

THE MALTA RAILWAY

(Chronological sequence of events.)

By N. Azzopardi 2.11.83

This year, 1983, the General Post Office of Malta issued a commemorative set of three postage stamps featuring the first centenary of the Malta Railway. In fact the official opening of the Line from Valletta to Notabile took place on the 28th February 1883.

This was a hundred years ago! But preparations began much earlier than that. Back in 1870, a certain Mr J. Scott Tucker laid before the local Government a plan for a Railway in the Island of Malta. This proposal was to construct a single line from Valletta to St Paul Bay as follows: The Line was to start from the ditch outside Porta Reale, in which Mr Scott Tucker proposed to establish the Valletta Terminus, runs underground through Floriana to Portes des Bombes where it re-enters the open ground, proceeding by way of Zebbug for the Verdala district close to Citta Vecchia and Musta. From there the line was to pass through the plain of St Margherita and ends at St Paul Bay.

Three years later, in 1873, another two proposals were laid on the Table of the Council of Government, one by Major Hutchinson dated 19th March 1873 and another one by Mr Edward Rosenbusch - a civil engineer-dated 19th April 1873.

Major Hutchinson proposed a narrow-gauge railway for Malta on the Fell System. This railway was to be built on trestles made of wrought iron, between Valletta and Citta Vecchia with intermediate stations at Portes des Bombes, San Giuseppe (Hamrun), The Lions (Sta. Venera), B'Kara. Attard and Musta. Major Hutchinson proposed to open this line first for the public and afterwards the line will be extended to Marfa with branches to the nearby villages and finally it will be extended also to Sliema. Besides, he even proposed a small railway from Rabat to Magrr in the island of Gozo.

In his letter of the 19th April 1873, Mr Rosenbusch, together with his partner Mr. Andrews proposed to the Local Government to build a railway line from Valletta to Citta Vecchia. The line would commence at a point near the Marina Gate (a), passes through a tunnel to the Gas works and the village of San Giuseppe (Hamrun). From there the line proceeds to B'Kara and Attard, and finally ends at Citta Vecchia - a total length of 6 miles. Subsequently, the line would be extended from Attard to St. Paul Bay through Musta, but this extension depended upon the success of the first named portion.

Naturally the three proponents, besides describing the Line, pointed out also other relevant matters connected with this project. These included Government aid, whether Local or Imperial Governments, lease of property for the railway company for 99 years at ordinary rent and also the benefits derived by this easy and cheap means of transport throughout the Island.

The Council of Government, by Resolution of the 14th May 1873, appointed a Select Committee of five persons "to consider different schemes for the construction of one or more railways, and to report whether it is expedient to give any exclusive privilege to either of the promoters of those schemes". This Select Committee was composed of Messrs. A.Dingli, G.B. Trapani, E. Scicluna, R. Barbaro and F.S. Decesare.

For some reason or other, the schemes before the Committee were only two, that is; those presented by Major Hutchinson and Mr Rosenbusch. As already mentioned, the promoters had originally asked for financial aid from the Government, but afterwards they renounced it. The Committee took those schemes into consideration with the professional assistance of Major E.R. James of the Royal Engineers, Professor G. Schinas and Mr E. Galizia, the Chief Surveyor of the Public Works Department. This Committee heard also the views of Major Hutchinson and Mr Rosenbusch separately.

Meanwhile, Major Hutchinson withdrew his proposal and the Committee resumed its proceedings on the Scheme of Mr Rosenbusch which alone remained for consideration. Some time later the Chairman of the Committee communicated to Mr Resenbusch the views of the War Office in London as to the direction that should be given to the Line from Valletta to Notabile. At a subsequent meeting the promoter laid before the Select Committee of the Council a memorandum containing the terms in which he and his partner Mr Andrews wish the concession to be made to them with a plan showing a modified line from Valletta to Notabile and also different other extensions of the line.

The Committee therefore have come to the conclusion that the work proposed is "Unquestionably one of public utility" and that a concession of an exclusive privilege for 99 years should be granted to the promoters on certain conditions. They listed 23 conditions, four of which were the following:

- i) Works for the Valletta/Notabile railway to be completed on or before the 31st December 1875;
- ii) If they fail to complete works within 12 months, they forfeit the privilege granted to them;
- iii) The railway shall be held to be completed, for the purpose of the contract, when it is fit for immediate use and furnished with engines and rolling stock;
- iv) Before commencing the work, all plans and drawings be submitted to a Board consisting of 3 persons, one appointed by the promoters, one by the local Government and another by the Officer Commanding the Royal Engineers in Malta for approval.

On the 12th June 1879, the Malta Railway Company Limited was formed. The laying of the line, the building of Stations, Bridges and embankments was in full swing. The meter-gauge track was single throughout. The line commenced in the centre of Valletta and passed underneath the fortifications by a tunnel almost 1000 yards long emerging at open ground near Portes des Bombes. Keeping in mind that this tunnel was dug in 1880, it was a remarkable piece of engineering, because when the works began from both ends at the same time, they discovered that an ancient reservoir would be intersected by the proposed tunnel. So it was decided to go round it, and this tunnel has the rare feature of a double S curve in the middle of it. This delicate underground operation was successfully accomplished and when the headings from Valletta and Portes des Bombes sides met, the difference was only of a few inches.

The Station building in Valletta was in Ordinance Street, opposite the Royal Opera House and near the old Porta Reale. It was built in classical doric and the elevation embraced nine columns (b) supporting a roof framed with a stone pediment. This building housed the Manager's office, an entrance hall and booking offices. There were also sloping ramps leading down to the station platform below. This station building was completely demolished together with the old Porta Reale in 1964.

Besides the Valletta station, there were another four, namely that of Hamrun, B'Kara, Attard and Notabile. With the exception of Attard station, the other four had double track arrangements. In fact, the line had 5 main stations and four halts consisting only of a platform and here the train stopped at request only. These halts were in between the main stations. The first one was at Floriana - between Valletta and Hamrun, the second was at Msida - between Hamrun and B'Kara, the third one was at San Antonio - between B'Kara and Attard, and the last one was at San Salvatore - between Attard and Notabile. These stations were connected with each other by means of a telephone line.

The official, opening of the Railway took place on the 28th February 1883 and on the morrow, it was opened for the general public. The line started in the ditch below Porta Reale, where the Yellow Garage is situated to-day, passed under Floriana and emerged at St Philips Bastions near Portes des Bombes at an acute angle with the

carriageway leading to Sa Maison gardens. Here stood the first of the fourteen railway Guard Huts along the line. This guard hut was after world War II used as a bar but to-day it is also demolished. After crossing the carriageway, the railway entered another small tunnel penetrating an outer bastion in the fortifications of the city, passed on a stone-arched bridge, thus nearing the cross-over in Princess Melita Road. The train passed near the Ta' Braxia Cemetery, crossed the place known as the Mile End and thence entering the Hamrun Station. This station, later known as the Central Railway Station, housed the engine sheds and the workshops. It was the only station throughout the line that possessed a semaphore signal. Leaving Hamrun station, the train headed for B'Kara, some one and a half miles away and thence to Attard. Before entering Attard Station, the track was raised on to an embankment and crossed B'Kara Road by a girder bridge. On leaving Attard station, the train crossed St Anthony Street and entered a constructed cutting, crossed Musta Road, where the Guard Hut No.11 stood and proceeded to San Salvatore Station. From here the train crossed Notabile road and passed by the Lunatic Asylum - now Mount Carmel Hospital - and proceeded on the last open stage of its journey to Notabile Station. This station was situated at the end of Racecourse Street just beneath the Mdina bastions. The station buildings of Hamrun, B'Kara and Attard had this in common. They were one-storey buildings, had a sun-canopy from the building extended on to the platform and rectangular doors and windows with the names of the station painted in black on the main entrance door.

The first time-tables show seven trains going to Notabile and another seven returning to Valletta. The first Railway Manager was Mr F.A.B. Geneste and he occupied this post for the time that the Railway remained a private concern. The first months were encouraging and the day-takings amounted to Lm.50 per day average, but very soon there were financial difficulties and as time passed by, these day-takings dropped to just under Lm.20 per day or even less. The Malta Railway Company had to close down after seven years, that is, on the 31st March 1890. The Company, besides the permanent way, had 3 small 0-6-0 Tank Engines and passenger coaches. Some time before the closing down in 1890, the No.4 Tank engine was also bought.

After the closure, the railway was taken over by the Government and two years later, that is on the 25th February 1892, it was re- opened under the name of The Malta Railway. The first manager under Government ownership was Mr Laurence Gatt who occupied this post for four years. One of the first developments that took place under the management of Mr Gatt, was the construction of Notabile Road over the railway line at San Salvatore Station and the addition of one siding. Mr Gatt reported to Government that the part of the railway line across the road is being so damaged by the vehicle traffic that it cannot be kept in a safe working condition without considerable expense. So the road over the line was constructed, thus creating the third tunnel for the railway line of about 25 yards in length. A few months later, a siding was also constructed at the same station. Mr Gatt in his letter of the 16th April 1893 addressed to the Chief Secretary to the Government pointed out that the construction of another siding between B'kara and Notabile stations should be made at San Salvatore Station and not at Attard Station as originally proposed. The main reasons brought forward by the Manager were firstly because San Salvatore Station is half way between B'Kara and Notabile and secondly, this station being on a level ground, was much safer than at Attard Station where the line had a gradient of 1 in 45.

On the 4th November 1896, a report by Capt. E.M. Woodward was laid on the Table of the Council of Government. It was suggested that two extensions be constructed, one from Hamrun via Curmi to Zebbug and another from B'Kara via Lija to Mosta. The routes in question were shown in a site plan attached to the said report. But this project for these extensions was later shelved.

In 1897 Mr Nicholas Buhagiar took over as Manager of the Malta Railway. One of the major operations that took place during his management, although preparations began earlier, was the opening of the Museum Station and the 4th and last tunnel leading to it in 1900. This tunnel between the Notabile and Museum

Stations pierced the hill on which stands the old capital of Mdina and is some 770 yards long. Both the Notabile and Museum tunnel portals and supporting walls are very imposing pieces of architecture, that of the Museum is still intact. Museum Station probably took its name from the Roman Museum which is situated just above this station.

From records of passenger traffic, one may come to the conclusion that the best year for the railway was the financial year 1904/1905. During this period, that is April 1904/ March 1905, about 1,045,398 passengers made use of the railway traffic. The financial report for this year showed also a gross revenue of Lm.9929 an increase of Lm.656 over the previous year. The number of passengers mentioned above show an increase of 86,268 passengers over the year 1903/1904. Thus the financial year 1904/1905 ended with a net profit of Lm.620.

It may be pointed out that the Malta Railway was always a passenger train. It never operated goods service. A time-table published on the 10th March 1913 shows 13 trains down from Valletta to Museum and 14 trains up from Museum to Valletta, daily on working days besides other trips from intermediate stations. The figures for 1930/31, the year when the Malta Railway closed down completely show a number of about 500,000 passengers making use of the train. These figures show that the railway maintained traditional popularity amongst the Maltese throughout its long life of nearly 50 years of service. In 1905, tramways and later on buses, were introduced on the island. These were the main cause of the decline of the Malta Railway in the early 1920's. They were in direct competition with the railway.

On many occasions, Mr Buhagiar advised the Government to buy rail- motors which were very economical. They could accommodate about 50 passengers. In 1910 they cost Lm.1,000 but ten years later in 1920 this price rose to Lm.5000. Due to lack of funds, the renewal of the permanent way was suspended. The yearly average losses after 1908 was between Lm.700 to Lm.900 but in 1920 the loss rose to Lm.8865 - Lm.6000 due to high cost of coal and Lm.2865 due to purchasing of spare parts to the rolling stock. Originally there were 10 locos - 4 small, 4 medium size and 2 very heavy. By the year 1920, one of the small locos was discarded and parts of it were being used for other locos. The 2 very heavy locos were seldom used because they consumed too much coal and oil. Thus the railway had 7 serviceable locomotives to run the trains between Valletta and the other stations. Each engine was overhauled every 18 months.

The railway employees worked very long hours. The pointsmen, for example, worked from 4.00a.m. until about 8.30p.m. for a 4s/2d per day. Their duty was to shunt trains, to keep stations clean and to look after the telephone. 'The chainmen or gatekeepers worked 14 hours per day for the miserable wages of 3s/- per day. There were 14 pointsmen and 19 chainmen. The number of employees shown in the Government Estimates for the year 1920/21 was 63 including the Manager.

Mr Buhagiar resigned his office in 1924 after serving as Manager and Engineer of the Malta Railway for 27 years. He was an imaginative man and during his long term of office several developments took place within the Railway Department on his own personal initiative. It may be said that Mr Nicholas Buhagiar witnessed the rise and fall of the railway transport in Malta.

The third and last manager of the Malta Railway was Mr C. Rizzo He could do nothing to improve the train service with the funds at his disposal. On the other hand, the bus service to various parts of the Island became more and more popular especially in those localities which were not served by the train. It was a fact that railways all over the world had to compete with motorcars. The Government had to come to a decision what to do with the railway.

Mr A.R. Bennett of the Institute of Locomotive Engineers in Great Britain was commissioned by the local Government to prepare a report on the possibility of effectively meeting the serious competition of tramways and omnibuses now being experienced by the Malta Railway. Mr Bennett presented his report in February 1928. As

an example, he mentioned the Jersey Railway in the Channel Islands, a line about 9 miles in length and very similar to the Malta Railway in general characteristics. In 1922, a motor omnibus service run almost parallel with the railway on a more frequent service. This influenced the railway traffic so much so that the Jersey Railway Company was compelled to seek some means of recovering its lost ground. They contacted the Sentinel Steam Road Wagon Works Company and ordered a new steam coach of the Sentinel type which could carry 56 passengers and was also very economical. After elaborating on the advantages accruing from the new type of steam rail motors manufactured by the Sentinel Company, Mr Bennett proposed the local Government the purchase of these new motor coaches.

Commenting on this report, the Acting Manager Mr Rizzo said that it is true that the Sentinel Steam Rail Coaches present some real advantage over the present rolling stock and improve the present state of things. This improvement is in the sense of some reductions in the consumption of coal and other stores, but not to such an extent as to approach a self-supporting concern. As long as the railway was run at low fares, whatever system may be adopted, it cannot be self-supporting and much less run with a profit.

It is worth mentioning that fares varied from 11/2 d (6m) from Valletta to B.'Kara or Attard to Notabile to 31/2d (1c7m) for the whole trip from Valletta to Notabile for 3rd class passengers. 1st class passengers paid from 3d (1c4m) to 7d (2c8m). Workman's fares were normally 2d (8m). Trains were normally of six to seven coaches but never exceeded eleven coaches.

Mr Rizzo suggested that, if the Government thought it proper that people should not be deprived of the railway, he would recommend a trial with at least one or two Sentinel Steam Locomotives and one Sentinel Steam Rail coach. Mr Rizzo concluded his remarks on the Bennett report as follows:

"Everything considered therefore the Railway undertaking can by no means in my opinion be turned into a paying concern. The adoption of the Sentinel Coaches and Locomotives would improve matters but would only lead to a reduction of the annual deficit."

In the Government gazette of the 14th June 1928, appeared a notice of tender for the concession of the Railway under the signature of Mr. Joseph Huber who was at that time the Treasurer and Director of Contracts. Unfortunately no one tendered for this concession. Moreover the Sentinel Wagon works Ltd. of Great Britain wrote to the Prime Minister that the conditions laid down in the tender were not workable.

On the 27th May 1929, the Legislative Assembly discussed at length the fate of the Malta Railway which was nearing its close down once and for all. The Prime Minister tabled a resolution before the House which runs as follows:

"That it is advisable to offer the railway under suitable conditions for a twenty years lease, and that if no acceptable offer is returned by the 1st August 1929, the working of the railway by the Government shall be suspended."

After a long discussion between the two sides of the House, no decision was taken. In the meantime, the 1921 Constitution was suspended by the British Government in 1930. So the decision to close down the railway was taken by the Colonial Government. The Malta Railway closed down definitely on the 31st March 1931 after serving the Maltese people for nearly 50 years. Incidentally, 41 years earlier, when the railway was a private concern, the Malta Railway Company closed down also on a 31st March 1890.

To-day there are no relics of the Malta Railway but for some exceptions. The only station buildings that remained intact are those of Hamrun, B'Kara and Rabat. The first one is the Headquarters of the Scouts group of Hamrun, that of B'Kara houses government offices and that of Rabat in Racecourse Street is leased to a private family. The stone bridge (c) near Portes des Bombes and the station building of Imtarfa (d) are in a derelict condition. The other two station buildings of Attard and Valletta, were demolished, the former in the late thirties and the

latter in 1964. As for the rolling stock and the ten locomotives, nothing is left. There are some relics in private property. The remaining 3 locomotives left at the Hamrun workshops were also destroyed during-the last war of 1943. Unfortunately the fate of the Malta Railway was to close down and be forgotten.

(a) Marina Gate was replaced by the present Victoria Gate in 1884

(b) should read 13 columns.

(c) still in place

(d) converted in a restaurant during the late 1980's