

Corner of a Foreign Field

How serenity has been restored to an historic British cemetery in Malta

When I visited on a hot summer's day, the small, secluded garden built on the ancient bastions overlooking Marsamxetto Harbour in Malta, was the scene of peaceful but industrious activity. Scattered amidst the funerary memorials and blooming flowers, deeply tanned figures were immersed in their work and thoughts. Some were weeding, others repainting ironwork, while the rest were doing the odd jobs that maintaining such a place requires.

Amongst them were some of the first volunteers who had helped to turn Msida Bastion Cemetery – a historically important 19th Century British burial place – from a sad mound of overgrown rubble to the quaint garden of rest that it is today.

Warden Mary Aldred explained how a small band of British expatriates living on the island had volunteered to turn the neglected site into a 'corner of Britain' in Malta.

"This all happened very quietly," she said with a smile.

Back in 1993, Peggy Kirkpatrick, widow of Reginald Kirkpatrick, approached historian Dr Andy Welsh (who had previously been a member of the Antiquities and Monuments Commission of Hong Kong) and his wife Jenny, asking if they could take up a project that her late spouse had been so keen on. Reginald had researched the cemetery's history, and encouraged Din L'Art Helwa (Malta's National Trust), the Department of Agriculture, and the British High Commission to jointly endorse the site's restoration.

Dr and Mrs Welsh accepted the task, but when they surveyed the cemetery, the extensive damage they found was daunting. Most of the memorials had been vandalized and eroded by wind and rain, and many gravestones had been split apart by overgrown trees. The cemetery had even received a direct hit from a German bomb during World War II.

Volunteers systematically excavated all the tombs, which were full of rubble, broken stones and soil. Considering the huge amount of heavy work required it was indeed a blessing that other keen volunteers, like Mary Aldred and her husband Derek, joined the restorers.

"There were very few complete tombstones," Mary recalled, "and the best ones had been stolen during the long years of neglect."

The volunteers painstakingly



The blue backdrop of the Mediterranean Sea, as seen in this harbour view, contrasts with the bright floral displays and greatly enhances the sense of tranquillity at the cemetery.

collected, identified and recorded some 20,000 marble and stone fragments, aided by data from a survey carried out in 1930. They even uncovered previously unknown graves that had been buried under a thick layer of soil. The restorers then used old photographs and prints to place the re-assembled memorials, headstones and iron railings in their original setup. The project was completed in 2000, after five years of hard work.

Dr Welsh's role, which had been to care for the historical aspect of the project, had been successfully fulfilled. Mary Aldred then took over the task of re-establishing a stately garden. More years of hard work loomed, but new volunteers kept trickling in. Most were British expatriates living in Malta.

The island's hot, arid summers turned gardening into a physical trial, and the scant rainfall imposed the priority of an irrigation system. Winter brought other problems.

"During a particularly heavy shower," said Mary, "a large volume of water drained from the government office roofs at the back of the garden and gushed through the gate, which was our only exit at the time. It brought along debris and all kinds of flotsam. We were marooned inside till the storm subsided and the water drained off."

Gradually, the garden began taking shape and colour. Despite the hardships, the volunteers put their different talents to good use and embellished the garden with new plants, mostly cuttings from

their own gardens, and repaired the walls and paths.

"We wanted to grow a British garden," said Mary, "with plenty of cover, colourful flowers and absolutely no succulents!"

In 2001, thanks to the loving and dedicated work of all the British volunteers, Din L'Art Helwa was awarded the prestigious Silver Medal of Honour for the restoration of Msida Bastion Cemetery and Garden of Rest by Europa Nostra, the European Federation of National Trusts and Heritage NGOs (non-government organisations).

The artistic and historic value of the site has been put to light once more, and plants, trees and shrubs of different height, shape and floral colour confer a touch of informality that balances the elegant lines of the funerary memorials. These features are evocative of a British landscape garden in miniature, where visitors can ramble peacefully amidst monuments bordered by beds of geraniums and bougainvillea-covered walls.

The men and women buried in the cemetery have been granted a peaceful Eden where they may repose in perpetual serenity. However, 14 years after the commencement of the restoration project, the volunteers would not rest upon their laurels.

When asked if she saw the end of the project closing in, Mary Aldred replied: "Not in the next ten years! We are looking forward to embellishing and maintaining the garden. There is still a lot of work to be done."

Richard Zahra



Wendy Mudge, one of the volunteers at work.

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