

Striking a Different Note



Photos by Giovanni N. Zammit

Gozo's only heritage organisation might not always sound the same note as other NGOs. But that's only because it feels it knows Gozo and its needs more closely, say its committee members... Sandra Aquilina has a round table discussion with the committee of **Wirt Ghawdex**

The four of us are gathered around a table. Apart from the small tray of biscuits in the middle, we could pass for a meeting of a high council. And in a sense, it is. Gathered around a table are three executive members of Gozo's only heritage organisation, Wirt Ghawdex, including its president, magistrate Paul Coppini. Although this is an informal gathering at the home of the secretary-general, the occasion is imbued with relevance through the urgency of the issues which the heritage agency is out to protect.

Of course, after the preliminaries are over, one of the first things I want to know from Gozo's heritage organisation is what they think about the proposed development at Ramla Bay. How do they think that the development will affect the image of Gozo as the Isle of Calypso and the beach's value as a symbol for Gozo's mythic and timeless qualities?

"We have already expressed ourselves against the proposed development at Ramla Bay," says secretary general Giovanni N. Zammit firmly. The heritage organisation had previously courted controversy by being the only NGO which had not outrightly condemned the Ta' Cenc project, supporting the development of the existing buildings while rejecting all new development outside that zone. "We felt that one of the advantages would have been the reversal of the degradation of the whole area and that the project would have given Gozo its first archaeological park," says Mr Zammit. "Unfortunately we were misquoted in some of the papers, creating the perception that Wirt Ghawdex was all in favour of the whole project. Since then, several other NGOs have clarified their position which, in reality, is quite similar to what we had proposed."

"It is true, however, that as the only Gozo heritage NGO we tend to rock the boat a little," says Mrs Zammit emphatically. "Because we live here, we tend to look at things from a slightly different point of view," she says. "As much as everybody would like to 'leave Gozo as it is', as Gozitans who live permanently on the island, we do not just see our leisure needs but also the social, economical and day-by-day needs of the island and its people. We would be taking the easy way out if we were just to condemn all new developments in Gozo; we try to take a more holistic approach by trying to balance all these aspects without forsaking the protection of our heritage and environment. We look at a project and see how it's going to affect Gozo in all these various ways."

Moreover, adds Mr. Zammit, no decision or position adopted by Wirt Ghawdex is taken unilaterally by the committee. "We are a very democratic society," he insists. "We arrange for information presentations about proposed new developments and invite all our members to come and get the information first-hand, get answers to their questions, and then participate in our discussions with the purpose of forming our NGO's position."

Is support for heritage protection widespread in Gozo, I ask. Is it growing? The committee members say that they wish more locals would get more closely involved with the society and its aims. "A lot of people talk about tourism – but I think many more are now beginning to understand that tourism is not just about beaches but it is also about protecting sites which are unique to our island's heritage. Although we have a core group of longtime supporters, we hope to start attracting the younger generation again and, in fact, we have some activities planned for summer to do just that," says Mr Zammit.

Set up in July 1981, Wirt Ghawdex started out as a localized society restricted to the Citadel in Victoria. At the time, it was called *Għaqda Belt il-Qadima*, an organization set up by Anton Spiteri. Eventually it was decided to expand the organisation to cover the entire island.

Meanwhile, the organization can pride itself on having saved a number of heritage sites from oblivion. "For instance, over the years the society has been effective in saving the Xaghra Stone Circle which unfortunately was scheduled as part of a housing estate in Xaghra," says Mr Zammit. The Circle was saved following the Society's intervention.

It has also been the moving force behind the restoration of the *Dghajsa tal-Latini*, the precursor to the Gozo ferry. The society persuaded Gozo Channel to buy the last remaining *latini* boat, which is being restored by the sons of the original builders. "The *latini* boat was considered an eyesore at Mgarr bay and had been lying there for around 30 years before we approached Gozo Channel," says Dr Coppini.

The society has also worked on the restoration of the 17th century Mgarr ix-Xini coast watch tower, in collaboration with the Gozo Ministry. They have also already signed a management agreement with the Gozo Ministry for the gunpowder magazine at the Citadel to be opened to the public and manned by the NGO's volunteers.

Many of Gozo's heritage sites are constantly under threat, they say. Which projects do they think merit the most urgent attention? Dr Coppini does not hesitate for one second. "The Chapel of Sta Cecilia is probably the building which requires the most urgent attention," he says. This, the only medieval chapel in Gozo, was once expropriated by government and Wirt Ghawdex was to supervise its restoration, which would eventually be utilized as its premises. Since then, however, the previous owner has reclaimed it as private property and, although the re-expropriation is going through again, the society is currently powerless in its attempts to save it. "We can only bring its precarious condition to the attention of the authorities, which we do on a regular basis," they say sadly. The chapel is closely followed by the Xlendi Tower, which is rapidly crumbling onto the cliffs beneath. Again, this is privately-owned.

Moreover, they add, the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage needs to appoint an officer for Gozo urgently. "We need somebody here, on site," says Dr Coppini, explaining that often urgent intervention – which can only be achieved by an on-site officer – is required, before objects of great archaeological importance are lost forever.

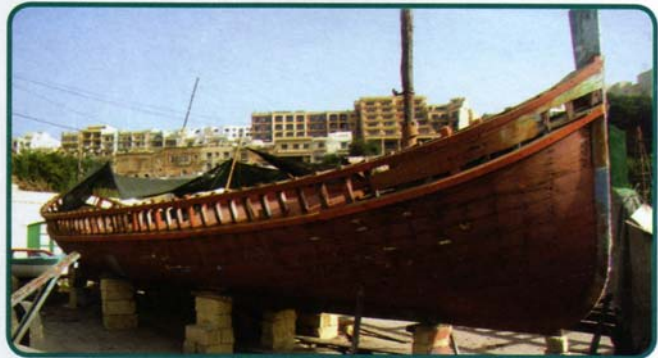
The difficulties are considerable, they say, yet the society ploughs on undaunted. Currently they are looking for funds to set up a new website to replace their old one and reach a wider audience. Financial support is generally lacking and vandalism is not a rare occurrence. The Mgarr Ix-Xini tower was vandalized during its conservation and the society's collection boxes for the *latini* boat have been ransacked several times.

Yet, the society is tireless in its attempts to save Gozo's beautiful crumbling towers and craggy vistas from oblivion. The very urgency of their mission precludes discouragement. As Mr Zammit shows me out, he points at a large box, filled with six volumes of information on the Hondoq ir-Rummien, Qala project. "That's what I'll be doing tonight." And sighs. ■

Anyone wishing to support Wirt Ghawdex can pay a donation into Account #071-159362-001 n/o Wirt Ghawdex with HSBC Bank (Malta) plc Victoria. Moreover, all three Gozo Channel ferries and the Cirkewwa terminal have been equipped with donation boxes which are regularly monitored by Wirt Ghawdex. The society also collects funds by selling a number of publications and numbered prints and also promotes the sale of a commemorative booklet called The Gozo Boat. All these publications are available for sale from the heritage organization, the Malta Heritage Gozo office and the Toys Museum in Xaghra or can be ordered by email from wirtghaw@di-ve.com.



Dar il-Lunzjata - Wirt Ghawdex Office



Dghajsa tal-Latini



Mgarr ix-Xini Tower



Santa Cecilia Chapel



Xlendi Tower