



St Margaret's College Boys' Secondary

Verdala, St Nicholas Road, Cospicua

T 21226336, 21220287, 27019451 F 21803850 E gdespott.bjl@gov.mt W schoolnet.gov.mt/smcboys

St. Margaret College Boys Secondary, Verdala, Cospicua **welcomes the Verdala RNS reunion group** **-8th October 2014-**

On Wednesday, 8th October 2014 we were highly honoured to welcome in our college ex-pupils and ex-teachers of the Verdala Royal Navy School. Generally, they organize a reunion in our school every year to refresh their nostalgic memories of their past British school life in Malta. On this special occasion we welcomed our guests with formal diplomatic greetings accompanied by the singing of the British and Maltese national anthems. I was very lucky to be chosen to address these special guests with a formal welcome speech and after the rising up of the Maltese flag our headmaster, Mr Joseph Ellul had his speech too. We could see tears in the eyes of these guests especially during the formal prayers and the singing of the 'God save the Queen' anthem at our school chapel. However, thanks to this visit we realized and appreciated more the historical roots of our school building and history.

The first Chapel-School for Malta was to be located in Cospicua as part of the new barracks being planned as Fort Verdala. The decision to proceed was made in a letter dated 9th January 1851 sent from The War Office in London to Lieut-Colonel Anthony Emmett, the Commanding Royal Engineer at Malta, which included the information that:

“..... the Secretary of War has decided that a Chapel School of 120 by 50 and 18 feet high with suitable quarters for the schoolmaster should be erected at Fort Verdala.....”

However, the Verdala School appears on the scene in 1929. By then there were once again too many children for the Senglea building to hold and an old Royal Marine barracks and ex-prisoner-of-war camp at Cottonera in St Clements Bastion (where our

school stands now) was taken over. This we now know as the **Verdala School**. Here were buildings which would hold 350 children, but the records for 1932 show only 150 boys and 70 girls attending. This number increased steadily to 530 in 1938, when there were three classes of infants, five of juniors, and six secondary. Though in the secondary level boys and girls were taught separately, in Verdala primary school boys and girls were mixed up. The school also catered for the education of the Dockyard apprentices in the evenings. Top storeys were built on the main Verdala Blocks in 1938. In those days school lunches cost **6d**, and the tuck shop sold lemonade at **1d** a bottle. Both boys and girls had their school houses and the girls had their own houses named Anne, Victoria and Elizabeth.

The school entered its first School Certificate candidate in 1932. He failed, but in 1938 ten certificates were won. This story of growth and development was sadly interrupted by the outbreak of war in 1939, and eventually all English wives and children were evacuated from Malta. The school struggled on in yet another home at St George's Barracks, but eventually shut down completely in September 1942.

During the war the Verdala buildings were badly damaged and the main hall was severely damaged too. Part of the School was used as a prison, and another part became HMS Euroclydon, and was used to house the crews of submarines.

After the war English families started to come back to much damaged Malta and education again had to be provided for their children. Early in 1946 the old Headmaster was sent out to see how much was left of the old school equipment, after the bombing. He found seventy five desks and some mouldering books most of which are now museum pieces, but this was not a very encouraging start for the re-opened school. Re-open it did on 16th May 1946 with 55 children, in two requisitioned houses on the water's edge at Ta' Xbiex. The staff was two Instructor Officers and their wives. Children under seven couldn't be accepted because no one could teach them. Soon after the school opened it became clear that the two houses in Ta' Xbiex would very quickly become inadequate and another search was made for a new building. Various country houses, hotels, etc all proved unsuitable but in September 1946, a disused Army Barracks at Tal Handaq was discovered. This had been built during the war to resemble a Maltese village, in order to give camouflage from the air. However this unpromising and remote spot had room for

lots of children and so work began to fit it out as a School too. So in January 1947 the Dockyard School (children's section) came to Tal Handaq and ever since there has been a continual race between the Civil Engineering Department of the Dockyard in preparing new rooms and children coming along to occupy them. In 1947 the name of the School, now completely separate from the Apprentices' School, was changed to Naval Children's School.

I end up thanking the Verdala RNS reunion group for coming and we look forward to see them again in the nearby future. Surely this was an opportunity for us students to uplift our school ethos and to deepen the knowledge of our school history. Special thanks go to the organizers of this Reunion especially to Mr Tony Foote, Ms Pauline Mendez and Ms Liz Mardel and also to our school organizing team.

Written by Thomas Camilleri

Student at St. Margaret College Boys Secondary, Verdala, Cospicua, Malta.

Photo 1 description:

A group photo of the Verdala RNS reunion group with our participating College boys and Headmaster Mr Joseph Ellul and organizing teachers: Miss Rita DeBattista and Mr Martin Azzopardi sdc.

Photo 2 description:

St. Margaret College student Thomas Camilleri addressing the Verdala RNS reunion group besides student Giosue Agius (tenor voice), teacher Mr Martin Azzopardi and Head of school Mr Joe Ellul while form 2 students are scattered in rows to welcome guests.