



St Ignatius Villa, Scicluna Street, St Julians | Heritage Assessment

EDWARD SAID B.E. & A.(HONS) (MELIT.), P.G. DIP. (MELIT.), M.SC. (BATH), PERIT

NOVEMBER MMXVII



ARCHITECTURE^{xv}

HERITAGE & STRUCTURAL
ENGINEERING CONSULTANTS

A 57/27 Marina Court
Triq Abate Rigord,
Ta' Xbiex XBX1120

T (+356) 2132 0520
E info@axv.com.mt

W axv.com.mt

Preamble

The following report is being submitted in a bid to justify a request for the scheduling of St Ignatius Villa, Scicluna Street, St Julians. All observations were carried out from street-level, taken in areas within the site presently accessible to the public as well as from roof-tops of third parties. The extents of the property being proposed for scheduling are delineated on the official site-plan appended with this report and also indicated in Figure 1 below. An historical appraisal and architectural description, illustrated with relevant imagery are being provided to substantiate this application. Other appendices include historical records germane to the case presented.

All contemporary photographs were taken by the undersigned during October and November 2017 after being given access to various vantage points.



Edward Said
B.E.&A.(Hons) (Melit.), MSc (Bath), A.&C.E.



Figure 1: Extents of property demarcated in red being proposed for scheduling. (Courtesy Planning Authority)



Figure 2: Current extents of scheduled properties on PA Mapserver (delineated in blue) which although overlap onto St Ignatius Villa, appertain to other addresses as per Government Gazette listings. (Courtesy Planning Authority)



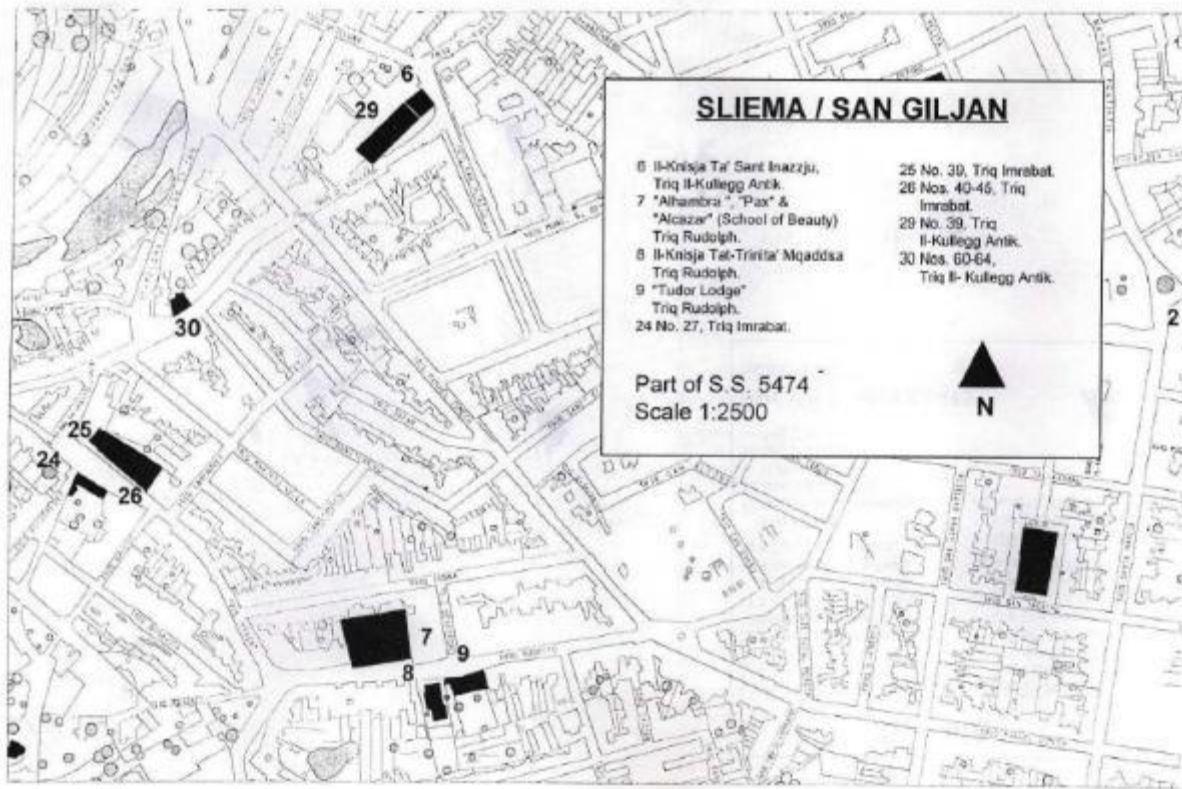
Figures 3 & 4: Location of St Ignatius Villa and extents in yellow being proposed for scheduling.
(Courtesy Google Maps)



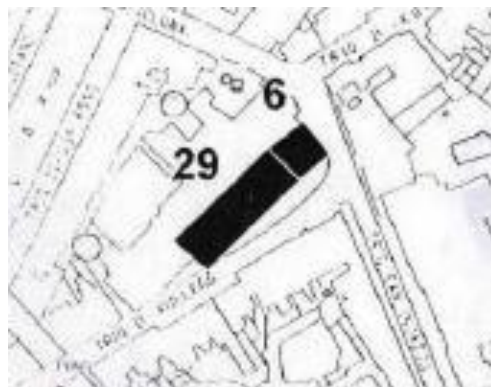
Figures 5 & 6: Angled aerial views of the site under study. (Courtesy Google Maps)



Figures 7 & 8: Further perspective aerial views. (Courtesy Google Maps)



5757



6. Il-Knisja ta' Sant Inazzju (6) fi Triq il-Kulleġġ Antik, San Giljan iddikjarata bhala ta' Grad 1 skond it-termini tal-Policy UCO 7 tal-Pjan ta' Struttura.

6. Church of St. Ignatius (6) at Triq il-Kulleġġ Antik, St. Julians designated as Grade 1 in terms of Structure Plan Policy UCO 7.

24. Proprjeta' Nri, 39 (29) 60-64 (30), fi Triq il-Kulleġġ Antik, San Giljan iddikjarati bhala ta' Grad 2 skond it-termini tal-Policy UCO 7 tal-Pjan ta' Struttura.

24. Premises Nos. 39 (29) and 60-64 (30) at Triq il-Kulleġġ Antik, St. Julians, designated as Grade 2 in terms of Structure Plan Policy UCO 7.

Figures 9 & 10: Excerpts from the Government Gazette dated 10th November 1995, item 700 describing property scheduled by law that year including St Ignatius Church and adjacent buildings but not St Ignatius Villa. (Courtesy Government Gazette, Department of Information, Government of Malta)



1 Historical appraisal

St Ignatius Villa clearly gets its name from the patron and founder of the religious order which at one point in history occupied it and the neighbouring buildings including the eponymous church. Visible only today from Scicluna Street, the viewer is forgiven for finding difficulty in visualising how originally this imposing structure stood as a detached country villa surrounded by gardens and fields, indeed serving as a landmark.

In his seminal history on the ‘Jesuit Schools in Malta’, Fr Anton Azzopardi S.J. first mentions that: ‘In 1846, the English Missionary Association bought a large house in St Julians of a rich English Merchant John Watson to open a Protestant College for training Missionaries for the East.’¹ Further research has shown that this gentleman was a noteworthy personality. An account of Malta dating to 1839 describes the Balluta area giving special mention to Bel-Vedere which was then the name of the building under study.

a Garrison of native troops in it. St Julians, being a favorite place, has, within but a few years, become an extensive straggling village, where several English families have villas; we shall take leave to mention the fine house and gardens of Bel-Vedere, the residence of John Watson Esq. who is rendering himself a benefactor to the natives, by his assiduity and exertions in the introduction of the Brazil cotton plant; an uphill task, with a people so bigoted to their ancient cotton and customs;—Mr. Watson labours both by precept and example, to show them their interest in this.

Figure 11: Excerpt from *A Hand Book or Guide for Strangers Visiting Malta*² describing Bel-Vedere.

Period paintings and later, photographs confirm how prominent Bel-Vedere was, indeed a landmark. Predating the first Carmelite church which was completed in 1858, the villa stood as the only building in the area, surrounded by walled gardens and terraces of fields along the idyllic Wied il-Ballut and Balluta Bay. It is believed that the Watson property dates to the early years of

¹ Azzopardi, A., *Jesuit Schools in Malta*, Volume 1, 1592-1907, St Aloysius College, Malta 2002, pp. 48 & 52

² MacGill, T., *A Hand Book or Guide for Strangers Visiting Malta*, Malta 1939, p. 117.

the 19th century, a fact which is highly significant from an architectural perspective, as shall be discussed in the next section.

“Mr Watson had made a beautiful garden of the three terraced fields adjoining the house, with stretched far down towards the bay.”³ A detailed account of the Malta Protestant College is given by Azzopardi in his account, dedicating a whole chapter to it, a facsimile of which is reproduced in Appendix 2 of this report. The college remained in operation for almost twenty years, closing down in 1865. It was this very building, the one being requested for scheduling that gave Sliema residents the sobriquet *Tax-Xelin*.

Within a short time three Maltese gentlemen purchased the old Watson property and in a bid to counter the spread of Protestantism locally, they invited the Society of Jesus to run a college from there, the order's third together with Valletta and Gozo. This was approved by the Colonial Office in 1877 which strove for the dissemination of the English language and manner (rather than Italian) through the education of the natives.⁴

In 1881 the church of St Ignatius was completed together with the neighbouring extension and end-wing which simulated the former in design, all fronting what was then *Strada Collegio*. These new buildings abutted the old Bel-Vedere which also underwent various other alterations and additions. Fr Azzopardi mentions in a footnote that there is a full description of the house and garden however this was not available to the present author, though is worth finding in order to uncover further historical information.⁵ Within a few years of operation, so high was the demand by those wanting to be educated there that it soon became a boarding school with accommodations made for a refectory, dormitory, gymnasium, study halls and laboratories. A number of sports facilities were housed in the former grounds of the old Bel-Vedere. On the 19th January 1892, the college received a royal visit from the Prince and Princess of Battenberg. By the start of the 20th century, numerous former pupils of St Julians were “filling in prominent positions in the public service, in the Church and

³ Azzopardi, op.cit., p. 105, fn 114.

⁴ Ibid., p. 105.

⁵ Ibid., p. 106, fn 117.

in important walks of life in Malta”.⁶ These included Sir Hannibal Scicluna, Sir Philip Pullicino, Sir Augustus Bartolo, Archbishop Dom Mauro Caruana and Archbishop George Caruana amongst many others. A.V. Laferla, the leading historian on education in late 19th and early 20th century Malta wrote:

*“The English Jesuits had attracted the sons of the leading families in the Island, independently of their political colour, to their College in St. Julians – St Ignatius’ College – which came to be recognised as one of the leading schools – if not the first and the foremost of the Island.”*⁷

Despite being at its peak, various circumstances led to the closure of the college in July 1907.

A little earlier the Daily Malta Chronicle’s opening sentences of it’s April 8th leader read: *“The great College which looks fondly down from the height upon the lovely bay of St Julians is to be no longer the College of the Island. We know not at the present moment, for how many years it has been looked upon as the English school par excellence of Malta.”*⁸

After the departure of the Jesuit Fathers, the premises remained vacant for eight years until they were converted into a military hospital in 1915 serving the convalescence of injured soldiers serving in the Great War. Starting with 155 beds St Ignatius Hospital also included an operating theatre with an X-ray room. In fact the hospital was first used as a surgical facility with its first 84 patients arriving in 2 July 1915. Two years later St Ignatius’ was adapted to take the mentally ill by this time accommodating almost 200 men. It closed down in January 1919 after the end of the conflict.⁹

From this period onwards, it appears that whilst the church remained functioning, the rest of the old college was divided into tenements and sold off for housing. Again various alterations were carried out to accommodate the apportioned dwellings. By the 1970s all of the surrounding grounds save the area outside the Queen’s Hall (that wing complimenting the church) had been sold off and developed into condominiums starting with the imposing Balluta Buildings completed in the 1920s. In

⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

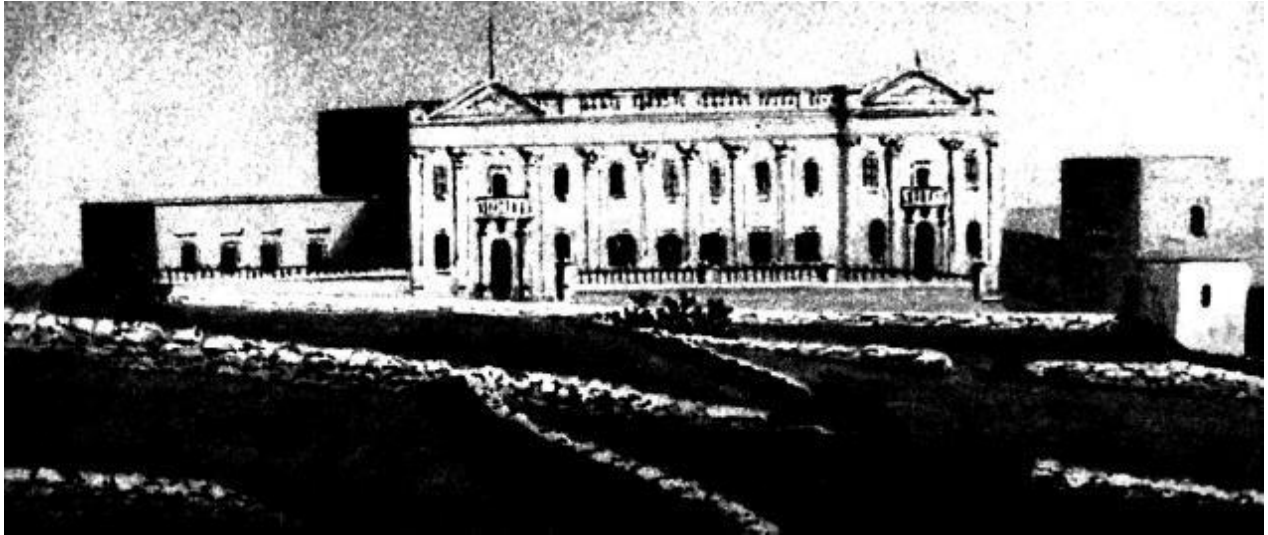
⁷ Ibid., p. 128 quoting A.V. Laferla writing in 1947.

⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

⁹ <http://maltaramc.com/articles/contents/greatwar.html>

more recent years the football ground and the Queen's Hall were demolished to accommodate an extensive apartment block which abuts the old college on the west side.

Presently the entire fabric of the old college including the villa building of Watson's Bel-Vedere still survive intact although naturally altered to adapt for the different exigencies spanning well over a century and a half.



Figures 12 & 13: Depiction of later new extension and church built after 1877 when St Ignatius College was established, and a photograph taken in the 1950s from Old College Street. (Azzopardi *op.cit.*, pp. 107 & 108)



2 Architectural description

That Villa St Ignatius, or “Bel-Vedere”, attains architectural significance is amply clear. Despite the substantial alterations both to the building’s exterior and presumably also internally (not accessible at time of study), the overall fabric still survives as Watson and the Protestants after him would remember it. Of course, the context has changed dramatically what with practically all of the grounds gone together with the once idyllic pastoral landscape.

Mention was made earlier of how significant the architecture of this building is. To the less discerning eye this might come across as an overstatement however closer inspection together with a deepened knowledge of its origins, now that documentary evidence is at hand, will prove otherwise. The 1839 book cited in the previous chapter describes John Watson’s house. This together with a series of plans and paintings proves that the villa was the first building of note at Balluta, pre-dating the Carmelite Chapel designed by Giuseppe Bonavia and erected in 1859 a full twenty years later. Bonavia had, a couple of years earlier, designed the Presbyterian St Andrew’s Scots Church in Valletta (completed in 1857). Experts have claimed that this is in fact the first Neo-Gothic building in Malta.¹⁰ Close inspection of Bel-Vedere both in the contemporary depictions and evidence on the building fabric today show various architectural elements which are of the Pointed Style, albeit retrained, yet unmistakably original to the early 19th century design. Most of the external facades still survive intact though some extents have been incorporated into the later Jesuit additions on Old College Street including the church. These can be seen in the figures below. In conclusion this begs the question: is Villa St Ignatius one of the earliest if not the first building in Malta with Neo-Gothic motifs?

¹⁰ Mahoney, L., *5000 years of Architecture in Malta*, Valletta Publishing, Malta 1996, p. 309



Figure 14: St Ignatius College as depicted in the late 19th century from Birkirkara Hill by Alice Rowley.
(Courtesy Marquis N. De Piro)



Figure 15: A depiction of Balluta bay dating to the early 19th century the sole edifice being what is today St Ignatius Villa then known as Bel-Vedere. This painting was reportedly commissioned for a Lord Ashley. (Courtesy Anton Azzopardi and Marquis N. De Piro)



Figure 16: Another painting of Balluta Bay dating to the early 19th century dominated by Bel-Vedere; note the crenellations and Pseudo-Gothic arches. (Courtesy Marquis N. De Piro.)

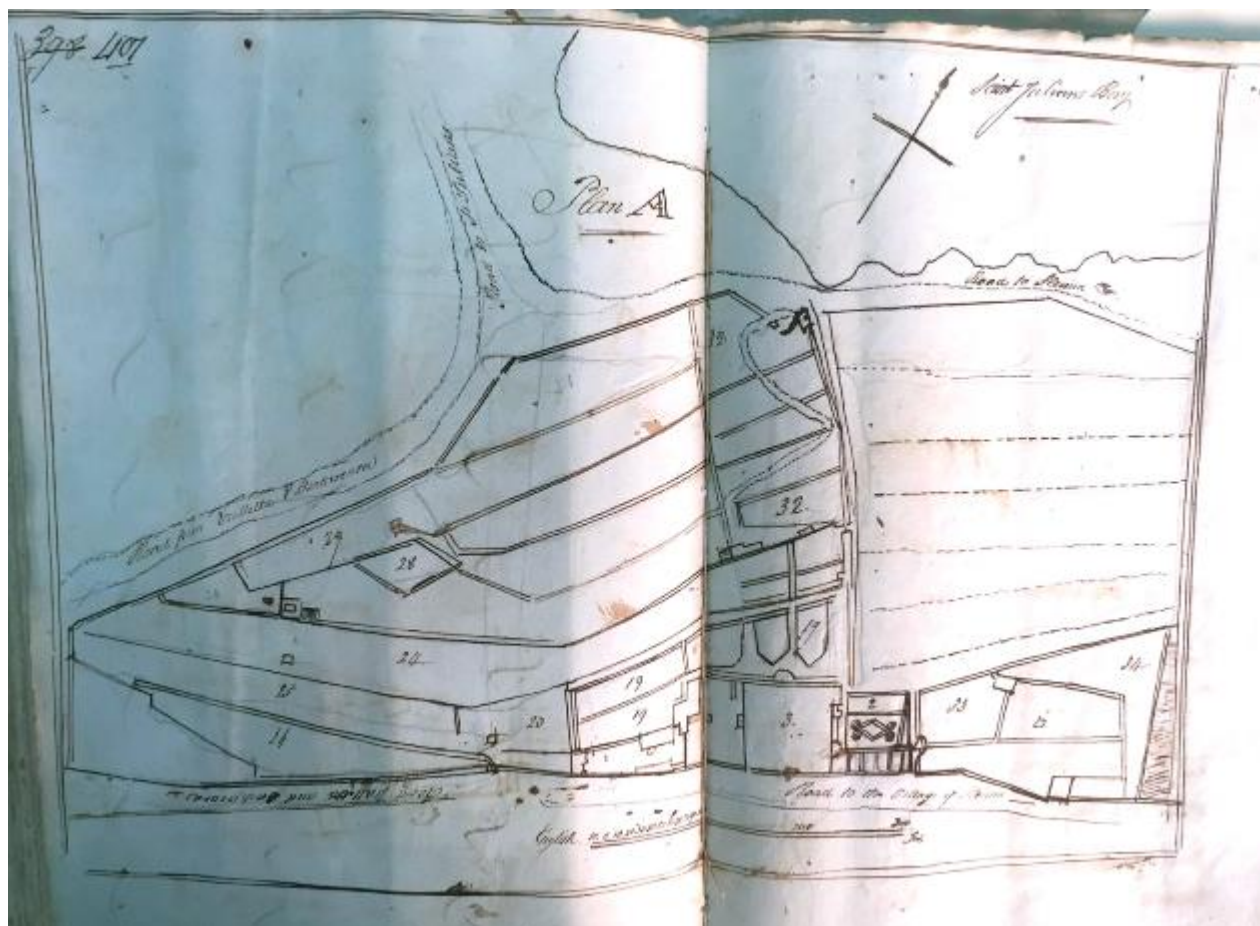
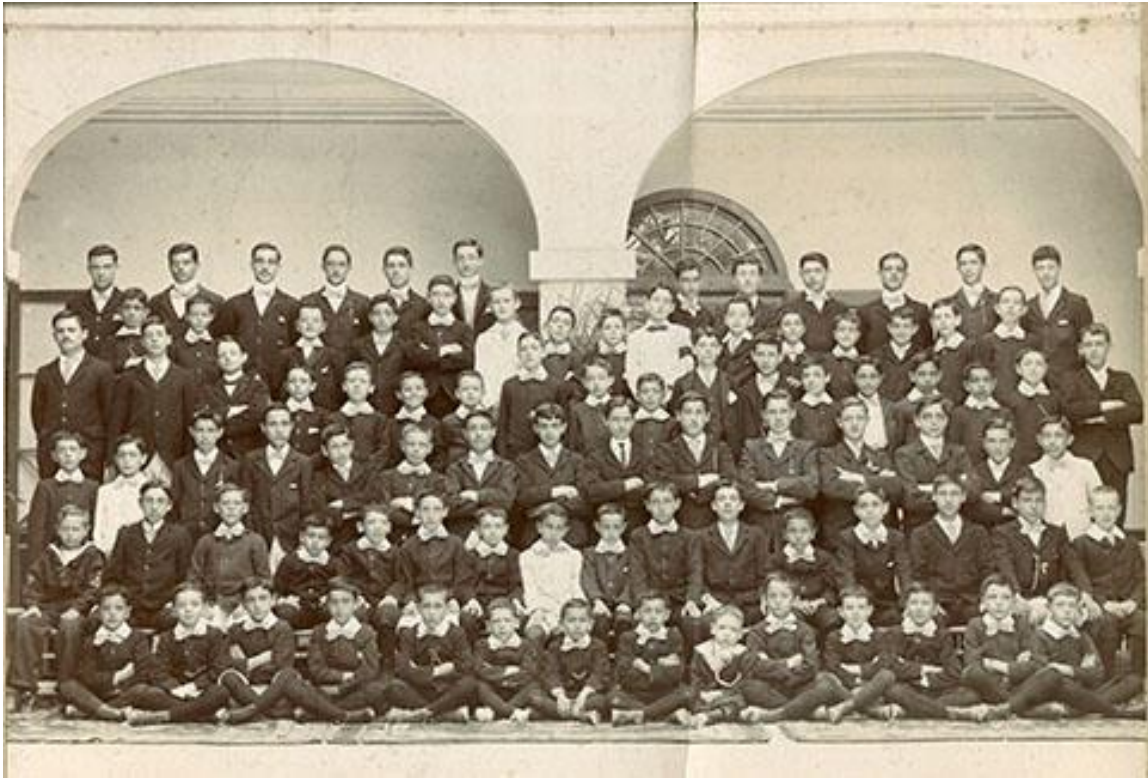


Figure 17: A detailed plan of the Watson property with numbered areas corresponding with a description of the property prepared by architect Paolo Attard in 1844 presumably when the property was sold to the Protestants. (Courtesy Notarial Archives of Malta and Ms P. Caruana Dingli)



Figures 18 & 19: Panorama of Balluta Bay dating to the 1870s and detail showing the pseudo-Gothic building under study then most likely operating as the English Protestant College with extensive gardens terraced down to the triangular piazza, now occupied by a multitude of apartment blocks fronted by the iconic Balluta Buildings. (Courtesy Richard Ellis Collection)





Figures 20 & 21: Two photographs of pupils and members of the Order of the Society of Jesus in the courtyard of St Ignatius Villa, then St Ignatius College, the upper image dating to 1893. (Courtesy www.jesuit.org.uk)





Figures 22 & 23: Two photographs of St Ignatius Hospital during World War I; upper image showing medical staff and patients whilst the lower shows an intervention underway. *(First image courtesy K Kirkwood in www.maltaramc.com)*



Figure 24: Sitting on the staircase down to the gardens flanked by a cypress tree just below the courtyard. This staircase still survives, unlike the gardens. *(Author's collection)*



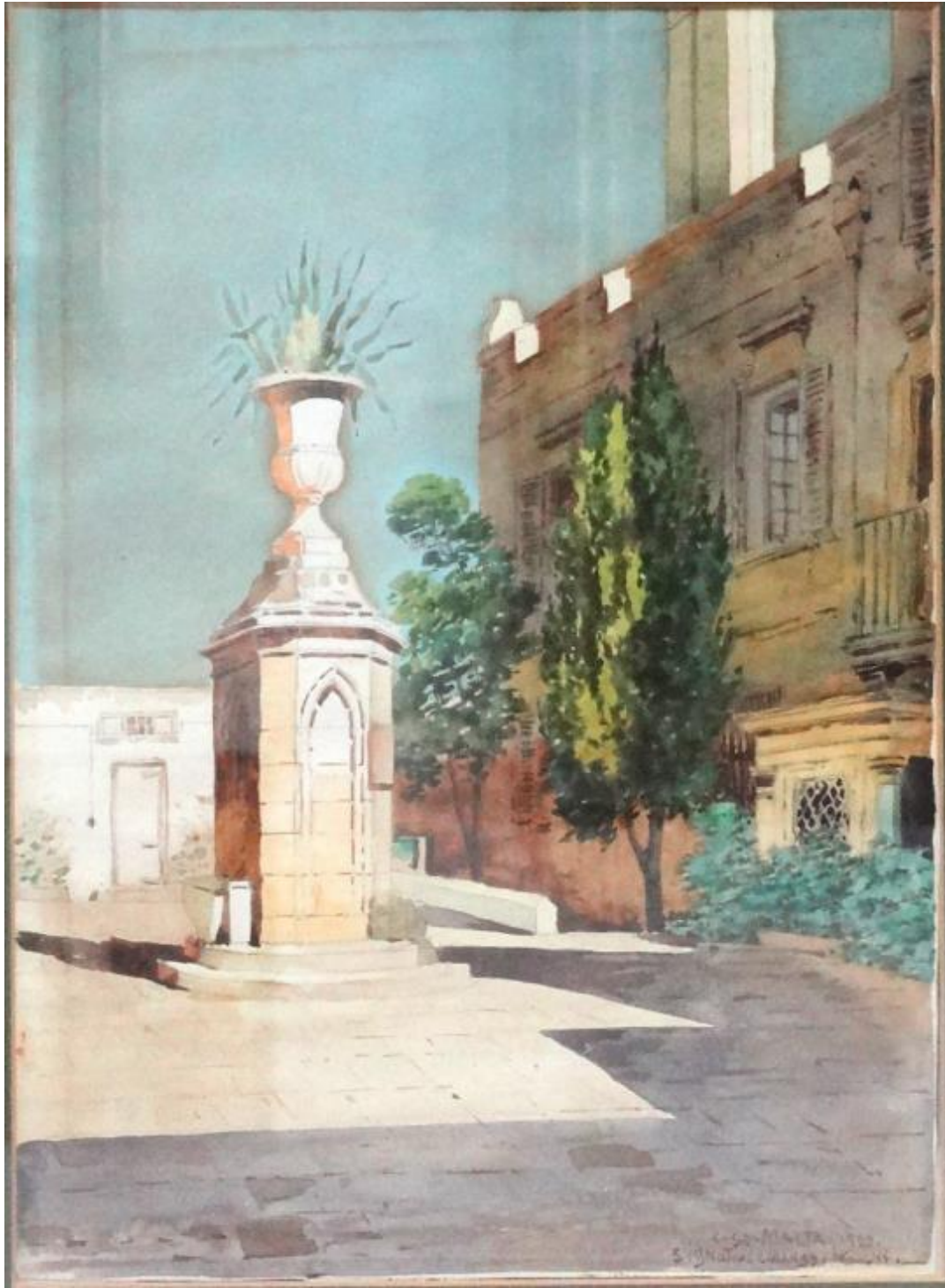


Figure 25: Nicholas Krasnoff's depiction of one of the courtyards of St Ignatius College dating to 1920. Krasnoff was a Russian national who together with other compatriots took up residence at St Ignatius College in 1919 after fleeing his country in exile. The urn depicted in the watercolour no longer exists, though note its Gothic-inspired pedestal. *Courtesy R. & J. Gingell Littlejohn Auctioneers*).



Figure 26: An aerial photograph and study showing Balluta Buildings under construction in the late 1920s allegedly on grounds once forming part of the Watson estate. Note in fact how the precincts of the then St Ignatius College were redefined by this time yet garden paths still visible. Today only the porch and wall survive. (Courtesy Richard Ellis Collection).



Figure 27: St Ignatius Villa peeps from behind the stunning brand new Balluta Buildings in this 1930s photograph and study. Note how by this time it was painted in *demm il-baqra* with white trims. (Author's collection)



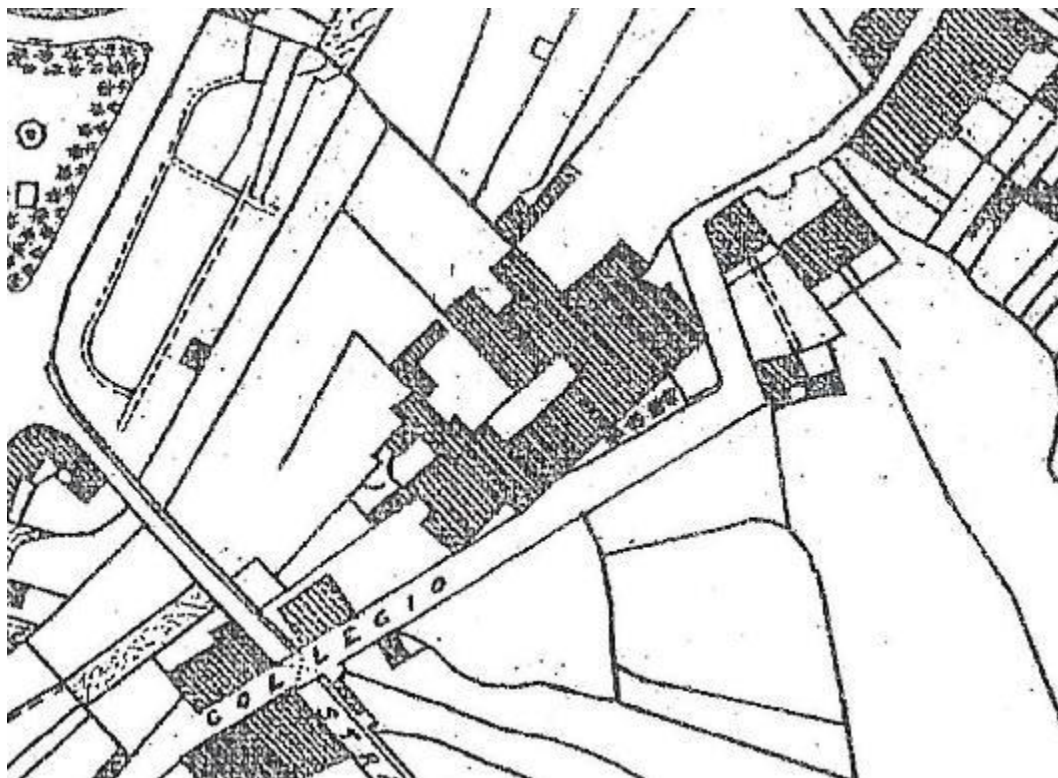
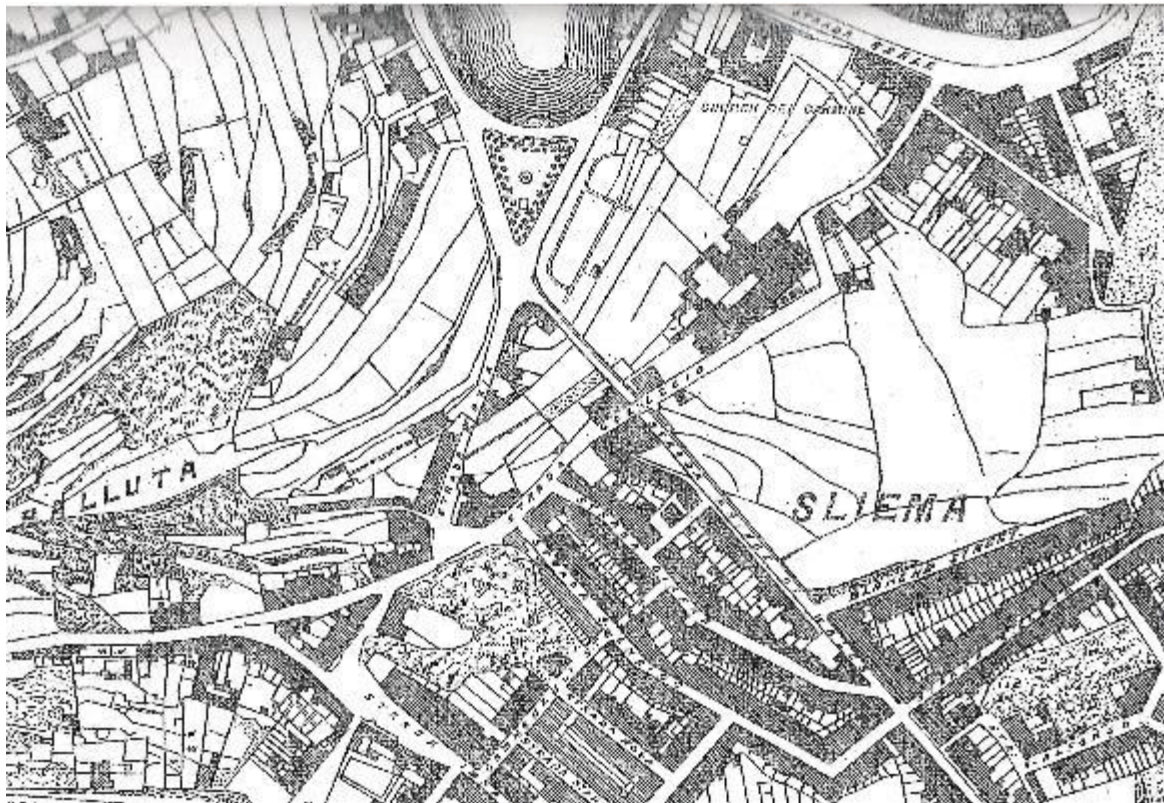


Figure 28: 1916 ordnance survey and detail showing St Ignatius College. (Courtesy Public Works Department)



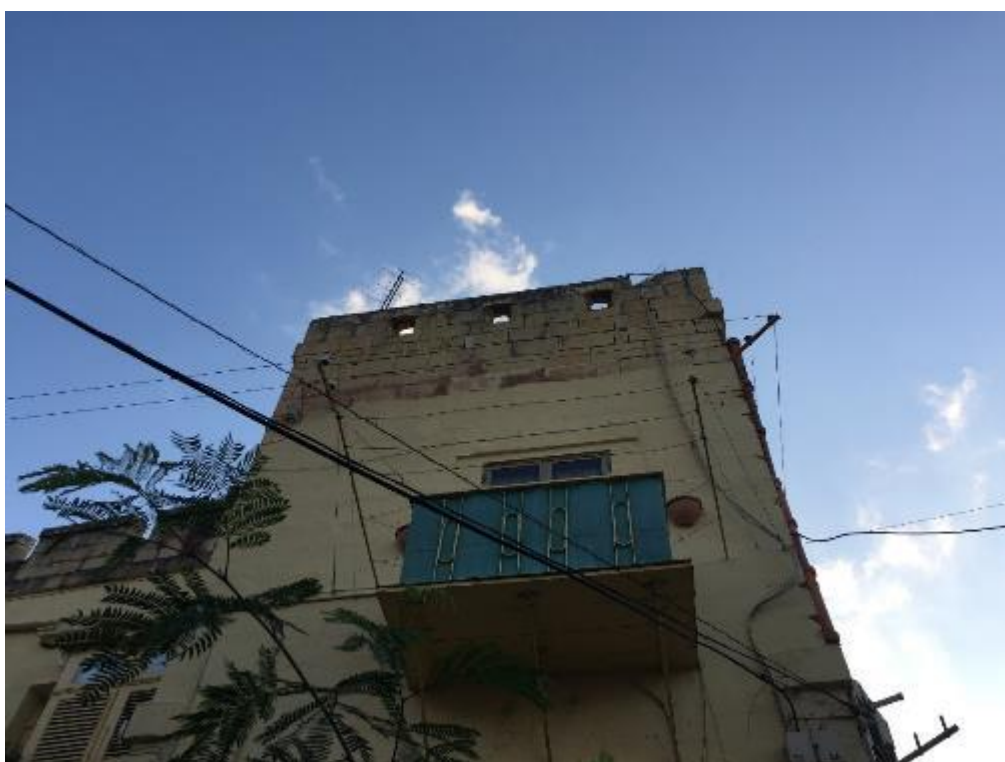
Figures 29 & 30: External views of St Ignatius Villa as seen from Triq Scicluna. (Courtesy Google Maps 2017)



Figures 31 & 32: Further views of the street forecourt. Note the characteristic louvered balconies and crenelated roof tops. Remnants of the *demm il-baqra* paint are still evident.



Figures 33 & 34: Close-ups showing remnants of a recessed balcony pointed archway with surrounding decorated panelling as well as faux-embasures and castellations still intact along the roof parapet.



Figures 35 & 36: Details taken from the street forecourt and passaging accessing the inner courtyard; note the crenellations and other architectural elements of vernacular and pseudo-Gothic design.



Figures 37 & 38: Views of the forecourt of St Ignatius Villa; note the finely proportioned verandahs and period louvered joinery in the first-floor colonnades.



Figures 39 & 40: Further views of the inner forecourt of St Ignatius Villa. Compare the lower image with the one taken a century ago in Figures 20, 21 & 22.



Figures 41 & 42: Views of what remains of the gardens. Note the staircase leading to what were the grounds terraced down towards the waterside; note the blocked pseudo-Gothic arch at the far end.



Figure 43: Sculpted heads with symbols on foreheads in one of the porticoes along the side of the courtyard.



Figures 44 & 45: Views of Bel-Vedere as seen from the roof-tops of one of the apartment blocks standing on what were the grounds of the villa. Note the pointed balcony archway, castellations and red-ochre paint.



Figures 46 & 47: Two views of the roof-top of Villa St Ignatius; note the faux-embrasures.



Figures 48 & 49: The south facing façade still surviving in the back-yards of the scheduled buildings built after 1877.



Figures 50, 51 & 52: Details of the south elevation; note the windows and their frontons

Bibliography and sources

Azzopardi, A., Jesuit Schools in Malta, Volume 1, 1592-1907, St Aloysius College, Malta 2002.

MacGill, T., A Hand Book or Guide for Strangers Visiting Malta, Malta 1939.

Mahoney, L., 5000 years of Architecture in Malta, Valletta Publishing, Malta 1996.

Notarial Archives of Malta

Richard Ellis Collection

Records and Archives, Chief Draughtsman's Office, Public Works Department, Floriana

www.jesuit.org.uk

www.maltaramc.com

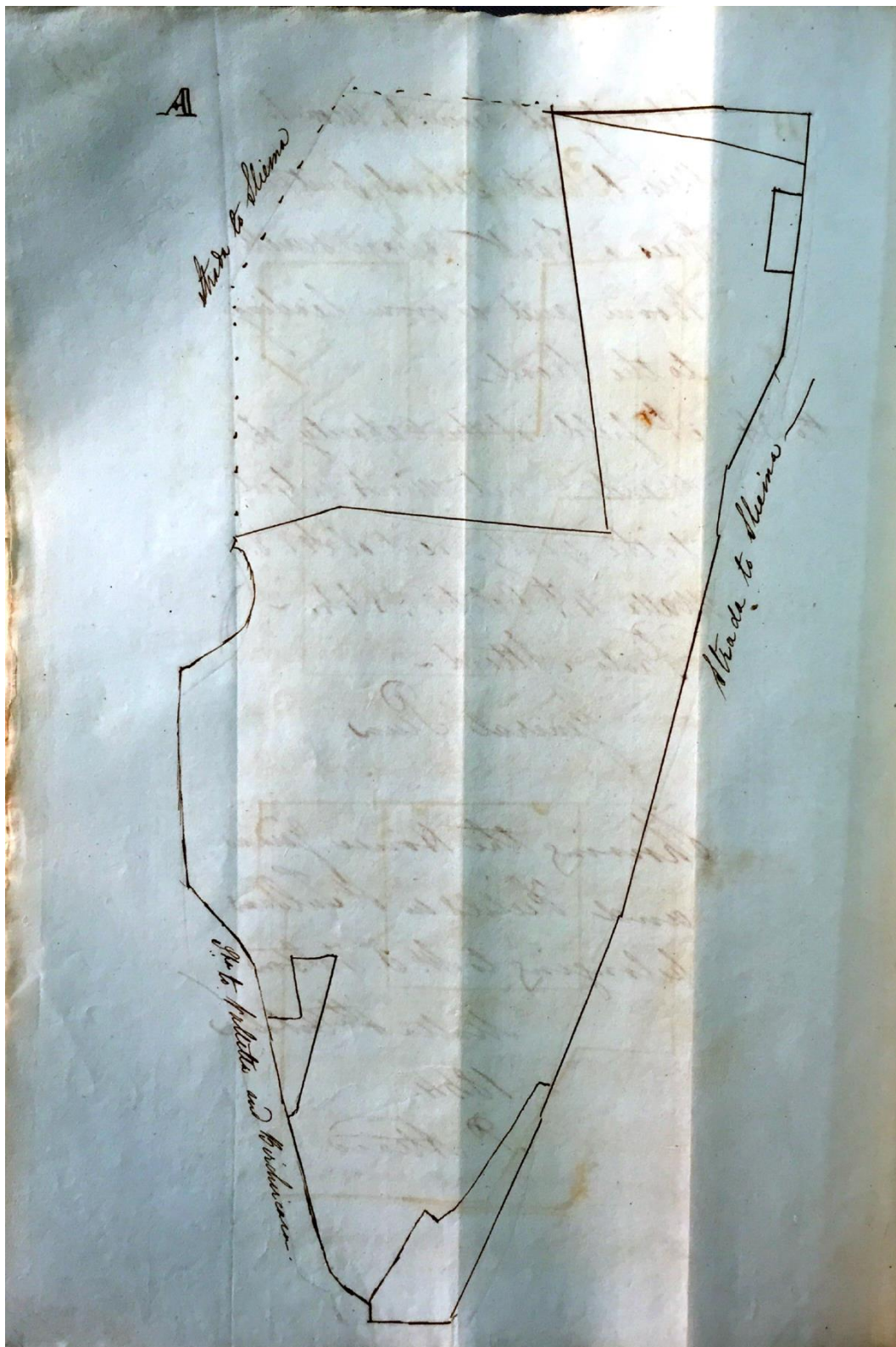
Appendix 1 – Official site-plan



Appendix 2 – Chapter VII from Azzopardi, A., Jesuit Schools in Malta, Volume 1, 1592-1907, St Aloysius College, Malta 2002.



Appendix 3 – Various plans found at the Notarial Archives dating to 1844 and 1851



B.

Plan of Roofs

