the premises for the Commission for National Property and as Headquarters for the British Armed Forces.



Today the exterior stonework of the Auberge de Castille, which was first built in 1588 on the designs of architect Girolamo Cassar, are undergoing extensive restoration works, intended to restore them to their original state.

### The Knights and their Auberges

The Order of the Knights of St John was established long before its arrival in Malta – in 1530 – sometime around the 11th century, to take care of Christian pilgrims in Jerusalem. It was never intended as a military order, but as the need for protection of Christians and holy places increased, so did the need for military strength.

In the early 14th century the Knights conquered the island of Rhodes, from where they positioned themselves to protect Western Europe against a growing Ottoman Empire. Although the Knights successfully defended Rhodes from a Turkish assault in 1480, in 1522 the Turks returned and captured the island.

This left the Knights in search of a new home base, which is when they were given Malta by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. It was around this time that the Order set up its administration and divided itself into eight langues: France, England, Aragon, Castille, Germany, Auvergne, Provence and Italy.

Each langue was represented in Convent, bringing together the Master's Palace, the Church, the Hospital and the Auberges, by a Pilier, who had under his charge the Auberge, which would house the Knights who did not have a home in Malta.

Each Pilier had his own particular official title, and had certain rights and duties. The Pilier of Castille was the Grand Chancellor, who was responsible for the registration and custody of all laws and decrees circulated by the Order of the Grand Master.

'Auberge', a term first coined during the reign of Grand Master Claude de la Sengle, referred to the Knights' hospices and houses. These were then divided by langue and custom.

The Auberges were dotted around the city, with each one placed close to the fortified curtain allocated to its langue, not too far from the church of St John.

They would be built over two floors, with a rich, but not excessively decorated façade. They would have an internal courtyard, ceremonial rooms on the lower levels and the bedrooms on the second floor.

The priory of the langue of Castille was considered a single district in the centre of Valletta, defined by St John's Street, Zachary Street, Melita Street and Merchants Street. Although the members initially lived in wooden tents, in 1569 they decided to build the Auberge.

### Auberge de Castille

The Auberge de Castille, which housed the knights of the Spanish and Portuguese langue, is the most beautiful and impressive palace from the time of the knights. It was built in 1588.

Casa Grande along St Paul Street served as the Auberge for the Knights for a period of time, but in 1588 the Knights of Castille decided it was time to build a bigger Auberge, to better cater for their needs as well as show a certain dignity.

The new building, designed by architect Girolamo Cassar was built in his matured mannerist style, which is evident in the pilasters between the fenestration. There are also large pilasters at either extreme of the Auberge's façade, to activate the flatness of his elevation.

The main entrance, on a higher level than street level, was flanked by five decorated windows on each side to give the place an aura of nobility. It also had a considerable number of doors on its side elevations, which catered for different reasons and the different people visiting the Auberge.

Around 1741, however, during the time of Grand Master Emanuel Pinto, the Council of the Order decided that a second Auberge would be built on a different style, transforming the military character to something more original and prestigious, in the Baroque style.

The façade, rich although not over decorative, is believed to be the work of Domenico Cachia, whose work has been described as the finest of 18th century Valletta. It has pilasters, a recessed panel and centerpiece projection, giving the building a touch of excellence.

Grand Master Pinto's endorsement of this building, a sum of around 200 scudi, is immediately apparent in the fact that his symbol and crescent moon are common sights on different parts of the building, while his Coat of Arms and bust are the main decoration to the central window.

These were too heavy and had to be removed in 1766-1768 to avoid damaging the building fabric. The Coat of Arms of the Langue of Spain and Portugal are also carved into the façade.

Each side of the main entrance is flanked by five windows, and according to sources these are located exactly as they were in the first Auberge. They are sought with wrought iron grilles with Pinto's half moon emblem.

Most of the decorations moulded on windows and on the main door were

transformed by time, so as to give the building a baroque style and a more homogeneous look.

Each window carries the abbreviation E.P (Emanuel Pinto), a rare monogram on buildings in Valletta. The main door was enlarged in 1971, and an arch for the main door and a large staircase were constructed.

Then came the French, then the Brits...

During the command of the French invaders, in the early 19th century, the Auberge de Castille served as a Commission for National Property. This lasted for two years, until the island became a British colony.

They transformed it into the headquarters of the armed forces and a residence for British officers. In the meantime it was also used as the headquarters of the army for Malta, Cyprus and Libya.

It sustained some damage to the right hand side during the Second World War, when the ceiling of one of the front halls was also damaged. Since 1972, however, the building has hosted the Office of the Prime Minister.

The restoration works

One would expect that having stood there for so long; it is only natural that there is the accumulation of a certain amount of dirt and grime. Besides this, its proximity to the sea has meant that the stonework has deteriorated too.

For the first time since it was built, save for some works to repair the effects of the WWII bomb, the decision was taken to properly restore the Auberge to its original grandeur over a period of three years.

In mid-July the workers began works on installing the scaffolding along the right side of the main door, on the corner with Merchants Street.

The structural works included the structural repair of pediment, replacement of stone as necessary; including badly deteriorated sculptural motifs of coats of arms and the reinstatement of lacunae.

Depending on the deposits to be removed, different cleaning methods were adopted, wrought iron works and the wood were replaced where necessary and a pigeon-protection system was installed.

It is estimated that the works, which have been divided into 11 phases over different fronts, will last some 44 months in all. Two of the phases on Merchants Street were finalised a short while ago, within 12 months, a month before the estimated deadline.

The works currently in progress are those over the corner of Merchants Street, where it touches with the main façade.