

Hal Qormi

Four walks through a historic city



Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas

Hal Qormi – A brief history



Details from A.F.G. de Palmeus, Carte Générale de la Principauté Souveraine des Isles de Malte et du Goze (1752), from the Albert Ganado Malta Map Collection at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta (Courtesy of Heritage Malta)

Hal Qormi is best known among the Maltese for baking *ħobż tal-Malti* (Maltese bread) and, indeed, during the rule of the Knights of Malta, Qormi was widely known as *Casal Fornaro*, the Village of Bakeries – a proud tradition that continues today. Unlike most Maltese towns which tend to lie on heights, Qormi is situated at or below sea level in the lower reaches of the *Wied il-Kbir* river system in the fork where the *Kbir* and *Sewda* valleys converge before continuing to Marsa and the Grand Harbour. This was rich agricultural land but also marshy and Qormi's motto, *Altior ab imo* (Rising from the low), acknowledges its geographical situation. The name Qormi (or Curmi as it appears on old maps) has been etymologically derived from Arabic meaning 'vine' or Greek meaning a 'confluence of waters' but, in all likelihood, Curmi was simply a surname.



An old 'Good Bread' cart
(Courtesy of Qormi Local Council)

The early history of Qormi is obscure. Ancient remains have been found in the area, particularly a number of Phoenician, Punic and Roman tombs, but not much to suggest there was a substantial settlement here until the medieval period. By 1436, Qormi already was established as a parish, one of the earliest in Malta, which encompassed a much larger area than it does nowadays, incorporating what is today Marsa, part of Hamrun and extending to the Xiberras peninsula where later the Knights of the Order of St John built Valletta. When the Knights arrived in 1530, Qormi was one of Malta's largest villages and contributed significantly in the struggle to defeat the Ottoman Turks in the Siege of 1565. Qormi thrived from the combination of agriculture, bread-baking and its proximity to the Grand Harbour and the job opportunities it offered in the era of the Knights. In 1743, the village petitioned Grand Master Pinto de Fonseca to officially recognize Qormi as a *città* (city), based on the exaggerated claim that the village had a population of over 6,000, when it actually was around 3,500. Nevertheless, the Grand Master granted the request and, for good measure, gave it his own

Voice **L-INNU TA'HAL QORMI** Qormi Hymn Klien: Gorg Bianchi Muzika: Sebastian Camilleri

♩ = 98

11 *mf* O Hal Qor-mi Belt Twe-lid-na Ir-rod
tnaq-oax b't-tri mdieh-ba F'dak li
To Qormi, our birthplace,
Your name is engraved

14 du-lek hajr u gieh. In-wegh-duk li nzom-muk
seh-h fost il-Mal-tin, Tul l-as-sed-jì, tul il-
our gratitude and respect we extend
with golden letters in the history of the Maltese Islands for the fruitful participation

17 f'qalb-na Tul haj-jit-na nħob-buk shih. Fik in-
gwe-rer Pin-to għa-ref Zied l-zej-nek bl-ogh-la
We embellish the inheritance from our Qormi ancestors
Wise Grand Master Pinto in prestigious manner

20 nsah-hu dak li ksib-na li hal-lewl-na l-qrie-ma
mas-tru Pin-to għa-ref Zied l-zej-nek bl-ogh-la
We embellish the inheritance from our Qormi ancestors
Wise Grand Master Pinto in prestigious manner

23 xjuh, U jber-ku-na ta'-wa-raj-na Jekk ah-
gieh, Wah-had mie-ghek l-isem tie-għu Sa-biex
so that the new generations will bless and appreciate
unified his name to yours while raising your village status

26 isim-ha Ma nich-du ha qatt u qatt, Bl-is-bah
our name has been derived and should be

29 ward-ghand-na nzej-nu-ha Biex tkun l-ghax-qa ta' kull-
adorned with flowers to become everybody's charming place.

32 hadd. B'rie-da taj-ba zgur li nas-lu Mal-mex-
In good will and full cooperation

35 xej-ja kbar Qor-min Nig-bdu magħ-hom ha-bel
with the Qormi leaders

38 wie-hed Biex nis-sil-tu kull frott-bnin. Is-mek
our aim will be totally achieved.

41 poco rall.
bnin.

Lyrics (2002) and translation (2011) by Chev. George Bianchi K.T.L.
Score (2002) by Rev. Sebastian Camilleri



name, *Città Pinto*. Qormi's coat-of-arms adopted Pinto's shield with five upturned red crescents, above which is a mural crown representing the fortifications of Malta and indicating Qormi's status as a *città*.

Today Qormi is the third largest town in Malta with a population of around 17,500 and includes two parishes, St George and St Sebastian. The original parish of St George and its church is at the heart of the old village. The area that became the parish of St Sebastian, began to develop during the 19th century on the southern and eastern outskirts of the old town, grew



Daniel Scerri (b. 1976), Qormi Procession (2011), oils on antique wooden door, 84 x 78cm (Courtesy of the artist)

rapidly in the years around the turn of the 20th century and was given independent parish status in 1936.

As with all Maltese villages, Qormi has its fair share of *festas* (feasts) and pageantry, and it is well worth trying to visit during one of these celebrations when the churches, streets and houses are splendidly decorated. Especially renowned is the Good Friday procession, one of the oldest and most elaborate in Malta. Also, of course, each of Qormi's parishes has its *festa*: that of St George takes place during the week ending in the



Good Friday procession leaving St George Church, 1933 (Courtesy of Qormi Local Council)



Church of St George and old village core, 1998 (Photo by John Frendo)

last Sunday of June and St Sebastian's in the week culminating in the third Sunday of July.

Despite the inexorable impact of modernization and the unfortunate encroachment of industrial estates, Qormi has much to offer those interested in Maltese heritage. The old core of St George remains a maze of narrow streets and alleys, old stone houses and traditional features, such as holy niches, intricate ironwork, handcrafted doors and Maltese balconies. The walker is encouraged, at the small risk of getting lost, to deviate from the routes suggested and explore further streets and alleys, in which one is certain to discover curious and charming details. Perhaps one might catch sight of those famous comic characters Wenzu and Rozi, whose creator, George Zammit (1908-1990), grew up in Qormi. In the following walks, we will pass by a number of shops carrying on traditional trades, including iron workers, horse sulky makers, carpenters, gilders and of course bakers. Bakeries are often unmarked and from the outside look like little more than garage entries, but one can often identify them by their tall and blackened square chimneys. If you happen to pass by one with its door open, do not hesitate to stick your head in. With Malta's only horse track on the edge of town, Qormi

has long been known for its horse enthusiasts, so especially in the early mornings and evenings, one is likely to see horses being exercised in the streets, and do not be surprised to see many stables while walking through back lanes. To help maintain energy levels, each of the first three walks will go past one of Qormi's three band clubs, which are open to the public and make good pit-stops for refreshments.

Qormi has over 200 niches with holy images, more than anywhere else in the Maltese Islands, evidencing the devoutness of its citizens. The statues are either of the Madonna or of saints, the most popular being the Madonna under a host of different titles, St Joseph carrying baby Jesus, St Paul the patron saint of Malta holding the book of his epistles, St George with the slain dragon under his foot, St Anthony of Padua usually adoring the Christ child, Archangel Michael slaying Satan, St Roque (*Rokku*) the patron saint of plague victims with his faithful dog and, naturally, several of the martyr St Sebastian shot with arrows. Typically, these were put up as vows or as thanksgiving by individual citizens. The inscriptions, usually in Italian, beneath these niches and a number of



The above inscription reads:

A.D. 20 Ottob 1811

*Indulgenza di 40 giorni a chi
divotamente regiterà una Salve
Regina innazi questa s. immagine
Concessa dal Rev. Monsignor
Vesgovo Fra Ferdinando
Mattei*

20 Oct. 1811

*An indulgence of 40 days to whomever
devotedly recites a Salve
Regina [Hail Holy Queen] before this sacred image
Granted by the Rev. Monsignor
Bishop [of Malta] Ferdinand
Mattei*

other statues indicate that an indulgence is granted for a specific number of days to whoever says the appropriate prayer before it, as well as which (arch)bishop granted the indulgence.

Transport to Qormi

Bus from Valletta or Marsa Park & Ride: No. 63 (stop *Stanislaw*, for Walk 1, 2 and 4), No. 61 or 63 (stop *Bastjan*, Walk 3)

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Detail from the manuscript map by L^t. C^d. F.G.C. B^{on}. de Behrend, *Carte Generale des Isles de Malte, du Goze et du Cuming* (1821), from the Albert Ganado Malta Map Collection at the National Museum of Fine Arts (Courtesy of Heritage Malta)

Back cover illustration:

Grand Master Pinto monument on roundabout (Courtesy of Noel Falzon)

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St George Church and the heart of the old village



Church of St George

St George Church stands at the centre of the original village of Qormi. An earlier church was rebuilt or enlarged in 1456 by the then parish priest, Dun Giglio Lombardo, and there survives a Latin inscription in Gothic script noting this just inside the right door entrance. This church was demolished by 1584 and its stones incorporated into the new church, whose construction continued over the next century, during which it was enlarged and altered into a cruciform shape. Finally, the dome was added in 1684, designed by Lorenzo Gafà (1638-1703), a prominent Baroque architect whose legacy can be seen in numerous churches throughout Malta.

Except for the doorframes and the statues set in the façade, the outside of the church is in the restrained Mannerist style of the early period of the Knights' rule, while the inside is more extravagantly decorated, although the earlier Baroque has been largely displaced by 19th century neo-classicism. The façade statues from the Victorian period represent St George in the centre with the four evangelists each wielding their



Façade statue of St George

pens: from left to right are Mark, John, Matthew and Luke. In front of the church stand two 18th century statues of St Paul and St Publius by unknown sculptors. To the left is a column dated 1671, presumably to commemorate the first centenary of the parish's designation as a *matrice*, meaning it mothered other parishes, beginning in 1571 when Valletta's first parish of Our Lady of Porto Salvo (popularly known as St Dominic's) was established and dismembered from St George.

Inside, the church is enhanced by many fine paintings and statues by outstanding Maltese artists of the past centuries. Around the main altar cluster various works depicting St George. The titular painting of the *Martyrdom of St George* is partly

Interior of the church





*Main altar with titular painting behind and
The Lamentation of Christ on the far left.
Stamp of titular painting (2003, Courtesy of MaltaPost)*



from the studio of Mattia Preti (1613-1699), although the main figure of the saint is by the hand of the master himself. On either side of the choir are two large works of *St George in the Temple of Apollo* and *St George before Diocletian* (1843) by Pietro Paolo Caruana. Above, in the apse, is *St George in Glory* by the most prominent Maltese painter of the

late 19th and early 20th centuries, Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930), while inside the dome the depiction of St George on a horse with St Paul and St Agatha defending Malta against the Saracens in 1429 was painted in 1938 by one of Malta's finest modern artists, Joseph Briffa. The titular statue of St George, in the second altar on the



St George dome



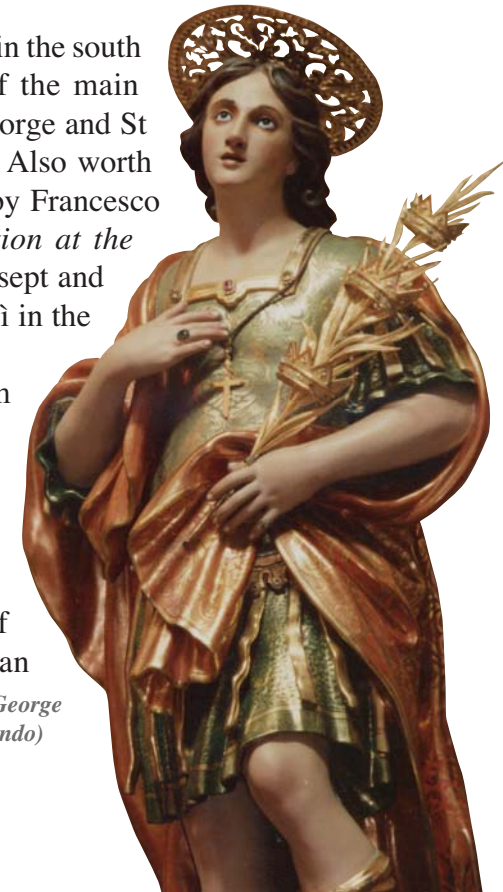
left, is one of the oldest in Malta and was first used in a procession in 1741. It was sculpted by Qormi-born Pietru Felici (1669-1743), although it was restored and slightly modified in 1895. The *Crucifixion* placed beneath the titular painting is the top part of what used to be the main altarpiece, a mid-15th century triptych painted in Italy in a curious mixture of Byzantinesque and late Gothic styles. The fine central panel of this work, *The Lamentation of Christ*, is in the south transept immediately to the left of the main altar, while the side panels of St George and St Gregory are in the parish museum. Also worth noting are one of the finest works by Francesco Zahra (1710-1773), *The Presentation at the Temple*, at the end of the north transept and a *St Joseph* (1888) by Giuseppe Cali in the third altar on the right.

The St George Parish Museum (contact the parish office to arrange a visit) holds a number of further artworks, including a painting of the *Eternal Father* by Preti, more works by Zahra and various paintings originally housed in the chapels of the parish. The museum also has an

*Wooden statue of St George
(Photo by John Frendo)*



Altar of Our Lady of the Rosary





Grand Master Pinto's sedan chair



Sundial by George Fenech

18th century sedan chair that belonged to Grand Master Pinto, a small collection of Neolithic and ancient artefacts and many objects related to the history of the church and the parish.

Coming out of St George Church, turn sharply right onto *Triq San Ġorġ* (St George Street) and, as we walk around the side of the church, look up at the sundial. Further up on the left is a recently restored house with old stone balconies which is now the parish office. Continuing around the back of the church, there is a large marble plaque stating that the remains of those buried in the Cemetery of the Gate (on the opposite



Plaque to commemorate smallpox and cholera victims



side of the church) up until 22 January 1937, together with those who fell victim to smallpox in 1830 and cholera in 1837 and 1850 were reburied in the courtyard just behind so that 'we will never forget them in our prayers just as we from those before us have reaped a thousand graces'. Qormi's modern cemetery is at *Triq il-Belt Valletta* (Valletta Road), off *Triq il-Mithna* (Mill Street), which was first used to bury the victims of the 1813-14 plague that ravaged the town.

Continue on *Triq San Ġorġ* to the first intersection with *Triq Dun Marju*, named after a priest whose identity has so far remained anonymous, along which we will find numerous niches. At the intersection one is likely to see sulkies or horse racing carts leaning



Our Lady of Mount Carmel on St George Street

Intersection with niche of St George and sulkies





St John the Baptist

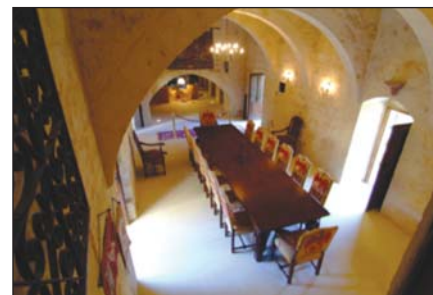


Palazzo Stagno (ca. 1589)

against walls since a shop that builds and decorates them lies just around the corner to the right. Following *Triq Dun Marju* uphill, we soon come to a cluster of three niches near where *Sqaq Stagno* (Stagno Alley) intersects on the right, and down this short alley one finds the front entrance to *Palazzo Stagno*. From this perspective one has only a limited view of the imposing front of the palazzo, which is not normally open for public viewing, although group visits can be arranged by appointment (www.palazzostagno.com). Built around 1589, the palazzo is one of the oldest surviving buildings in Qormi, but there is little reliable information about its early occupants or builders. A series of spacious rooms with impressive stone arches are organized around a central courtyard. The palazzo also has a small private chapel with an ornate ceiling and a tower accessed by a spiral stone staircase (*il-garigor*) offering fine views of the surrounding area, as well as of Mdina in the distance. Although the basic structure of the palazzo is typically austere, the window frames and balconies are decorated with often whimsical faces and

figures, and curiously, the numerous doors, windows and other apertures are of various shapes and sizes and often set at asymmetrical heights, giving the palazzo a playful feel. A grand terrace overlooks two walled gardens with fruit orchards irrigated by an original stone trough system and three wells. There is a legend that the palazzo was once occupied by a wizard during the time that the present St George Church was being built. Originally the church was to be situated some distance from the palazzo, but wishing that it be closer to his residence, the wizard magically moved the stones of the church at night to within a stone's throw of the palazzo. After several attempts by the builders to move the stones back to their planned site, only to have them fly back during the night, they finally acquiesced in building the church at its present location not far from the palazzo.

At the top of *Triq Dun Marju* there is a tiny park with olive trees and bay laurel opposite a bakery. In 1940 a British bomber taking off from Luqa to attack Italy crashed on a house at the edge of a small quarry just behind the houses on the far right. Bearing to the right



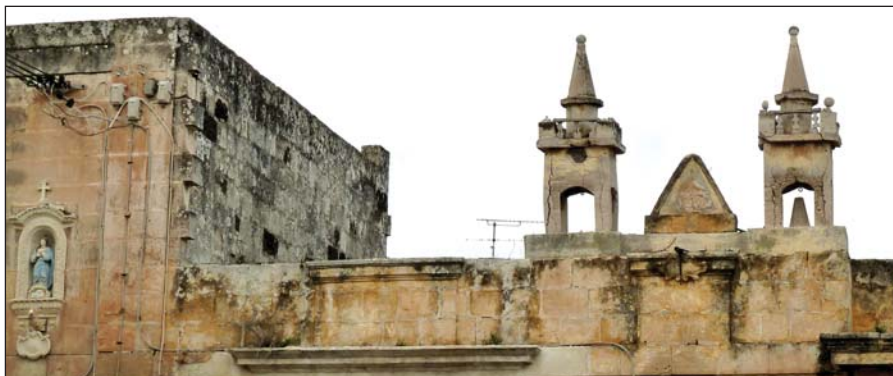
Bottom photograph by Jonathan Beacom (2006), Courtesy of Palazzo Stagno



Public park with olive trees

of the park and then crossing the main street of *Triq l-Isqof Scicluna* (Bishop Scicluna Street), turn left onto *Triq Pinto*. Some way up we see on the left the arches and half rosettes on the back of St George Primary School built in the 1930s. Opposite *Sqaq 7* (Alley 7) note on the right a crude imitation of the upper façade of St George Church, near which is a delicate little niche of the Immaculate Conception. At the fork, bear right on *Triq Dun Ġwakkın Schembri* (Father Joachim Schembri Street) around an old building and immediately we see Cappadocia Palace on the right, the home of the Anici Band and Social Club, the newest of the three bands in Qormi, founded in 1988.

Imitation of upper façade of St George Church and Immaculate Conception niche



Cappadocia Palace, Anici Band Club

Continuing, we come out on *Triq il-Vitorja* (Victory Street), turn left, go past a classic red telephone booth and a traditional ironwork shop and we see the Church of *tal-Vitorja* (Our Lady of Victory), in front of which is a small traffic island with the Victory Cross and a Victorian era statue of St Joseph by Vincenzo Decandia on a high plinth. The present church replaced a previous one dedicated to the Nativity of Our Lady, whose feast in Malta became identified with Our Lady of Victory because

Square of Our Lady of Victory





*Papier-mâché figure of Baby Mary
inside Our Lady of Victory*

it was believed that the intercession of the Virgin Mary brought victory both over the Ottoman Turks in the Siege of 1565 and later in the so-called Second Siege during World War II. The present church was built probably around 1657 with four altars – representing four chapels that previously existed in the area – dedicated respectively to The Assumption, St Paul, St Roque and St Leonard. The Victory Cross (1688) standing in front of the church also commemorates these deconsecrated chapels. The clock on the belfry tower

was built in 1886 by the famous Maltese clockmaker, Michelangelo Sapiano, who also made the clock on the left belfry of St George Church. Inside Our Lady of Victory, the titular painting of *St Anne and St Joachim with Baby Mary* (1890) is attributed to the prolific Giuseppe Calì. There is an adorable figure of Baby Mary swaddled in embroidered clothes that was donated to the church in 1942. The church is open for mass every morning.

From the church re-cross *Triq il-Vitorja* and walk down the continuation of *Triq Pinto* which soon tails into *Triq Santa Katarina* (St Catherine Street). Crossing *Triq*



Statue of St Joseph



Corner of St Catherine Street

l-Isqof Scicluna we see straight ahead on the right two impressive niches on either side of a small alley. On the left is a dramatic statue of the warrior Archangel Michael crushing Satan under his heel and, as if to balance this niche, on the facing corner is a more serene Our Lady of Mount Carmel with child. *Triq Sta Katarina* winds down past three important chapels originally constructed in the 16th century but all later rebuilt.

First is the Chapel of *Sta Katarina ta' Lixandra* (St Catherine of Alexandria) on the left, which was rebuilt in its present form in 1678. Directly across the street is an 18th century house with an imposing door at the left side of which is a Sacred Heart monogramme pocked with many holes that allowed for



Archangel Michael



*Lintel on side of St Peter's chapel
with Jesuit monogramme in centre*

confession and communication with the outside during times of plague, which in the past was believed to be contagious.

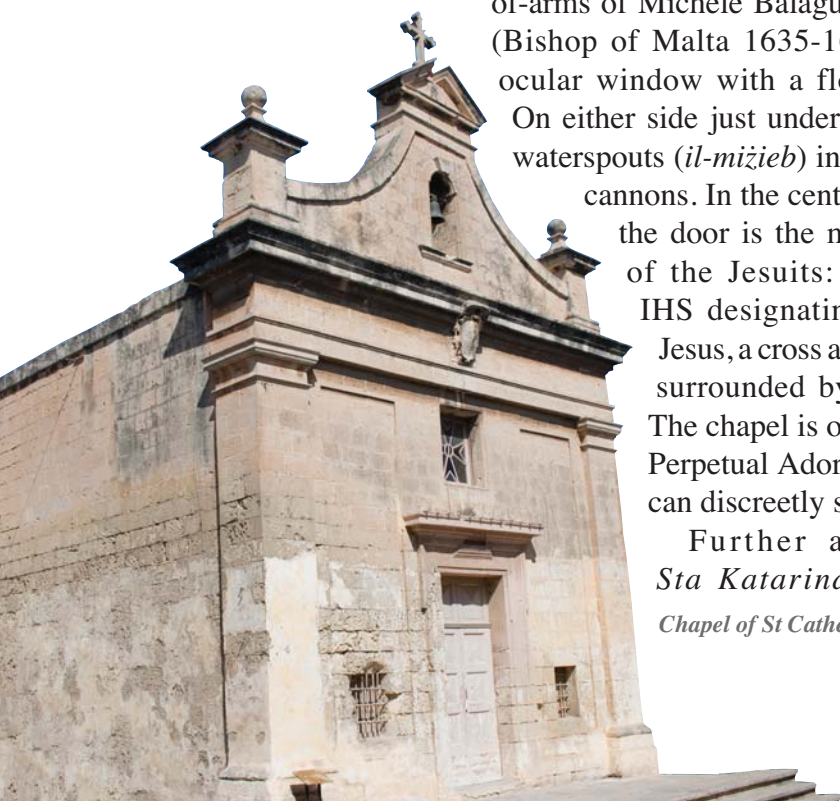
A few steps down on the right is the Chapel of *San Pietru* (St Peter), rebuilt in 1656. Its well-preserved façade has a small niche of St Peter holding the keys to heaven, the coat-



Chapel of St Peter

of-arms of Michele Balaguer Camarasa (Bishop of Malta 1635-1663) and an ocular window with a floral pattern. On either side just under the roof are waterspouts (*il-mizieb*) in the shape of cannons. In the centre just above the door is the monogramme of the Jesuits: the initials IHS designating the name Jesus, a cross and three nails surrounded by solar rays. The chapel is open daily for Perpetual Adoration, so one can discreetly step inside.

Further along *Triq Sta Katarina*, around a



Chapel of St Catherine



Ta' Qrejqa Chapel with baker's square chimney behind to the right

slight bend and on the left, is the chapel of *Santa Marija ta' Qrejqa* (Our Lady of the Assumption, known as "ta' Qrejqa") rebuilt ca. 1653 by Baron Giacinto Cassia. There used to be a tradition, during the feast of the Assumption on 15th August, of making a circuit of seven chapels dedicated to the Assumption all within the parish of St George, which was significantly larger than it is today, and ending at this chapel. Here the tired pilgrims were fed roast pork from a piglet that was allowed to roam the neighbourhood and fed throughout the year. The nickname *qrejqa* is an old word referring to the cooked fat and skin, in other words crackling with fat, which was usually given to the poor. A few years ago, the chapel was in serious danger of collapsing until it was restored in 2009 and is occasionally open during *festas*.

Across from the Chapel of *Santa Marija ta' Qrejqa* is the former residence of Stanislaw Gatt (ca. 1744-1811), pharmacist and prominent official, who served as mayor of Qormi in the last years of the Knights



House of Stanislaw Gatt with upended cannons

of Malta and was its representative in the National Congress of 1799. Gatt is best known for leading local resistance against the French rule of Malta in 1798-1800. The single-storey house appears unfinished as originally planned, although this may not be the case but rather a stylish means of indicating how the upper storey would look, if and when it was added. Two upturned cannons mark either side of the housefront, a common practice of disposing of obsolete guns. Next to Gatt's house is a small piazza with a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes on a high plinth, indulged by Bishop Pietro Pace in 1906.

Continuing down *Triq Sta Katarina* we come to *Triq il-Kbira* and turning left we soon return to St George Church.

Piazza with Our Lady of Lourdes



Walk No. 2 (approximately 1½ - 2 hrs)

Around, down and up Main Street



Cardinal Xiberras Street

From the front of St George Church facing outward go right up *Triq il-Kardinal Xiberras*, named after Malta's only cardinal to date, Fabrizio Sceberras Testaferrata (1757-1843), a stately street built in the 1920s and lined with handsome houses. Half-way up there is a British era red cast-iron letterbox where we take a left turn onto *Triq il-Barrakki*, whose name refers to sheds or huts that were constructed here to isolate victims of the plague of 1813-14. This narrow uneven street passes by a gilding shop that makes traditional Maltese clocks (*tal-lira*) and then, on the right, there is house No. 47 where Dr George Abela, President of Malta since 2009, was born. Eventually, *Triq il-Barrakki* curves down to *Triq Stanislaw Gatt* behind the Chapel of *Santa Marija tal-Qrejqa* (see Walk

1). However, shortly before the end of *Triq il-Barrakki* look on the right for an inscription high inside a disused doorframe where in 1968 a woman living here is reputed to have had a vision of the Madonna, who showed her displeasure with the world.

From the chapel, turn right up *Triq Santa Katarina* and then take the next left at the Chapel of St Peter onto *Triq San Pietru* (St Peter Street). About halfway down the lane, note the little wedge-shaped corner house with a boxed niche of the Immaculate Conception perched on top. This road comes out onto a small piazza dominated by a monumental statue of Our Lady of the Rosary erected in 1888 by Luigi Frendo in thanks for sparing his family from the cholera epidemic of 1887. It was sculpted by Vincenzo Decandia, who



Gilder on Triq il-Barrakki



St Peter Street and one of its alleys



Four niches at Main and St Bartholomew Streets

also made the St Joseph in front of Our Lady of Victory Church (see Walk 1) and the Assumption at the Chapel of *Tal-Hlas* (see Walk 4).

Continuing down *Triq San Pietru* and bearing to the right, we come out on *Triq il-Kbira* (Main Street). Continue a short way past *Triq Anici* until we come to a fork – pausing here one sees four niches. The two on the right – representing Our Lady of Sorrows and St George – guard the entranceway to a convent of the Augustine Sisters established here in 1894. Take the right fork onto *Triq San Bartolemew* (St Bartholomew Street) and, on the first corner on the right, is a finely detailed niche of Christ the King. Halfway down the street on the left is an unusually large and elaborate niche of St Lawrence, next door to which is a plaque marking where Ġużè Muscat



Christ the King



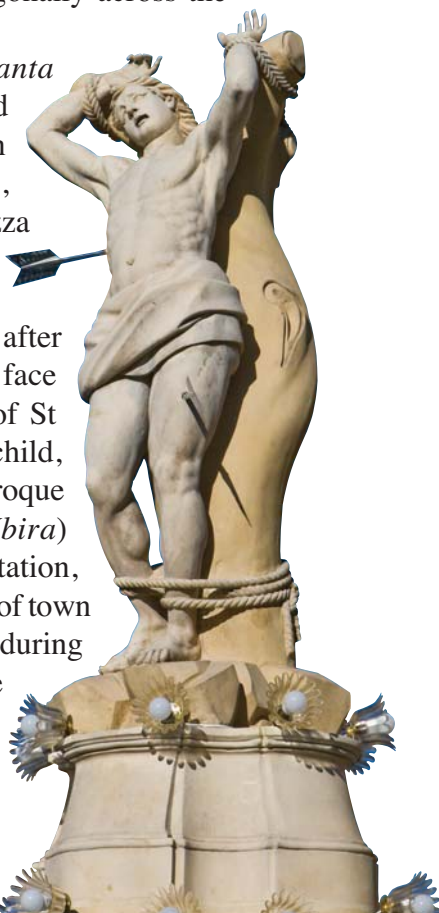
Birthplace of Gużè Muscat Azzopardi

Azzopardi (1853-1927) was born; often referred to as the 'Father of Maltese Literature', he was a major poet, novelist, dramatist, translator, journalist and editor. On the opposite side of the street, look up the little lane of *Triq Dun Bert* (Father Bert Street) and at the end there is a very old stone balcony.

Triq San Bartolemew comes out onto *Triq San Bastjan* (St Sebastian Street), where there is a monument of St Sebastian on the right-hand corner and the old Church of St Sebastian diagonally across the street (see Walk 3).

Turn to the left immediately onto *Triq Santa Marija* (St Mary Street), a quiet back lane of old houses and horse stables and, at the end, turn right onto *Triq San Benedittu* (St Benedict Street), which opens out onto a small triangle-shaped piazza dominated by a Victorian era monument of St Paul treading a snake underfoot, alluding to the incident when he was bitten by a viper after being shipwrecked on Malta. To the left, as we face the statue, is a niche with an unusual design of St Anthony of Padua kneeling before the Christ child, apparently based on a work by the Spanish Baroque painter Murillo. Follow the main street (*il-Kbira*) uphill 100 metres and on the right is the Police Station, originally built in the 18th century on the outskirts of town as an armoury by the Knights of Malta. In 1797 during the time of the French Revolution, the Maltese

St Sebastian



If you stop at house No. 88 on Main St, you'll be at the spot that inspired the artist

Chev. Edward Caruana Dingli (1876-1950), Morning of the Festa (ca. 1940), watercolour, 36 x 25cm (Courtesy of Casa Rocca Piccola)

linguist and patriot Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-1829) joined an abortive revolt to overthrow the Knights and made a raid on this armoury that ended in his capture and imprisonment for life, although soon he either managed to escape or was released by Napoleon.

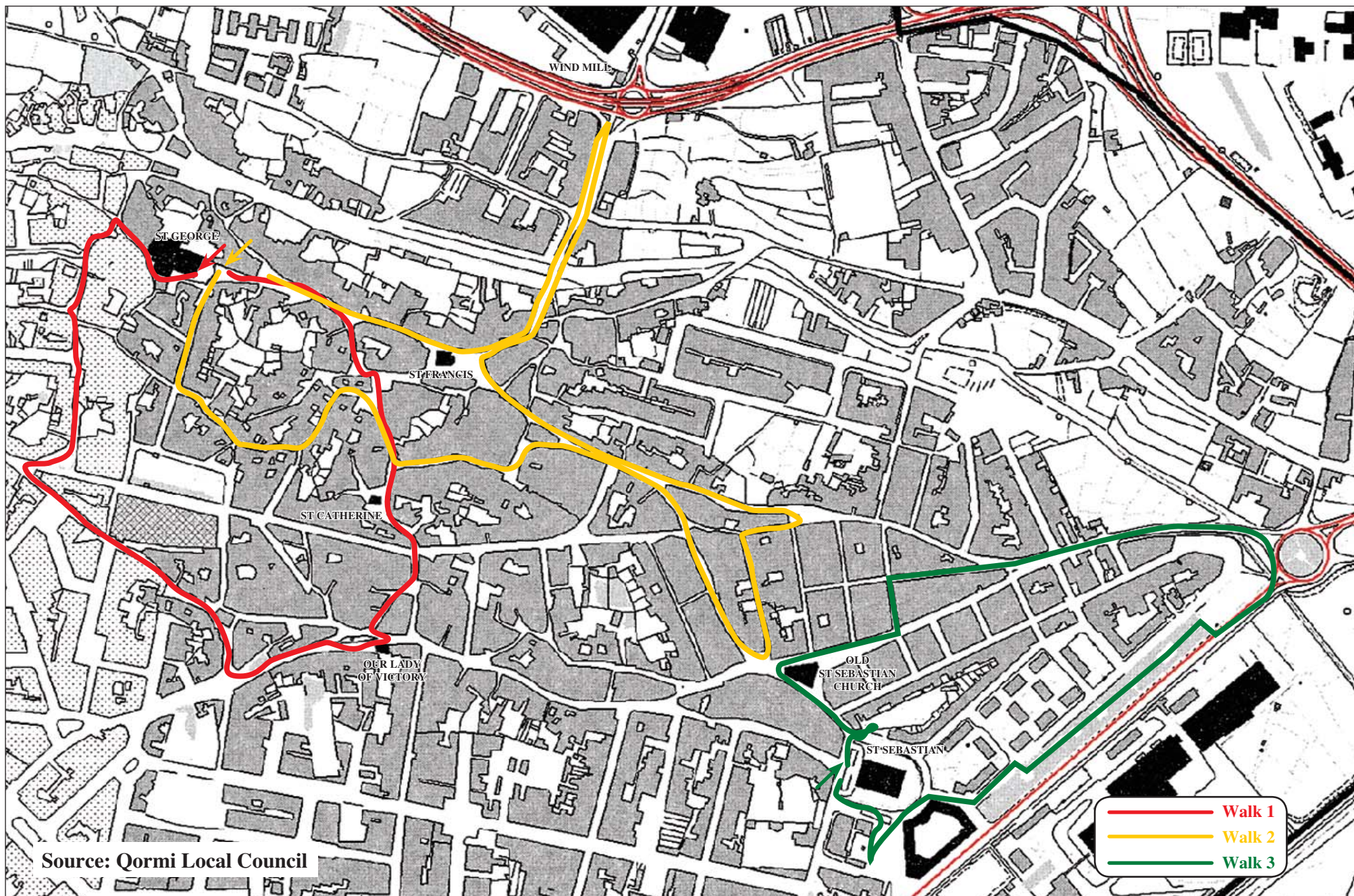
Continuing along *Triq il-Kbira*, retracing some of our earlier steps, notice at the corner with *Triq Anici* two niches: St Francis of Assisi on the left and a dramatic Immaculate Conception on the right.

St Paul



Din l-Art Helwa







St Francis Square (Courtesy of Richard Hili)

Further along *Triq il-Kbira*, we enter *Pjazza San Frangisk* (St Francis Square) with the striking façade of the Church of St Francis de Paola immediately ahead. Sitting on the site of a much older church,

*Can you find this view of
St Francis Church?*



Rossella Dalmas, Sqaq iż-Żenqa [Strong Stone Alley] (2006), acrylic, 50 x 30cm (Private collection)

St Francis was built in 1707 to designs by local architect Indrì Psaila for Francis Casha and his son, Fr George Casha, whose descendents remain in possession of the church to this day. The Latin motto over the front window, *Posuit humilem in sublime*, means 'put the low on high'. Physically attached to but separate from this church is the tiny *Kappella tal-Lunzjata* (Chapel of the Annunciation), rebuilt in 1647. In 1759 it was demolished because of its ruinous state but again rebuilt around 1790 and subsequently bequeathed to the parish's confraternity of the Holy Sacrament.

At this point we can take a detour up *Triq il-Mithna* (Mill Street) which is reached by taking *Triq San Frangisk* on the opposite corner of the square from the church (road sign to B'Kara).



Qormi windmill on Mill Street



St Paul niche on Valley Road by Giuseppe Cassar (1917-2002), Qormi (1985), water-colour, 29 x 23cm (Courtesy of Cassar Estate)



Pinto's coat-of-arms on Mill Street





Church of St Francis de Paola



St George Band Club

This street takes us down and across *Wied is-Sewda* (Black Woman Valley), sadly marred by modern developments, and up the other side where at the top we see in the shadows of the Mriehel bypass a windmill tower built by the Knights probably at around 1685. On *Triq il-Mithna* are a couple of fine 18th century houses, with one just on the other side of the bridge bearing the coat-of-arms of Grand Master Pinto. When we come back we have a good view of a pair of fine corner niches of St Paul and St George guarding this entrance to the old town. To the left, a short distance down *Triq il-Wied* (Valley Road), we see '1743' Razzett l-Antik, a restaurant in an old mill and farmhouse (*razzett*) that specializes in traditional Maltese cooking. The date 1743 refers to the year Pinto conferred city status onto Qormi.

Back at St Francis Square, follow *Triq il-Kbira* to the right side of *Lunzjata* Chapel and quickly we find the St George Band Club, established in

1893. The heart of *Triq il-Kbira* has many impressive house fronts with intricate ironwork, handsome doors and balconies. At house No. 35, a pair of plaques indicates that two prominent Maltese writers lived here: Anton Muscat Fenech (1854-1910) was a newspaper editor, poet and historical novelist, and the previously mentioned Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi, the 'Father of Maltese Literature'. Nowadays, this is the *Domus Curialis*, that is, the residence of the parish priest and over the door is the coat-of-arms of the Archbishop of Malta, Paul Cremona, with his personal motto meaning 'Prepare the way for the Lord,' seen on many churches and other buildings belonging to the archbishopric.



House No. 35 on Main Street



Art exhibition in alley during annual Wine Fest (Courtesy of Qormi Local Council)

Continuing along *Triq il-Kbira*, just before we reach the Church of St George, there is a small triangular-shaped piazza with a pharmacy on the right where we can duck inside to look at a typical old shop building with stone-arched ceilings. Almost facing it, atop a short flight of steps, is the imposing façade of an early 19th century house. Just in front of this house, there is an entrance to a recently uncovered World War II shelter that stretches 80 metres beneath *Triq il-Kbira* with many small rooms and a carving of Our Lady of Sorrows on the wall. This and other war shelters under the Police Station and beside the statue of St Paul on *Triq il-Kbira* are usually open to the public during *festas* and certain holidays.



View of St George Church from the piazza



The parish of St Sebastian



View of St Sebastian from the Marsa Golf Club

The area that is now the parish of St Sebastian has a history of about 200 years and consequently its layout is on a more modern plan than that of the old village centre. Malta has a long history of suffering from periodic outbreaks of the plague, usually carried on ships from the East, and probably because of its low-lying and marshy situation, Qormi has been the victim of some particularly virulent episodes. In the epidemic of 1813-14, over 4,600 people died in Malta, about 740 of them in Qormi. Indeed, the British governor of Malta, Sir Thomas Maitland, ordered Qormi to be literally walled in. When the epidemic was over, a statue of St Sebastian, traditionally a protector from the plague, was raised in thanksgiving on what was then the outskirts of Qormi and facing towards





Aerial view of new St Sebastian Church, 1980s (Courtesy of Dr Anthony J. Abela Medici)

the port at Marsa from where the plague arrived. As the area developed, a church was built in the late 19th century directly across from the statue, although this soon proved too small for the ever-growing population of the area. In 1936, St Sebastian was granted status as a distinct parish and, within a few years, work began on a new church.

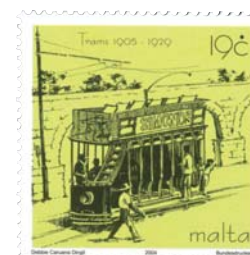
Interior of the church



Wooden statue of St Sebastian

modern stained glass windows. Much of the interior design – including the main altar with an imposing Crucifixion behind and the Chapel of the Sacrament to the right – is by John Bonnici. The titular statue of St Sebastian was carved by Ġorġ Borg (1906-1983) in 1938 from scrap wood of HMS Hibernia. In front of the church stand statues of St Peter with keys and St Paul with a sword, both by famous Qormi

We begin our walk at the new church of St Sebastian, one of the finest modern churches in Malta. Begun in 1939 to the initial designs of Arthur Zammit, the construction of the church was slow and interrupted by the war, lack of funds and alterations in the structural design, but the building was finally completed in 1980 and consecrated in 1986. Despite its low-lying site, the church's impressive dome, designed by Italo Raniolo, can be seen from afar from many vantage points throughout the eastern and southern half of Malta. The church inside is spacious and light with an elegant neo-Romanesque style, largely unadorned except for an intricate frieze carved around the entire interior and understated



Electrified trams ran through St Sebastian Street after 1904 until 1929. Stamp of tram and ticket stub to Curmi (Qormi) (2004, Courtesy of MaltaPost)



sculptor Marco Montebello (1915-1988).

On leaving the church go right and across from the near corner is the entrance to the small Armourer Park, where there are a couple of old cannons belonging to the Knights' former Armoury, now the Police Station on *Triq il-Kbira* (see Walk 2). On leaving the park, continue right and already we can see



Old St Sebastian Church

the bell towers of the original church of St. Sebastian. Along the way we pass a niche of St Sebastian, one of Montebello's earliest works. The old church, built between 1880-90, stands on the corner with *Triq San Bastjan* (St Sebastian Street). When the site for the church was determined, one shopkeeper located there refused to move, but one night his shop was mysteriously dismantled. After the new church of St Sebastian came into use, the old church was neglected but, happily, has been recently renovated and reopened in 2011. Although relatively small, the



Restored interior

church is high, giving it a spacious feel. The paintings are all Victorian era works by Maltese artists. The titular painting of the *Martyrdom of St Sebastian* as well as *Christ the Redeemer* on the right-hand side altar are by Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932). A more recent addition is the statue of *Christ Resurrected* (1981) by Gerolamo Dingli to the right as you enter the church. On the left-hand side is a large life-size papier-mâché statue of *Jesus falling under the Cross*, a 1985 work by Alfred Camilleri Cauchi. Across *Triq San Bastjan* stands the statue of St Sebastian erected in 1815, which bears a large plaque declaring an indulgence by Archbishop Fernando Mattei for anyone who says a prayer before it. If we look further up the street, we can see another monumental statue of St George, so that each patron saint stands guard along the border of their respective parishes.



Papal visit through St Sebastian Street, April 2010 (Courtesy of Robert Farrugia)

A block down *Triq San Bastjan* on the left-hand side, we pass the Pinto Band Club, the oldest of three in Qormi, founded in 1862. The statue of Grand Master Pinto on the front façade was recently installed in 2011. The central commercial area of Qormi stretches along *Triq San*

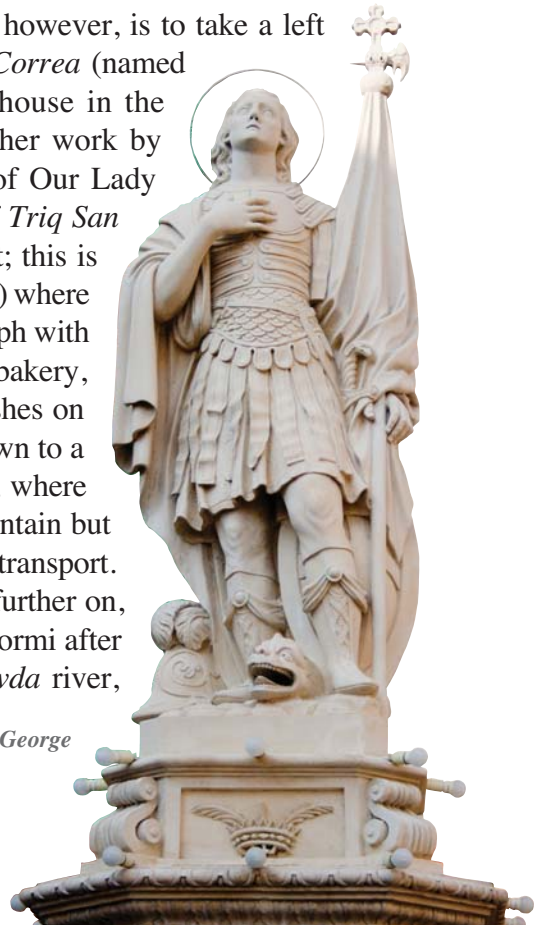


Postcard looking down Victory Street with St Sebastian statue in distance, late 1940s to early 1950s (Courtesy of Dr Anthony J. Abela Medici)

Bastjan. Of greater heritage interest, however, is to take a left turn a little further down onto *Triq Correa* (named after a Knight who had a country house in the vicinity) but not before noting another work by Marco Montebello: a corner niche of Our Lady of the Rosary on the opposite side of *Triq San Bastjan*. At the next corner turn right; this is *Triq il-Kunċizzjoni* (Conception Street) where there is an interesting niche of St Joseph with a staff above house No. 45, a former bakery, which has a few other curious flourishes on its front. *Triq il-Kunċizzjoni* leads down to a petrol station in the fork of the road, where there used to be a horse-watering fountain but now services more modern modes of transport.

Straight ahead, about 300 metres further on, is the roundabout at the east end of Qormi after crossing a small bridge over the *Sewda* river, which these days only has water when there is heavy rain. Along

St George



Pinto Band Club



Our Lady of the Rosary by Montebello, corner Correa and St Sebastian Streets



Front door on St Sebastian Street

this stretch one is quite exposed to traffic, which can be unpleasant during weekday business hours. If one prefers to skip this section of the walk, we can turn right onto *Triq is-Sienja* (Water Wheel Street; *is-sienja* is an animal-powered contraption for drawing water) and cut across to *De la Cruz* Park picked up in the second next paragraph.

If we venture out to the roundabout, in its centre stands a modern statue



On the way to the roundabout: St Roque and Our Lady of Mount Carmel

by John Bonnici of Grand Master Pinto holding the decree elevating Qormi to city status. On the opposite side, we see an enclosed niche of St John of the Cross, at the foot of which a small street runs up alongside a stone wall called *Triq l-Erba' Qaddisin* (Four Saints Street) because at one time there was a large garden here with niches at each corner. Three of them survive despite modern depredations: besides St John, there is a dusty, boxed Our Lady of Sorrows further up on the right-hand side of the road to Hamrun and an empty niche in the corner of the old stone building on *l-Erba' Qaddisin* that once held a statue of the Immaculate Conception. Beyond the roundabout, and behind the bus terminus, is the Marsa Racecourse.

From the roundabout, turn to the right (keeping Pavi Supermarket on our left) and we soon come to a long, narrow park, *De la Cruz* Park, its name referring to the St John of the Cross niche at the roundabout.



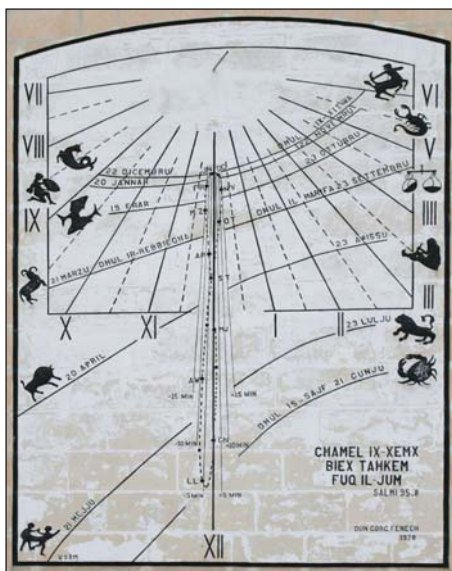
De la Cruz Park which has an olive grove nearest to the roundabout



St John of the Cross

Church is Grand Master's Square, little more than a parking lot, beside which stands somewhat forlornly the restored Pinto's Loggia bearing his coat-of-arms and a Latin inscription stating that it was erected to mark

Following the length of the park and the road that runs alongside, we arrive at the back of St Sebastian Church. Bearing left, we see on the church's south wall an elaborate sundial (1978) by Fr George Fenech (1902-1989), with a Maltese motto meaning: 'He created the sun to rule over the day'. Qormi-born Fenech was an electrical engineer and professor of mathematics, who zealously restored neglected sundials and created many new ones throughout Malta. Two more of his sundials can be seen on the side of St George Church (see Walk 1) and at house No. 109 *Triq Anici* opposite his former home on the corner. Next to St Sebastian



Sundial on St Sebastian Church

the 31st year of the Grand Master's reign in 1772. The purpose of this elegant pavilion is unclear, as it was built some distance from the then inhabited area of Qormi. Unfortunately the modern housing behind it has replaced a large 18th century farmhouse that once housed a farming community and some stables for the horses of the Grand Master in the times of the Knights. Today, there is a lively open market in front of this pavilion and stretching along the streets around the church every Saturday morning.



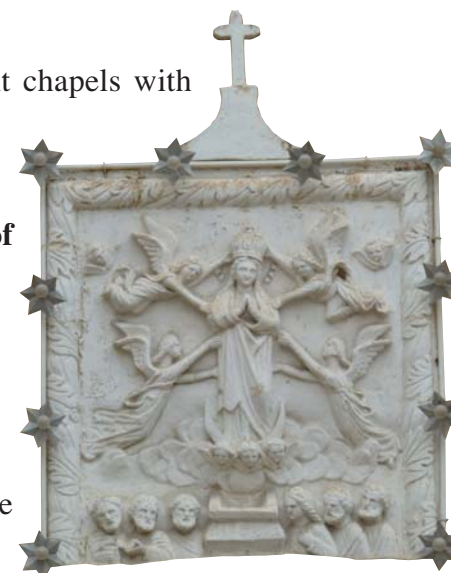
Pinto's Loggia with view across Grand Master's Square (Courtesy of Richard Hili)



Country Walk: from tal-Blat to tal-Hlas

This walk takes in two significant chapels with a country trek that passes by old farmhouses and offers excellent views of the valley in which Qormi is situated (see map at the end of **Walk 4**). The chapels can be visited separately since *tal-Blat* is near the Church of St George and can easily be included in either of the first two walks, while *tal-Hlas* is further out and quite isolated.

From the Church of St George we go down *Triq il-Kbira* a few steps until we reach a small piazza, then bear sharply left onto the street that leads down to *Wied is-Sewda* (Black Woman Valley). Along the way are a few interesting niches and a striking large bas-relief of Our Lady of *ta' Pinu*. Cross the *wied*, now just a broad road, and continue on *Triq il-Blata*, which rises upward to the Chapel of *Santa Marija tal-Blat* with a statue of Our Lady of the Assumption standing in front. *Blat* means rocks and this chapel was situated at the top of a rock-faced road. An early 16th century chapel was rebuilt in 1644. The façade has a small niche with a figure of the Assumption and the date 1646, indicating either when the chapel was finished or consecrated. Underneath is an ocular window in the shape of a stylized cross. Inside is buried the Franciscan Fr Francis Rinaldet, who died while tending the sick in the plague of 1676, the worst of many outbreaks Malta has suffered.



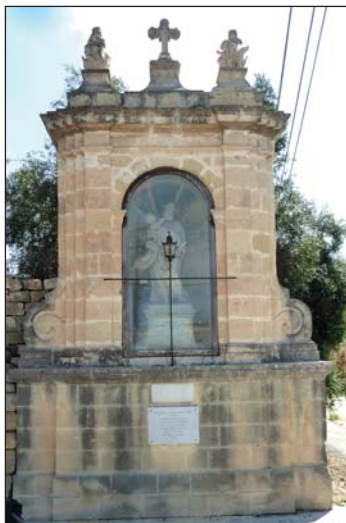
Bas-relief of Our Lady of ta' Pinu





Chapel of Santa Marija tal-Blat

Taking the road behind the chapel and to the left, we quickly find ourselves in the countryside. Although it is a bit of a detour from our main country walk, at this point we can take the fork to the right by some new houses. This road, lined by high rubble walls, leads past an old farmhouse and comes out at the Mriehel bypass, next to which is a large and impressive enclosed statue of *San Ġwakkin* (St Joachim) erected in 1741. This detour is about one kilometre round-trip to and from the fork.



St Joachim

If we take the fork to the left past a row of houses, the view opens across fields to the Church of St George and the red-domed tower of *Palazzo Stagno*. Half a kilometre further, a stone cross on the right is next to a road leading to the St George Fireworks



View of Qormi from countryside



Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell (1857-1941), Citta Vecchia (Mdina) from Curmi (Qormi) (ca. early 1890s), watercolour, 13 x 9cm, (Courtesy of The Scout Association Trustees)

Factory, which is off-bounds. A few more steps and there is a paved road that forks left back to Qormi, but continuing straight we can already see *tal-Hlas* on the opposite side of the valley, as well as Mdina in the distance ahead.

Although the beauties of the Sewda Valley can still be seen,



'Chief Scout of the World', Lord Baden-Powell, aged 80, on his last of several visits to Malta in 1937 (pamphlet excerpt 2007, Courtesy of MaltaPost)



*Praying mantis,
in Maltese known as Devil's Mare*



*Cape sorrel,
in Maltese known as English Grass*

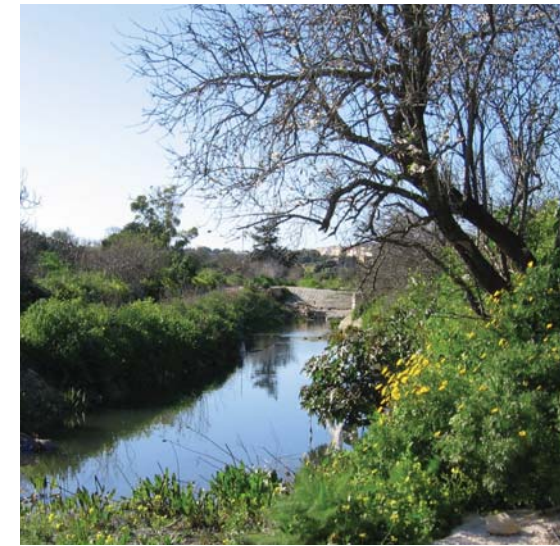


Squirting cucumber, Ecballium elaterium



Large white, Pieris brassicae

(Photographs courtesy of Paul Portelli)



*There really is a river in Malta; the Sewda during February-March 2011
(Courtesy of Mario Mizzi and Tonio Farrugia)*

unfortunately insensitive development is also everywhere apparent. Only when there are heavy rains does the Sewda River momentarily reappear and one can glimpse what the valley once was like.

After another half a kilometre, opposite a farmhouse named Santa Rita, take the fork to the left onto a short road down to and across the bottom of the *wied* onto a paved section of road. Go left and



Decorated farmhouse



Farmhouse near tal-Hlas Chapel



*St George
stone carving atop
Coffee Farm*

then right. At this point, over high rubble walls, we can see colourful, decorative additions on the upper part of a farmhouse that includes a niche in the shape of St George Church with a small statue of St George inside. Continuing uphill and staying right, we pass by several farm buildings, including one on the right marked 'Coffee Farm' that has traditional waterspouts and, high up, a cute carving of St George slaying the dragon. Further on the left is a farmhouse with a large relief of the stoning of St Stephen. Quickly one comes to a split in the road, continue right and then up left and we are at the Chapel of *Santa Marija tal-Hlas*, opposite which is a lovely shade tree, although botanists would tell us it is a mere tree pokeweed (*Phytolacca dioica*), a poisonous evergreen.



Relief of stoning of St Stephen



Tal-Hlas Chapel (Courtesy of Mario Mizzi)

This well-preserved chapel offers a sense of quiet refuge. Locally, the chapel has long been known as a place of pilgrimage to pray to Our Lady of Safe Births, and newborns are brought here for thanksgiving. *Hlas* means 'payment' and can mean the delivery of a child as well, but the origins of the name are complex. In the earliest documents, *ta chilas* is simply a place name and, according to Prof. Godfrey Wettinger, *Khilas* was an Arabic personal name. Later documents from the 16th and 17th centuries refer to the chapel as *tal Chilas*, *cioe' della liberazione*, which may refer to payments made on a specific day or to the liberation of slaves. The chapel has votive paintings dating to pre-1800 indicating that the liberation of slaves was common until slavery was abolished in Malta in 1798, which may be when the present sense of safe childbirth became dominant¹.

¹ For further details and complications see Joseph F. Grima, *Mill-Istorja ta' Hal Qormi*, Vol. I (Malta, 2001): pp. 93-95, 160; and *Minn Ġrajjet Parroċċa Maltija: San Ġorġ ta' Hal Qormi ca. 1400-2003* (Malta, 2003): pp. 51-52.

A chapel has existed here, near the main road mid-way between the Grand Harbour and Mdina, since at least the 15th century and was rebuilt about 1560 by Fr Christopher Montgaudri, Treasurer of the Knights of Malta, who also endowed it with an oil painting on wood, now in the parish museum. However, as it stands today, the chapel is a ca. 1690 work of celebrated Baroque architect Lorenzo Gafà, supposedly in fulfilment of a vow when the dome he designed for St George Church survived the devastating earthquake of 1693. The portico loggias on either side were added in 1699 to offer shelter to pilgrims.



Interior of tal-Hlas Chapel

The chapel is literally on the border between Żebbuġ and Qormi and, in fact, is closer to Żebbuġ. There are several tales as to why it ended up belonging to St George parish. According to one version, when the chapel was badly



Budding caper (Courtesy of Paul Portelli)



Statue of the Assumption with Knight's palazzo behind Tree Pokeweed

damaged in the 1693 earthquake, Żebbuġ replied that it could not afford to rebuild it, but the Qormi priest agreed on condition that the chapel be ceded to his parish. Ġużè Galea (1901-1978), a well-known Qormi author and collector of local lore, has related several further explanations including the following: once, when a Knight who lived in the palazzo opposite the chapel fell ill and requested a priest to administer the last rites, the priest from Qormi arrived first. Yet another tale claims a judge decided the dispute by noting that the chapel faced towards Qormi.

The former chapel, in medieval style, exists behind the present chapel as a vaulted room in the back that now serves as the sacristy. This room contains a lavabo, a large stone jug for storing water to wash hands before and after mass, as well as many ex-votos in thanks for safe childbirths. The small belfry at the back is also part of this older chapel. Gafà's chapel is in Baroque style and, although relatively restrained, it is exquisitely detailed. On the upper façade is the escutcheon of Pope Clement XI (1700-1721), perhaps because he confirmed that the chapel belonged to Qormi. The Latin plaque to the right of the main door,



Front entrance of Knight's palazzo and garden

'*Non Gode l'Immunita Ecclesias*', indicates that no one who seeks refuge in the chapel can claim ecclesiastical immunity. The 1868 statue of the Assumption outside the chapel is by Vincenzo Decandia. The titular painting of the *Assumption* is an 18th century importation from Rome above which in the apse is the *Coronation of Our Lady* (1719) by Enrico Arnaud. The chapel is open for mass every third Sunday of the month and the feast of the Assumption is celebrated here on the Sunday following 15th August.

Opposite the chapel behind the tree is a small palazzo built in the time of the Knights. The building is modest but the compound encloses an impressive garden that retains many original stone features, which unfortunately is not open to the public since it is privately owned.

To return, we either continue uphill which comes out near Żebbug on the main road to Qormi or, by retracing our steps down to the last fork, we continue straight about a kilometre which takes us back to Qormi via *Triq il-Helsien* (Freedom Street).



Source: Qormi Local Council



STMARRIGNA T-TALBA LI SARITILNA,
U LIT-TERRITORJU JISMU HAL QORMI
QED NGHOLLUM FID-DINJITA',
GHAL BELT JISIMHA PINTO

25.5.1743

HABITA RELATIONE,
TERRAM CURMI
ERIGIMUS IN CIVITATEM,
IMPONENTES EI NOMEN PINTO

XXV.MAJI MDCCXLIII



Qormi Local Council



Dín I-Art Helwa

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