

19 – From Floriana to Naxxar via Sliema

When I knew in September 2013 that we were going to stay at the **Phoenicia Hotel**, guide books told me it was in Floriana, so I started googling restaurants there. In fact, the hotel is just outside the City Gate and it is Valletta that draws one in. For this itinerary, however, the hotel fits neatly into Floriana and is a good starting place. But only the first part is walkable.

Unless you are staying in the area that extends from Pietà to St George's Bay via Sliema, you will need a car or public transport, which includes a ferry from Valletta across Marsamxett Harbour to Sliema. And turning inland beyond St George's Bay to Naxxar, for the sake of the story, is definitely a car or bus journey. Some sites may be more suitable for the armchair traveller.

Floriana

The large tablet to the right of the entrance of the hotel reads: 'Hotel Phoenicia, erected at the command of the Lady Strickland DBE, Countess della Catena and happily completed in the year of our Lord MCMXLVII.' It may have been completed in 1947, but Margaret Strickland set the construction of Malta's first luxury hotel in train before the War (Chapter 14). She named the hotel after the Phoenicians who left their mark on Malta (Chapter 2).

The central space was originally a courtyard; roofed over in the 1960s, it is now the Palm Court Lounge. As you enter, your eye is caught by the sculpture of a female nude whose slinky lines suggest it was sculpted in the 1920s or 1930s; in fact it is black painted wood dating from 2007. She presides over afternoon tea, cocktails with the manager or café music played on a grand piano. The career of soprano Hilda Mallia Tabone, who has a street named after her in Birgu, started in the Phoenicia in 1950 when, as the Chapter 18 itinerary relates, she was 'discovered' by the Marchesa Scicluna who will be met at the Palazzo Dragonara towards the end of this one.

Leaving the hotel, turn right down Triq L-Assedju L-Kbir, past the Ministry of Education on the other side of the road, until you reach Hannibal or Hann. Scicluna Street, with the Hotel Excelsior on your right, on the edge of Marsamxett Harbour. Continue along that street, following the sign for Historic Gardens est. 1806, past the public library on your left, until you come, on your right, to that garden, the non-Catholic **Msida Bastion Cemetery**. The first burial took place in 1806; it was consecrated in 1843, and was full by 1856. As it is not mentioned in guide books, note that it is open on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and the first Sunday of the month, 9.30 to midday. The entrance fee in 2013 was 2 Euro.

The cemetery, overlooking the harbour, in the lee of the Msida Bastion, and shaded by trees, is something of a haven, staffed by knowledgeable volunteers based in a little shop at the entrance. It was neglected for years which accounts for many displaced headstones, so you may not find the

grave of a long-ago relative, or of Margaret and Thomas MacGill buried there in 1844 (Chapter 10). But the monuments to the most obvious women – introduced in Chapter 9 – are there. You first come across that of Catherine Hankey, Greek wife of Chief Secretary Sir Frederick Hankey. Further along are those of the Freres: Elizabeth (Countess of Erroll), her husband John, and his sister Susannah. They will be met again later in this itinerary at what remains of Villa Frere.

Wend your way back to where you started, but without crossing over to the Phoenicia and, dominating the intersection, is the 1964 bronze **Independence Statue** – a towering, well-built woman on a plinth.

Behind her is the entrance to **Maglio Gardens**, 400 metres long and narrow for the playing of a form of croquet, pallamaglio (pallmall). I would have omitted this site, but for the delightful injunction to his fellow Knights issued by Grand Master Lascaris. If ever we suspected that tales of their less than virtuous lifestyle were exaggerated, this would disabuse us. It has been variously translated from Latin, but my husband prefers his own version:

An end to laziness, to cupid's art!
 For you, you Knights, this playground is a gift.
 So play! The game here makes you swift
 For war; wine, women, dice just sap your heart.

Embedded in the walls are several statues of significant Maltese – none of them women.

Beyond the Maglio Gardens, at the end of Triq Sarria, are the **Argotti Botanic Gardens**. In 1805, medicinal plants and other botanical specimens were collected in the Maglio Gardens. In due course, the Argotti Gardens were established. The first curator was Father Carlo Giacinto and, in 1806, a British woman traveller, perhaps arriving from South Africa, but leaving no record of her name, donated some bulbils (sometimes mistakenly called bulbs) of Cape Sorrel (*Oxalis*; known in Maltese as *Haxixa Ingliza*, English Weed). The low-slung, yellow-flowered *Oxalis* was to spread all over Malta and, indeed, over many parts of Europe. Today's curator, Joseph Buhagiar, when approached, calls it a plant that 'has caused much mischief'. Perhaps it is as well that she remains nameless; still, it would be good to know.

Lady Francis Egerton (née Harriet Catherine Greville, 1800–1866, m.1822) passed through Malta very briefly and recorded in *Journal of a Tour of the Holy Land, in May and June 1840* (1841): 'We also went to the Florian Gardens, a singular place teeming with orange-trees, geraniums, and with other flowers, kept with English neatness.' It is not clear if she refers to the Maglio or Argotti. In 1945, **Beatrice Borg**, wife of Professor John Borg, gave his cactus collection to the Botanic Gardens. Part of them are open to the public from 8.30 am to sunset, and admission is free.

Before you get to the Argotti Gardens, turn right down Vincenzo Bugeja Street and make your way towards La Vittoria Bastion through the Poverista Gate. In the lee of that is the old Floriana **Ospizio**, now used for

performances during the Malta Arts Festival. This is the former House of Industry which the Marchioness of Hastings modified in 1824 to teach poor girls useful crafts (Chapter 9) from the Order's *Ospizio* or *Conservatorio* of 1734 which housed elderly women, former women convicts and vulnerable girls (Chapter 7). The complex was severely bombed during the War and the arcade flanking the central courtyard and the imposing entrance with mounted guns on each side were totally destroyed.

Pietà and Gwardamanga

As the crow flies, you can from Floriana cross over to the **Ta' Braxia Cemetery**, on the left going towards Sliema off Triq Indipendenza. There you will find the graves of the following: governor's wife, Evelyn Emily Grenfell to whom there is a plaque in St Paul's Anglican Church, buried in 1899, Jessie Tod Wisely, joint founder of St Andrew's Church, South Street, in 1910 (Chapter 11), and 72-year-old teacher Ethel Yabsley, killed in a bombing raid on 5 February 1942 (Chapter 15). The graves of two members of the Russian refugee Poutiatine family and their retainer are also there. Princess Olga died in 1967, Alicia Strautman in 1977, and ballet dancer Nathalie Poutiatine in 1984 (Chapter 13).

At the bottom of the Ta' Braxia is a signpost indicating the **Pietà Military Cemetery** at the beginning of Triq id Duluri (Our Lady of Sorrows Street). Dr Isabel Addy Tate, who served in Malta during the First World War (Chapter 13), died there of typhoid in November 1915, when the cemetery was established, and was buried there with full military honours, attended by women colleagues who had served with her. VAD Helen Bachelor Taylor died the same month of dysentery.

Behind and above the cemeteries is Gwardamanga Hill in the hamlet of Pietà. The first port of call here is **Villa Gwardamanga** (Guardamangia) in Telgħet Gwardamanga Street, its name clearly on the wall by the front door. This villa was leased by Lord Louis Mountbatten in about 1929 while he was serving with the Mediterranean Fleet and, from time to time, Edwina joined him there. But, during the War, it was divided into four flats, one of which was rented by Suzanne Layton Parlby and another young wife, when they had been bombed out of St James Hotel (Chapter 15).

In 1948, Mountbatten was appointed Rear Admiral, Commanding the First Cruiser Squadron Mediterranean. By this time, he had bought Villa Gwardamanga and Janet Morgan describes how Edwina set about trying to make something of it, while they lived at the Hotel Phoenicia from where, as her daughter Pamela relates, 'we were nearly asked to leave' when the family's pet mongoose got loose and created chaos. In December, Edwina told Nehru, 'Villa going backwards'. To cheer herself up, she bought plants for the garden and 'enchanted goldfish with lazy, swishy tails, 18 at 4d each'. They moved in on 29 December 'gassed by paint and cold intense'. By 1949, the family of three employed a staff of 19: a butler, a housekeeper, two housemaids, two charwomen (shared with the ship in harbour), six stewards, three cooks, two Marine drivers, a Marine valet and a coxswain.

At various times between 1949 and 1951, Princess Elizabeth and her Royal Navy husband, Prince Philip, stayed at the villa, and the Queen paid it a nostalgic visit in 1992. In 1952, the Mountbattens moved to Admiralty House, when he was appointed Commander-in-Chief (Chapter 17 itinerary). Then Edwina looked back more kindly on Gwardamanga. The villa, with its once-grand porch, is now in a rather a sorry state and an aging woman neighbour may remonstrate with you should you stop to gawp.

Off Telgħet Gwardamanga Street is the slip road leading to St Luke's Hospital. This used to be the main hospital, and in the grounds is the **Karin Grech Rehabilitation Hospital**. The story of **Karin Grech (1962–1977)** is one of great tragedy. In 1977 the Maltese Medical Association was in a long-running dispute with the Labour government, and the doctors at St Luke's were on strike. Dr Edwin Grech, who had been working in England, was asked to come back to head the department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, which he did, thus being labelled a strike-breaker. Fifteen-year-old Karin was studying in England, but had returned home for Christmas. On 28 December, a large brown envelope containing a small pen-shaped parcel in Christmas wrapping arrived and Karin, in the presence of her brother, opened it. It was a letter-bomb which exploded in her hands. She died half an hour later in St Luke's. The perpetrator was never found. The hospital was built in her memory in 1981 and there is a Karin Grech Gardens in San Gwann containing a sculpture of her.

Maltese-born Aline P'Nina Tayar, who explores her Jewish diaspora roots in her writing, drew on Karin's tragic story for her novel *Island of Dreams* (2012). This time it is a wife who opens the packet intended for her doctor husband. Her murder in 1977 leads to ramifications for three cousins, Ellie, Claire and Vanna, who meet up in Malta from Brussels, Jerusalem and Sydney in 2011. While the murder of the mother of one of them 34 years earlier is the back story, Ellie, the political activist, becomes caught up in the contemporary tragedy of refugees from Africa arriving in Malta, or drowning at sea.

The grounds of St Luke's are also the best, perhaps the only, place to see the remnant of the gardens of Villa Frere which the Frere family built and embellished on land owned by the St Catherine's Nunnery (Chapter 17 itinerary) following their arrival in 1821. Their life in Malta is described in Chapter 9, and the involvement of Lady Erroll's niece, Honoria Blake Hamilton Chichester, in Maltese lace in Chapter 10. If you drive straight through the hospital grounds you cannot mistake the sad remains of the Villa's Greek temple (*tempietto*) on the left of the internal road. The Hookham Frere Primary School is a little way to the right of the *tempietto*, built on what was the Japanese gardens and wilderness. The nursing school was built on the upper reaches of the gardens and, in 1984, a helipad was built, together with a wide parking lot, next to the *tempietto*.

To see Villa Frere itself, make your way down to the main road along the waterfront (I did all this area in a car with a driver; probably not easy on foot unless you are staying nearby). You should then be able easily to spot

the three-storeyed mansion, standing between Villa Ciantar and Bezzina House. It is painted half-way up in peeling dark red and has three enclosed green wooden balconies and three green-shuttered French windows leading on to a long, open balcony with a bay centre.

Lady Grosvenor, who did not think much of St John's Cathedral (Chapter 17), knew the Freres and wrote of Villa Frere in 1840, after the deaths of both Elizabeth and Susannah, but while Honoria was still there looking after John:

We found him in his pretty garden or rather series of gardens on the side of a hill behind his house, which are attained by long flights of steps with terraces and walks, cut out of the rock, ornamented with columns, balustrades and other devices, in the Maltese stone, and extremely pretty.

Following John's death, Honoria and her husband, Lord Hamilton Francis Chichester, lived in the villa. Edward Lear wrote to a friend in 1866 (contained in *Later Letters of Edward Lear*, 1911):

The chief person here after the Govr. General and top Admiral, is Lady Hamilton Chichester. Mr. Hookham Freer, who married her aunt, Lady Erroll, left her a fine house and gardens and I suppose she is a 'power in the State' as she is now an R.C. and I fancy is influential.

Manoel Island

There are many places from which you can see Manoel Island in Marsamxett Harbour, and forming Sliema and Lazaretto Creeks. It is significant for the **Lazaretto** (quarantine station) set up as early as 1592 as wooden huts to protect Malta from infectious diseases; its permanent structure dates from 1643 (Chapter 6). At times, too, under the British the nearby Fort has been military barracks and the Lazaretto turned into married quarters; indeed, military wives and daughters were buried in its cemetery (Chapter 12).

Nineteenth-century travellers and twentieth-century refugees confined to the Lazaretto, and writing about it and its lack of delights, abound, as Chapters 9, 10 and 13 suggest. Some died there. Typical was **Ann Flynn**, Lady Montefiore's maid, who developed pleurisy returning with the couple from a visit to the Holy Land in July 1839 (Chapter 10). Her employers erected a fulsome tombstone which still stood in 1970 but was destroyed that year when the cemetery was razed to the ground.

It may well be from here that Laudonia Testaferrata was fatally injured by shell fire in her house at the waterfront end of St John Street, Valletta, facing the island (see Chapter 17 itinerary) when Maltese insurgents used it as a base against the French in January 1799 (Chapter 8).

Sir John Franklin, who in later life disappeared trying to discover the Northwest Passage, served in the Mediterranean in the 1830s. His new wife, **Jane Franklin** (née Griffin, 1791–1875) would, as Frances Woodward describes in *Portrait of Jane: A Life of Lady Franklin* (1951), follow him,

but also dart off on her own travels. Jane visited Malta several times and writes tellingly of trying to communicate with him at the Lazaretto:

My first communication with Sir John was by means of a letter brought to me by Commissioner Briggs, which turned me sick and ever continues to do so when I inhale its peculiarly offensive fumigation. Then he came alongside himself with his yellow flag, and his yellow-cuffed guardiano, and then I was put into a boat with *my* yellow flag, and guardiano (and to make the livery more complete I put on my yellow scarf also) and we were both landed on a narrow platform in front of the Lazaretto, and narrowly watched on each side lest we should approach too near, during half an hour's conversation. The next day ... I was landed on a rock with my guardiano and Sir John came off in a boat with his, and we had another conversation. They tell me it was nearly two hours long. However this may be, the fatigue of standing a long while in the heat and speaking at the pitch of my voice to make Sir John hear, united with the blinding effect of the bright water, and the dazzling buildings so overcame me that I was fit for nothing but my wretched berth on my return to the ship.

(Jane's time as governor's wife in Tasmania is covered in depth in my *Tasmania: Women, History, Books and Places*. Her quarantine in Crete is described in the web update to my earlier book in the same series, see www.holobooks.co.uk.)

The Franklins avoided breaking the rules; perhaps they learnt from the experience of poor **Lady Georgina Walpole** (1795–1859, m.1827), daughter of the 2nd Earl of Oxford, wife of traveller and missionary Joseph Wolff. Gabrielle Festing tells of the occasion when he was in the Lazaretto on his return from one of his missions, and she was staying on the island:

[She] ... went to see him from behind the grille. Delighted at her appearance, he rolled up his handkerchief and flung it at her. The health guards protested against this demonstration of conjugal love for they considered that by coming in contact with the handkerchief Wolff's wife had exposed herself to the possibility of infection. They, therefore, insisted on her following her husband into quarantine – which she had to do.

Some of these historic buildings on Manoel Island are undergoing restoration, so they are probably best viewed from the nearby mainland until completion.

Sliema and Beyond

The neo-classical **The Hotel Palazzo Capua**, adjoining the The Victoria Hotel and the The Palace in Gorg Borg Olivier Street, Sliema, has an intriguing history. The story of Irish **Penelope Caroline Smyth** (1815–1882) and her husband Carlo di Borbone, Prince of Capua, is told in most detail

in the chapter 'The Prince of Capua: An Exile in Malta' by Albert Abela in *Nation's Praise: Malta*.

Penelope and Carlo eloped from Naples, which she had been visiting with her sister, to Scotland in April 1836 and married at Gretna Green; thereafter they married more formally more than once. Carlo's brother, King Ferdinand II of The Two Sicilies, refused to recognise the morganatic marriage, one that had taken place without his permission, exiled Carlo and confiscated all his property.

Travelling as Count and Countess Mascali, the couple arrived in Malta in September 1836. Selma Hall, Sliema, later known as Palazzo Capua, was to be their home on at least three occasions over the next 14 years. Their first son was born there in March 1837, and later a daughter. Meanwhile, they were dogged by lack of funds – although Penelope did have an income of her own – Ferdinand's suspicions of conspiracy, and his attempts to cause them diplomatic problems. More than once in Sliema they faced acute financial embarrassment, once even involving the bailiffs. They left Selma Hall and Malta for the last time in 1850. Nine years later, Ferdinand died and his son, Francis II, restored Carlo's property. Later still, after her husband's death in 1862, Penelope was recognised as Princess Capua (*Principessa di Capua*); she was also known as Princess Carolina Bourbon of Capua.

A century later, in the early 1940s, Palazzo Capua housed the government Capua Orphanage under the Sisters of Charity; it became St Jeanne Antide Home in 1963, and closed in 1978 when the orphans were transferred to the Conservatorio Vincenzo Bugeja (Chapter 11 and Chapter 20 itinerary). By the 1980s the palazzo had fallen into disuse and neglect. Eventually it was meticulously restored and opened as The Palazzo Capua Hotel. The connection with the Capuas is maintained by the Princess Penelope suite and the Prince Charles of Capua suite.

Sliema today is not quite as it was then, though behind the coastal development of hotels and modern shops, as Juliet Rix expresses it in her *Malta and Gozo* guide book, is 'a quietly elegant residential area with some lovely old buildings, colourful *gallariji*, churches and pretty squares'. But, without addresses, imagination is required to conjure up the homes of others who lived there: Sarah Austin (Chapters 9 and 10); Dr James Barry (Chapter 12) and, of course, the ultimate snob who accosted Christina Ratcliffe on the boat from Marseilles (Chapter 14). The bastion of snobbishness, the Sliema Club (Chapter 14), has changed location since its founding in Ghar il-Lembi Street in 1874. The original Union Club in the Strada Reale, in what was the *Auberge de Provence*, and is now the Archaeological Museum, was, of course, men only, not allowing women in until 1907, and then on sufferance with their own side entrance – that is, until 1910 when, under pressure from the Duchess of Connaught, one was opened on the façade of the *Auberge*. Women did not become full members of the Malta Union Club, now in a modern building at 1 Triq Tigné, Sliema, until 1992. Those descendants of the *gente per bene* of the past who enjoy posh shopping are known as *Slimzi*.

The Zammit Clapp Hospital (Blue Sisters Hospital) founded by sisters Emilia Zammit Clapp and Maria Zammit some time after 1907 (Chapter 11) is now the Zammit Clapp Nursing Home for the Elderly in Triq Dun Anton Tabone, St Julians. Nearby, in Sacred Heart Avenue, is the Sacred Heart Convent where admiral's daughter Rosamund Fisher (Chapter 14) and political activist Josephine Debono and her sister (Chapter 16) went to school.

The northern route Hop On Hop Off sightseeing bus, ending (and starting) as it does in Sliema, passes the gates to the **Dragonara Casino and Hotel**, Dragonara Road, St Julians, as does transport to catch the Gozo ferry. But the casino beyond, on Dragonara Point, used to be the Palazzo Dragonara, seaside summer residence of the Scicluna family, built in 1870 by banker and first Marquis, Emanuele Scicluna, and the nearer hotel was built in the gardens.

The widow of Emanuele's nephew, the second Marquesa, Corinna, lent the palazzo to 20 officers as a convalescent home during the First World War (Chapter 13). But it was **Maria Violette Testaferrata Moroni-Viani**, 7th Baroness of Tabria (1897–1955), married to John, 3rd Marquis Scicluna, in 1921, and known affectionately in family stories as Granny Vi, who discovered soprano Hilda Mallia Tabone in the Phoenicia Hotel in 1950.

Marquesa Violette was the daughter of the Baron of Tabria and **Maria Mizzi** (m.1895). Big and tall, she was a strong woman and quite a character. During the Second World War she volunteered rooms at the palace for Malta Relief Fund Committee meetings, for sewing and knitting parties and anything else that needed doing. She also organised concerts in aid of the Fund, the Spitfire Fund and the Sanatorium Fund, and held parties for the forces. She was a brilliant pianist and there were two Bechsteins in the drawing room on which four hands played such pieces as the *Warsaw Concerto* (1941). The philanthropist Sciclusas further embellished the Dragonara, but also used it to house 100 people made homeless by bombing.

Violette took three of her children off to Caracas, Venezuela, following the Berlin airlift of 1948 and opened a pizzeria, only returning when her son got sunstroke. Her daughter, **Corinne Ramsay Scicluna** (1923–2007), did not travel with them as she had married a British naval officer in 1947 and inherited her Tabria title. We shall meet Corinne's daughter and granddaughter shortly.

The whole area the other side of St George's Bay from the former Scicluna residence was a British military base between 1850 and 1979. On the seaward side of the main road returning from the North Tour, or going to and from the ferry to Gozo, you pass the low-slung Pembroke barracks, the only sign left of what is now the residential town of Pembroke. But here was **St George's Hospital** where VAD Vera Brittain nursed during the First World War; Chapter 13 contains her description of the place and her time there.

The naval women and families who remained in Malta during the Second World War, such as Kathleen Norman and Caroline Vernon, were, as Chapter 15 relates, housed in the **St George's Barracks** which were bombed



47. Marquessa Violette Scicluna, courtesy of Palazzo Parisio

on 25 April; the Vernons all wrote about the event. The barracks have been converted into housing. Two sites further towards the ferry terminal are in Chapter 23 itinerary.

Naxxar

Here the connections with places earlier in this itinerary force me to create a diversion, and take you to Naxxar, a hilltop village overlooking the sea. It will only work if, leaving the Pembroke site, and turning inland, you are doing so by car (or you could catch the 225 bus via San Gwann where there is a statue of Karin Grech). We did not approach Naxxar this way on either visit. The first time, it was after having been driven hither and yon all over the island visiting sites off the straight and narrow. The second time, we went to have lunch at the **Palazzo Parisio** and interview the 10th Baroness of Tabria (née **Marie Christiane Ramsay Scicluna**) whom everyone knows as Muffy, and her daughter **Justine Pergola**; we travelled then by taxi from the Phoenicia and returned by local bus.

The story of Palazzo Parisio starts in 1774 with Anna Muscati Parisio when she moved back to Malta because of ill health and an ill-judged marriage (Chapter 7). It passed to her son and was inherited by his widow Antonia, 3rd Baroness Benwarrad, as was the Palazzo Parisio in Merchant Street, Valletta (see Chapter 17 itinerary). But from her and her second husband it passed to the Jesuits until it came into the possession of the Scicluna family of Dragonara Palace and was extended and beautified from villa to palazzo by Giuseppe Scicluna, 2nd Marquis, and his wife Corinna Abela Pulis (Chapter 13).

During the Second World War, as Chapter 15 and Tamara Marks' account relate, the palazzo became home to the wives and families of Royal Air Force personnel. But there must also have been Maltese families sheltered there from the bombing because in Rosanne Dingli's *Counting Churches* (2011) the story 'The Most Fortunate Children' tells of such a family; introducing the palazzo and its inmates she writes:

The orchard in the grounds of the palace of the Marquis in Naxxar was sealed off. From the high parapet of the forecourt at Parisio Palace, the children could see the Marquis's men harvest sacks full of oranges.

There were about forty children of different ages, from barely walking toddlers to adolescents of fourteen. And among them, of course, were the four children of Spinola.

The Spinola family probably picks up on the Dragonara Palace/Scicluna connection.

The 2nd Marquis and Marquesa Violette had married in Naxxar Parish Church opposite the palazzo and she donated the unique *pavaljun* (canopy) under which its statue of the Bambina stands.

In due course, the palazzo became the responsibility of Muffy and Justine who, working as a team, turned it into this unmissable stop, which they run. You can either eat or simply visit the rooms furnished and decorated by earlier generations not lacking funds or flair. The Luna Restaurant at Palazzo Parisio is for lunch or tea, the Luna de Sera for dinner, and the Luna Lounge for cocktails, and it leads into beautiful gardens that are available, too, for events such as gala dinners and weddings. We have only had lunch, when the food, wine and ambience were classy. There is also a boutique. Mother and daughter have inherited something of the earlier Scicluna women.

Half a mile's walk from Naxxar, or a bus ride on the No. 35, is San Pawl tat-Targa. Behind St Paul's Church is the creeper-covered Gauci Tower, built in 1548 after Francesco Gauci's wife was kidnapped during a corsair raid. The effect is a little spoilt by electricity cables.

Gharghur

Back at Naxxar, do consider catching the No. 31 local bus just beyond the palazzo back to Valletta. It was pure chance that it took us past Gharghur

which had taken my fancy from reading Vera Brittain's description of an outing there from St George's Hospital:

In Gargar Ravine, a deep valley where the greenest grass in Malta was strewn with grey boulders of incalculable age, scarlet anemones and a dozen varies of vetch – yellow and mauve and cerise and orange and purple – sprang up beneath the old stumpy trees, with their dry, hollow trunks and dark, smooth leaves. The ravine must have been an ancient watercourse, for maidenhair fern grew in the damp crevices of the rocks and between the stones of the steps leading upwards to cultivated fields. The asphodels and oxalis were now over, but heavy masses of magenta clover, four times the size of the English variety, covered the ground, and mauve and pink gladioli held their slender, spiky heads erect in the warm scented air.

Much of inland Malta lacks scenic splendour but the Għargħur gorge, which was part of the British military's nineteenth-century Victoria Lines, and which we came across unexpectedly, is different, almost mysterious. Well worth a visit in the spring. The village of Għargħur itself has a long history; relevant to our story is its vulnerability to raids from the sea. Early houses were built with a secret room in which females would hide during those attacks. Exiles from Celano, described in Chapter 3, settled here in 1223 and built the *casal's* oldest church, St John's.

When I mentioned Vera Brittain's account to artist Anna Grima, she gave me the lovely ink drawing of a girl tending her goats at Għargħur shown on the back cover.