

New light on Webster Paulson and his architectural idiosyncrasies

Matthew Gauci

*'He was respected by all classes of the community for his affable and courteous manners, and performed his duties in a manner most credible to him and to the full satisfaction of his superior officers.'*¹

Webster Paulson was born in Lincolnshire on December 11, 1837.² After receiving his education at the Grammar School in Grantham, he was put for four years under the direction of Mr T. Chapel, of the Cubitt's firm in one of the principal roads of London, Gray's Inn Road.³ This major building company was responsible for many of the city's great buildings⁴ and was also the means through which Paulson eventually mastered the trade of a builder.⁵

Unfortunately, none of the consulted sources resulted in any other information regarding his life and work prior to his departure from England. Nevertheless, it is in Malta, where he spent the rest of his life, that Webster Paulson presumably reached the peak of his architectural career. As shall be clearly demonstrated, the architect's contribution towards the country's evolution of nineteenth-century architecture is as monumental as the projects themselves.

His time in Malta began in 1861 following Edward M. Barry's success in rendering London's architectural scene with projects such as Covent Garden's elegant '*Royal Italian Opera*.' This building captured the interest of the Maltese authorities, and Barry was commissioned to design Valletta's own Royal Opera House. The English

1. Webster Paulson's Obituary. Institute of Civil Engineers, London. Refer to Appendix VIII.
2. NAR, CSG45/4, 596.
3. Webster Paulson's Obituary mentioned *supra*.
4. Thomas Cubitt, <http://www.locallocalhistory.co.uk/studies/cubitt/index.htm>
5. Webster Paulson's Obituary.



Fig. 1. The Royal Opera House, Valletta (1865), *The Malta Independent* – 19th Century Malta – No. 5 from a set of 18 prints

architect must have had great faith in Paulson's abilities for he was chosen at the young age of 24, to represent him in Malta and together with Salvatore Fenech from the governments works department, he supervised the theatre's construction.⁶

Four years later, following the theatre's completion, Paulson was promptly commissioned to serve as a contractor in the erection of an Anglican Church in the developing locality of Sliema.⁷ After the Anglo Saxon Community felt the need of a much larger place of worship, the architect G.M. Hills of London was appointed to prepare the plans of the ensuing Holy Trinity Church and rectory. The foundation stone was laid by the Acting Governor Major General William John Ridley on September 20, 1866 and, under Paulson's direction, was completed the following year. Gracing Rudolph Street with its simple and pleasing exterior and equally impressive interior, the design reflects the neo-gothic manner that was currently being introduced by the British themselves.⁸

It was Paulson's desire to remain in Malta that initially led to the local Government's decision to appoint him Temporary Clerk of Works,⁹ the duty for which he received £60 per annum.¹⁰ On January 31, 1867 Paulson was assigned overseer on the Lighting of the Streets and other public works and with the establishment of the fixed Land, Revenue and Public Works Department in 1873, his position was accordingly shifted.¹¹

On May 25, of the same year, Paulson's attention was once again drawn towards the Royal Opera House. While *La Vergine del Castello* was being rehearsed, the paper backdrop caught fire and the roof eventually collapsed, 'sending up such an

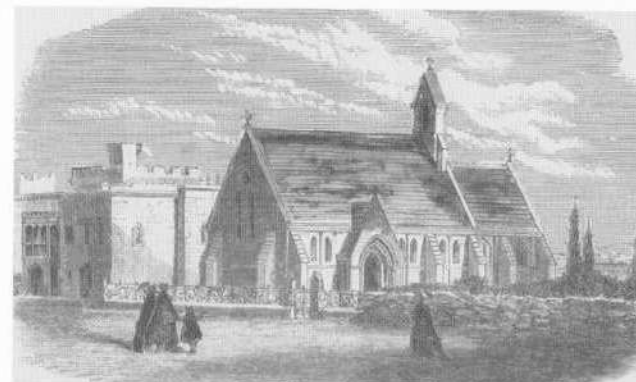


Fig. 2. The Holy Trinity Church, Rudolph Street Sliema (1867), *The Malta Independent* – Antique Malta Series – No.11 from a set of 16 prints

*immense volume of flame as to light up the surrounding countryside for miles.*¹² Many were those who suffered the loss of their belongings but none came close to what Paulson was forced to forget. Since its completion the architect had been appointed Temporary Guardian of the New Opera House¹³ and was actually living on the premises, so it wasn't just his work that succumbed to the flames that night, but he had also lost his home and all of his possessions.¹⁴

It was decided that the 'one place of amusement' was to be reconstructed. From the Land Revenue department, Paulson, together with the infamous E.L. Galizia and Salvatore Fenech, prepared a report on both the theatre's disastrous state, as well as estimate costs for its reconstruction. The building's exterior was more or less intact, however, the rigorous use of timber in the original design amplified the spread of fire in the interior. Its use was thus limited in the new proposals and costs were also saved by the consideration of alternative materials such as Iron and Steel.¹⁵

Paulson agreed to the suggestion of removing the original terrace as this 'would have a very good effect and bring out the architectural features of the front building'. However he immediately disregarded the idea of having the stage enlarged and turned so that the main entrance to the theatre would be from Strada Mezzodi - one of the side streets. The engineer argued that besides having an overall negative impact on the architecture itself, such an alteration would incur unnecessary additional costs and will result in a loss in the generated revenue by reducing the theatre's seating capacity.¹⁶

Some argued against the fact that Paulson's proposal had the least amount of timber,¹⁷ thus hindering the acoustic properties of the theatre. Nonetheless, his

6 J. Bonnici & M. Cassar, *The Royal Opera House*, Malta 1992, 19.

7 Personal communication with Michael Ellul, A. & C.E.

8 *About Sliema* - <http://www.sliema-malta.com/churches.htm>.

9 Webster Paulson's Obituary.

10 NAR, CSG01 13530/87 (1887), Refer to Appendix X.

11 Webster Paulson's Obituary.

12 As cited in Bonnici & Cassar, 39.

13 NAR, CSG45/4, 596. Refer to Appendix IX.

14 Bonnici & Cassar, 42.

15 *Ibid.*, 49.

16 *Ibid.*, 51.

17 *Ibid.*

Fig. 3. Webster Paulson's proposed plan of the Royal Opera House, Valletta (1873), Public Works Archive

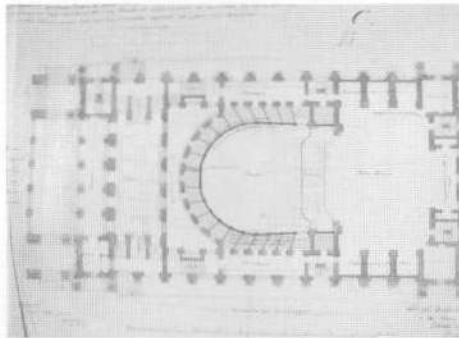
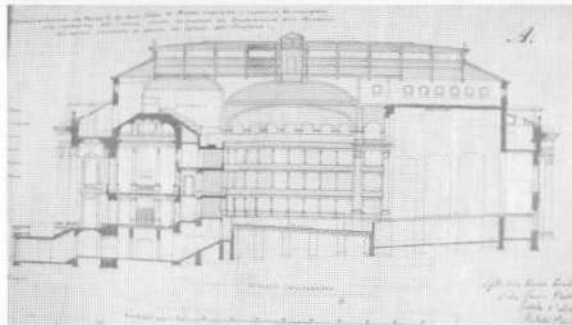


Fig. 4. Webster Paulson's proposed Longitudinal Section of the Royal Opera House, Valletta (1873), Public Works Archives



assertiveness must have assured the select committee that his plans were indeed the best and most viable solution for he was once again entrusted with the task of rebuilding the theatre and putting the building into its pristine shape. Together with Galizia, he finalised the plans, and within two years the reconstruction had reached its final stages.¹⁸ The Royal Opera House had been successfully restored to its former glory and Paulson, then 36, must have established himself as one of the nation's finest civil engineers so much so that he was elected an Associate of the British Institute of Civil Engineers on May 30, 1876, and was subsequently transferred to the class of Associate Member.¹⁹

Although devoted towards the government's cause, Paulson was not restricted from practicing for private clients and such an achievement surely attracted the attention of many. The ensuing assignments offered the architect an opportunity to design independently, the first since his arrival in Malta. In turn, these projects provide a better definition and understanding of Paulson's own architectural influences and style.

The architect is accredited with the design of one of the earliest monuments in the Addolorata Cemetery; the Camenzuli Chapel dated 1875. The Chapel is



Fig. 5. The Camenzuli Chapel, Addolorata Cemetery, Marsa (1875), Author

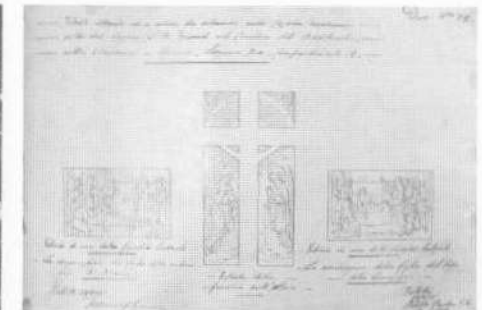


Fig. 6. Paulson's designs of the Micallef Eynaud Chapel glass cycles (1875), Public Works Archive

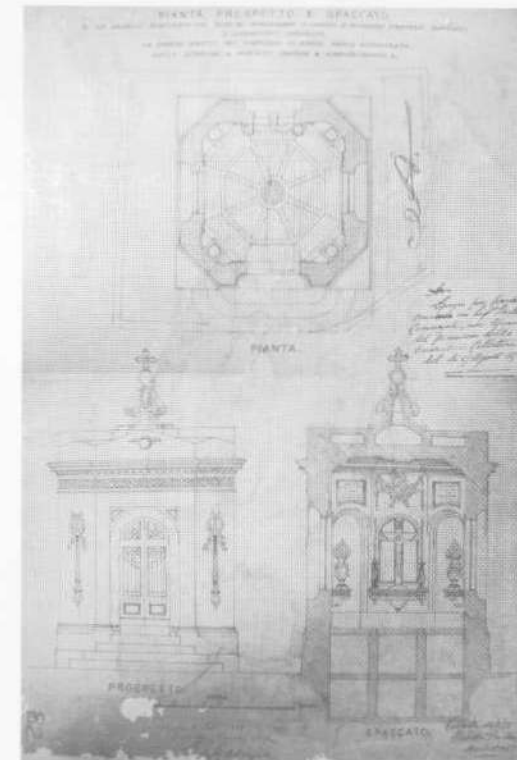


Fig. 7. Webster Paulson's proposal of the Camenzuli Chapel, Addolorata Cemetery (1875), Public Works Archives

¹⁸ Bonnici & Cassar, 53.

¹⁹ Webster Paulson's Obituary.

characterised by an overall strong linear approach, emphasizing its functional rather than aesthetical purpose.²⁰ As with the rest of the architectural idiom within the cemetery, the Chapel's minimal yet effective decorations exhibit hints of eclecticism derived from foreign influences. Several pattern books, depicting amongst others, plates of ornamental carvings, were available on the island and Paulson must have surely become familiar with such illustrations, interpreting them according to his own liking.²¹ The architect was also commissioned to design the three beautiful glass cycles of the Micallef Eynaud Chapel. With the imaginative use of vibrant colours, the cycles feature (i) the Resurrection of the Son of the Widow of Naim, (ii) a Crucifix with Angels, and (iii) the Resurrection of the Daughter of the Synagogue Leader.²²

By the 1880's Sliema had evolved into a fashionable seaside resort inhabited in summer mainly by the professional and commercial classes who resided in Valletta.²³ In 1879, Paulson was privately assigned to design a small pavilion as part of the enhancement of the verandah at the jetty of the Sliema Ferries, which linked the sprawling town to the capital city.²⁴ This one storey building was eventually utilized as the locality's first police station²⁵ and its presence on the shore end must have characterised the rectangular open space forming St Anne's Square with

an intimate sense of enclosure. Although it no longer stands today, the original drawings portray this edifice as being composed of arched openings, paneled pilasters and a purely classical pediment with classical columns in a typical British manner.

This neo-classical influence is also exhibited in the architect's manifestation of the Jewish Cemetery in the area known as 'Ta' Sammat' in Marsa.²⁶ Established by the Jewish community in December of the same year,

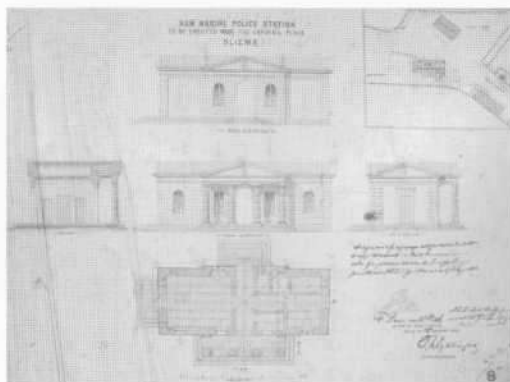


Fig. 8. Drawings of the Sliema Verandah Police Station, St Anne's Square, Public Works Archives

20 M. Borg, *The Artistic Relevance of the Santa Maria Addolorata Cemetery*, unpublished M.A. dissertation presented in the Department of History of Art, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, vol. 1, 2001, 104

21 M. Borg, *The Addolorata Cemetery: a study of a select number of funerary chapels of the late nineteenth and twentieth century*, unpublished B.A. (Hons) dissertation presented in the Department of History of Art, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, 1998, 60.

22 Borg 2001, 104.

23 Kamra Tal-Periti, *St. Anne's Square, Sliema – Saving Urban Spaces document*.

24 L. Mahoney, *5000 Years of Architecture in Malta*, Malta 1996, 322.

25 J.V. Gauci, *Insights into Sliema*, Malta 2008, 30.

26 C. Thake & Q. Hughes, *Malta War & Peace*, Malta 2005, 249.

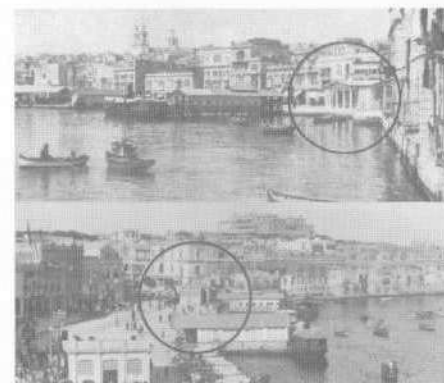


Fig. 9. Views depicting Police Station at the Jetty of the Sliema Verandah, *The Malta Independent – Nostalgia Series II*



Fig. 10. Sliema Creek with the Police Station in the foreground, *Gauci JV, Insights into Sliema*

this burial place is humble and weak when compared with the adjoining highly elaborated Turkish Cemetery designed by Galizia in 1873. The only point of interest is the main gabled gate, adorned with decorations resembling Torah finials affixed to its top. The Italian inscription below the pediment attests that the Israelite Cemetery was granted to the community in a public act by the government on December 8, 1879.²⁷ This burial compound is still in use today and as Sir Harry Luke, Malta's former Lieutenant Governor stated, 'it is the only place in the world where Arabs and Jews lie peacefully together'.²⁸

In 1880, the architect had overseen the completion of an orphanage building in Hamrun. The local philanthropist, Chevalier Vincenzo Bugeja, founded the institute in 1876 and it was being built according to the plans prepared by Pope Pius IX's own architect, Count Vespignani. Inspired by the typical medieval cloistered priories

27 P. Dimech, *Il-Marsa matul iż-Żminijiet*, Malta 2006, 188.

28 As cited in Mahoney, 242.

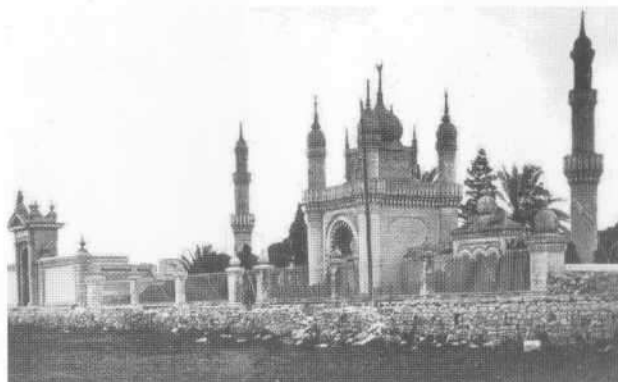


Fig. 11. Paulson's Jewish Cemetery (1879), besides Galizia's Turkish Cemetery (1873), at 'Ta' Sammat', Marsa, M. Borg, 2001, *British Colonial Architecture*

with an arcade bordering a central open courtyard, his design was considered to be exceptional, nonetheless it required alterations to accommodate proper planning and sanitary facilities.²⁹ While supervising its construction, Paulson, who had previously carried out sanitary works on several government buildings,³⁰ was also responsible for the institute's necessary modifications. It was perhaps for this reason that Bugeja engaged Galizia, a Maltese architect, to design, on an adjoining site, a technical institute to cater for the education of the boys attending the orphanage.³¹

Following the department's suppression in 1880, Paulson was transferred, in the same capacity to the separate establishment of Public Works.³² Under the direction of Hon. Galizia, who was naturally appointed Superintendent of Works on June 7,³³ Paulson was involved in countless works all over the island including the construction of a boat-slip in the valley of Żurriq, a landing place and breakwater in St Paul's Bay, several construction projects within the evolving Grand Harbour, the repairs of some wharfs and he had also charge for some years of the branch 'Roads, Streets, Bridges & Lighthouses'.³⁴

The construction of the Methodist Church in Floriana proceeded swiftly under Paulson's supervision. Despite vigorous objections against its erection by locals who did not accept Methodist activity, works according to the neo gothic design of T.M. Ellis of London, commenced on December 12, 1881.³⁵ Denoting the British preoccupation of erecting 'models' on prominent sites, the *Times of Malta* of March 10, 1883 described the newly built Church as 'occupying a commanding



Fig. 12. View of the Methodist Church, Floriana (1883), Ellis Photography, through Dott. Claude Busuttill

site close by the Floriana Railway Station', creating 'a conspicuous object in the eye of every traveler from Valletta to Floriana'. Arousing great curiosity amongst the community, the church was the first building in Malta to be fitted with incandescent lamps and was also amongst the first to have a flat roof.³⁶

Contained within the triangular pediment of Galizia's burial chapel in the Addolorata cemetery, are carvings depicting architectural drawing instruments, such as the dividers, protractor and plumb-line, which associate the acclaimed architect with Masonic lodges.³⁷ It was hardly surprising to discover that Webster Paulson was also enrolled as a Freemason.³⁸ Freemasonry in Malta during the English period goes back to 1815, when a petition for the creation of the Lodge of St John and St Paul was submitted to the United Grand Lodge of England. Conveying 'a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols', the associated colonial characteristics of the lodge proved popular amongst the British in Malta and by 1890 there were five lodges under English jurisdiction, with a total of 409 masons.³⁹ The United Brethren Lodge No. 1923 was established in 1881, at the Masonic Hall

29 *Ibid.*, 237.

30 Webster Paulson's Obituary.

31 Mahoney, 237.

32 NAR, CSG45/4, 596. Refer to Appendix IX.

33 C. Thake, 'Emanuele Luigi Galizia, Architect of the Romantic Movement', *Treasures of Malta*, vi, 3, 2000, 42.

34 Webster Paulson's Obituary.

35 H. Fawthrop, *The Floriana Story*, Malta 1963, 24.

36 *Ibid.*, 26.

37 Thake, 42.

38 *Freemasons in Malta* - <http://website.lineone.net/~remosliema/Freemasons.htm>.

39 *A Brief History of Freemasonry in Malta* - <http://www.sglom.eu/history.aspx>.

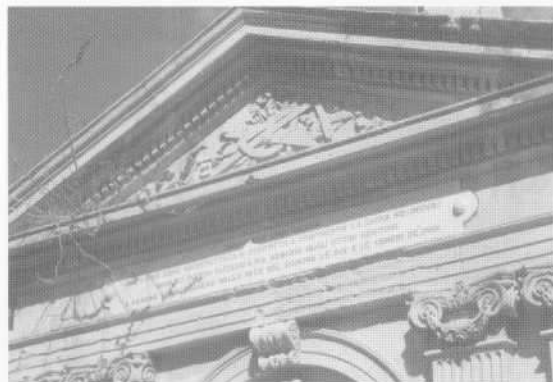


Fig. 13. Pediment of E.L. Galizia's Burial Chapel depicting architectural symbols related to Masonic Lodges, *Author*

in Valletta's Strada Stretta;⁴⁰ the notorious street parallel to Strada Forni (now Old Bakery Street), where Paulson resided at 211 following the great fire in 1873.⁴¹ He must have had an influential role within the lodge, for he was appointed master within just four years of its mysterious history.⁴²

Soon after, Paulson was involved in the construction of yet another large-scale project; the St Vincent De Paul Hospital in Luqa. It all started when Florence Nightingale gave her approval of Thomas Henry Wyatt's plans for the asylum for the old and infirm, which however did not satisfy F.V. Inglott who insisted that certain sanitary alterations were necessary. Under Galizia's direction Paulson commenced the project in 1886, while under Giorgio Schinas, Andrea Vassallo completed it in 1892.⁴³ The latter was also responsible for the adjoining chapel, water supply, drainage and approach roads. On December 21, 1887 Vassallo was appointed Clerk of Works, filling in the post vacated by Paulson himself and went on to become another of Malta's acclaimed architects, who dominated the architectural scene of the early decades of the twentieth century with magnificent interventions, particularly those in the distinctive art nouveau style.⁴⁴

1886 was also the year in which a few noblemen from Mdina had consulted and eventually commissioned Paulson to design a small clubhouse, which was to replace a belvedere sited at the top part of Saqqajja Hill. By October, the architect had presented his proposal and with the authority's approval of the leasing of the land, the building's construction was set to commence. There are no records of the ceremony of the laying of the foundation stone, but its erection was finalised



Fig. 14. The St Vincent de Paul Hospital, Luqa, completed 1892. Thake & Hughes, *Malta War & Peace*

before the month of August 1888.⁴⁵ The flamboyant Casino Notabile is a unique manifestation of the Victorian era. Amongst other relations, the elaborate manifestations recall the architect's eclectic influence, particularly that which he inherited during his intervention at the Addolorata Cemetery.

During the nineteenth century, steamships proved invaluable for Malta to maintain a strong relationship with the rest of Europe, especially Sicily, primarily for the exchange of goods. Many skilled Sicilian workers were employed in various infrastructural and artistic interventions across the island and along with their capabilities came their influence. Apart from Sicilian connotations in terms of style and atmosphere,⁴⁶ the Governor's bust within the Casino is the work of the distinguished Sicilian sculptor Giuseppe Valenti, who amongst other excellent sculptures had also executed Queen Victoria's monument in Valletta.⁴⁷ The intricate details on the exterior of the Casino, were definitively carved by a professional sculptor thus it would not be surprising if these manifestations are actually Valenti own work.⁴⁸

40 A. Agius, *History of Freemasonry in Malta*, Stiges 1998, 82.

41 *1880 Voter's List* - <http://website.lineone.net/~stephaniebidmead/1880p.htm>.

42 Agius, 189.

43 Mahoney, 242.

44 *Ibid.*, 264.

45 J. Galea, 'Casino Notabile: A Centenary', *Sunday Times of Malta*, July 31, 1988, 15.

46 Personal communication with Dott. Claude Busuttil held in March 2009.

47 Galea.

48 Personal communication with Dott. Claude Busuttil held in March 2009.



Fig. 15. The Casino Notabile, Saqqajja Square (1888), Author

The apogee of Paulson's architectural career, this pavilion was unluckily also his last. He did not even see the completion of his own masterpiece, because on August 16, 1887, the latest Cholera outbreak claimed the architect's life after a painful illness of six days.⁴⁹ The following day, *'with feelings of the deepest regret'*, Galizia reported the demise of Mr Webster Paulson to the Lieutenant Governor W. Hely Hutchinson,⁵⁰ and *'as to the selection of the person best fitted to reoccupy the situation in question'* it took till December 16, of the same year for Galizia to nominate the Maltese Andrea Vassallo. Included in his nomination, was a lengthy report indicating the *'primary duties to the said office'*, the qualities of which best reflect Paulson's own capabilities.⁵¹

Unfortunately, none of the searched archives resulted in any records that might indicate the architect's burial place; however it is very possible that he was buried either at the Birgu cemetery, Lazzarett Cemetery, or the Cholera Cemetery in Floriana, before these burials were exhumed after they were severely damaged during the aerial bombings of the twentieth-century wars.

49 NAR, CSG01 11999/87. Refer to Appendix XI.

50 *Ibid.*

51 NAR, CSG01 13530/87. Refer to Appendix X.

Following the Casino's completion, Mrs Fanny Paulson claimed payment of £400.10s.6d. for the *'rights owed to her husband for the drawing of the plan and the execution of the building under his direction, until he died'*. A letter of intent had been sent to the gentlemen forming the Casino's committee and after a lengthy discussion during one of the first meetings, it was *'agreed that the claim should be honoured immediately and the amount defrayed from among the 28 members styled 'shareholders', paying the sum of £15 each'*.⁵²

Undoubtedly prolific in terms of talent, commitment and volume of architectural work, Paulson proved invaluable in the execution of these historical landmarks. Together with Galizia, his close colleague, mentor and influence, Paulson introduced an eclectic atmosphere within the local architectural scene and numerous architects followed suit.⁵³ Not only does Webster Paulson form an integral part of Maltese history, but this outstanding project architect also deserves recognition as one of the finest of the nineteenth century.

52 Galea.

53 Borg 2001, 105.