

Ye olde Valletta signage

By Elaine Attard



It is not only centuries-old grand buildings which one can admire in Valletta – any visitor who looks for them will find quaint shops and street signs of different epochs that decorate the capital.

Many disappeared or were left to deteriorate but some others have been preserved.

In 1998 the Malta Environment and Planning Authority scheduled the only street sign in French in Valletta, a survivor of the short two-year period of the French occupation. The sign is painted on the wall at the corner of Old Theatre Street and Treasury Street. It was covered with a perspex frame in the 1990s to protect it from the elements.

In Valletta there are other old street names, as well as a number of advertisements that were painted directly on the walls, some of which are still discernible though much faded, and other signs, such as the one painted on wood giving the direction to the Barrakka Lifts, according to a Mepa spokesperson.

The design guidelines for Urban Conservation Areas (1995), provide that wherever possible, Mepa should protect all cultural features that have acquired heritage value by virtue of their age – over 50 years as stipulated by local law – and/or owing to their history and socio-economic significance, or because they are an integral element of their surroundings.

According to historian Antonio Espinosa Rodriguez, there is very little literature to consult on the topic.

He referred to one aspect of businesses which mushroomed in the capital during the English rule. Many who know the area wonder, for instance, why there are so many old shops in St Mark Street – many of which are closed today. Only few people know the reason.

“There was a time when St Mark Street teemed with shops. Sailors used to travel from Sliema to Marsamxett on boats which disembarked passengers at the lower end of the street. They then used to walk all the way up along it to reach Republic Street so the Maltese made the most of it and

opened shops selling all sorts of sailors' requirements. Unfortunately most closed down during the war," said Mr Espinosa Rodriquez.

Folklore historian Guido Lanfranco spoke when asked about the way shop windows used to be decorated and locked. Most shop windows were made of decorative glass and wood. Shop signs were made using a distinctive large print that is still familiar with many. Shops used to be locked for the day or night using large wooden planks that acted as shutters.

Mr Lanfranco said that the Valletta periphery was also crammed with shops to meet the sailors' needs. Some, like the Bridge Bar near Victoria Gate, are still open.

Tourists love the 'Rawplugs' and 'Go-Gay' signs in Old Bakery Street and stop to take pictures alongside them. Probably they assume they are some sort of wartime relic. Strait Street – which used to be the capital's red light district – is full of old shop signs of what once were bars that were popular with the sailors.

Some years ago, a Victory Kitchen sign was discovered in Melita Street. Recently, this was freshly painted with the original colours and lit with a typical streetlight.

The memory of most shop fronts has been well preserved in photography but there is also the lingering physical splendour of a few left scattered around the capital. eattard@independent.com.mt
