

Expatriates' first overseas reunion at former RN School, Verdala

Lin Holdsworth



The group of former students of the Royal Naval School, Verdala, during their visit to their former school, now Guzeppi Despott Boys' Junior Lyceum

A group of British expatriates were in Malta from September 17 to 24 to hold their first overseas reunion at their former Royal Naval School at Verdala, in Cospicua. Their attendance years ranged from the 1930s to the school's closure in the mid-Seventies. This is actually the second official reunion as the first was held in 2001 at Wiston Manor, West Sussex.

Most of the group stayed at the Victoria Hotel in Sliema, where coaches picked them up to take them on various excursions to revisit historical sites.

The highlight of the week, however, was the trip to the school now named Guzeppi Despott Boys' Junior Lyceum. The headmaster, Joe Huber, and his staff, were most enthusiastic about the visit and ensured the school was specifically opened for this tour before the new term begins. They also arranged for the group to have a talk on the history of Verdala, which was given by Rita Debattista, subject co-ordinator at the school.

Following the talk and refreshments, the group toured the school at their leisure to revisit their most treasured haunts of yesteryear. As the actual school buildings have remained the same, this triggered many happy childhood memories and all agreed that their time at Verdala was their best school years.

Martin Azzopardi, who is also a teacher, filmed our visit on video and took numerous pictures. Later in the week some of the group also visited Tal-Handaq School, as this was the secondary School they attended on leaving Verdala at the age of 11.

After the Verdala visit, the group returned to the Victoria Hotel for a reunion lunch to which the present staff were invited. A former Maltese secretary, Josephine Binett, also joined the group for the visit and attended the lunch. Sadly she is the only local person to contact the reunion group to join in despite former press coverage and the Website listing event details for several years of the planned visit. Although there were a few former Maltese pupils, none have, unfortunately, yet made contact.

A reunion dinner was also held on Thursday evening at La Dolce Vita restaurant in St Julian's, where again some of the present staff was in attendance.

For anyone interested, a vast amount of information, including pictures, concerning the old Royal Naval School can also be found on the expats' official school Website www.verdala.com. The Webmaster, Alistair Newman, will always be pleased to receive any new submissions via the Website e-mail address. The site is also linked to the Friends Reunited site as this also lists many of the RN Verdala School's former pupils who have registered.

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Links with the past!

Rita DeBattista

As subject co-ordinator of Geography the premises of Guzeppi Despott Boys' Junior Lyceum has intrigued me ever since I set foot there. So I decided to collect as much material as I could about the history of the site, namely Margherita Hill. Eventually I started providing a leaflet for the new entrants to the school and other visitors, highlighting in chronological order the various significant moments that have influenced the history of Verdala as the area came to be known.

I wanted to share with the students of Guzeppi Despott JL our school's really amazing story. Over the years I obtained new information about Verdala from contributions by other members of staff, from the Internet and by interviewing the numerous visitors who came on nostalgic trips over to our school. Most of these were students or staff attending the Royal Naval School for children of British servicemen.

Through contacts made between Lin Holdsworth and Joe Huber, the present headmaster, the school was opened on September 20 to welcome back old students and members of staff.

I enjoyed delivering a Power Point presentation using the material collected over the years linking the site to the Great Siege, the building of the bastion walls by the Knights, the French besieged behind the bastions, Malta under the British, the building of the Verdala Fortress within St Clement's Retrenchment, the two world wars, the Royal Naval School, the International School of Malta, up to present times.

Then it was also immensely interesting to go around and speak with the various individuals and hear their human stories. I got to know about the trauma of a five-year-old, having left war-stricken Britain, only to end up at Kalafrana with her parents and then sent on a coach with complete strangers for her first day at school at Verdala.

Another ex-student had visited Malta several times and during his stays he had visited quite a number of cemeteries until he finally found the grave of his friend who sadly had died while still a student at Verdala.

During the reunion dinner held at La Dolce Vita a donation was made by the expat Verdalanans to the headmaster for the restoration of the Victorian dome on top of the hall. Recently an awareness campaign group was set up at Guzeppi Despott JL to have this dome restored professionally. The donation was greatly appreciated by all members of the school staff.

We look forward to meeting more of the former students and staff of the Royal Naval School and would really appreciate any material about the Verdala story to enrich our archive section. Martin Azzopardi or myself can be contacted at the school on tel. 2182-1413.

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