

# Object Summary

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## Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: John

## Muscat

### Date

27 January 2021

### Primary Maker

John Muscat

null

### Dimensions

40 minutes 13 seconds

null

### Extent

1 digital audio recording (WAV)

### Object Type

Oral history

null

null

### Collection

Malta Dockyard Oral History project

## **Museum**

Malta Maritime Museum

## **Registration Number**

MMM.AV0010

## **Description**

This recorded interview was made as part of the Malta Dockyard Oral History project by the Digitisation Unit, Heritage Malta, under the direction of Joe Meli. John joined the dockyard as an engine fitter apprentice. After the apprenticeship he was assigned to the fitters-afloat section, where he became a chargeman. He also spent some time working also with the Newbuilding section. John retired in 1995.

## **Transcript / Summary**

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) He spent six years as an apprentice, then one year at the machine shop working on the lathe, then went to work with the afloat section. Later on, he was promoted to chargeman, but after four months he resigned as he felt he was not adequate for the post. However, Mr Ellul convinced him to apply again for a chargeman, and Muscat agreed to sit for a 2-hour examination. (03:30) To join the dockyard he went to Mdina for private lessons in mathematics, English and geography and in the examination, he placed in the 80th position out of about 2000 candidates, and chose the job of an engine fitter. (04:15) The work of an afloat included machinery generators, main engines, valves, etc. He had good experience working with the afloat section. He was then sent to No.1 Dock where he applied for the position of a foreman. Then Mr Rowe proposed to send him on the new building of the Chinese product carriers. He was very happy doing the new building work, where he used to start the compressors, check that the temperature is right, check the oil etc. They went on sea trials. He remembers one incident where the alarm system went on accidentally. (10:45) He recalls when he took an electric shock of 440V, they had to turn the main engine through the turning gear that had a 50HP electrical motor. Muscat was on the control switch of the motor and someone opened a valve and water leaked on

the control, and as soon as he touched it, he was practically thrown away, but he states that he was not hurt.

Another incident he remembers was when once during night, they were working on a ship, named Bide Ford. He mentions that the bullwheel had some damage and they had to change it but suddenly they had an electricity failure. Then they realised that because of the strong wind, the ship broke the mooring wires. The ship then started moving the No.5 dock gate, where there was a Norwegian ship. All the workers working in the dock fled to the machine shop, because had the ship hit the dock gate, and damaged it, a very serious accident could have happened because of the sudden water flooding of the dock. (14:30) The newbuilding mentioned above, were the two product carriers that were built for Chinese owners. The tanks were painted blue by a contractor from Scotland specialised on this work. (15:30) He mentions when once he was at the machine shop and the Admiralty was leaving and Bailey was taking over. Mr Bailey came to the workshop explained to him that “... about 27 ships pass by Malta and if we attract even a small a percentage of them, the future of the workers would be good.” Another time is when he was with some of the management, and a ship arrived in the yard. The ship had a very extensive grounding damage affecting also the engine room. Their work was that they had to remove the turbine, refit it and re-align it, after the shipwrights had completed the bottom repairs. His instructor was a Mr Baldacchino, and at that time they were asked to work on Sunday, which was not usual in Malta even through religious beliefs. On pay day, he met the Naval Commander, who commented to John that he must be very happy with the pay. And John, who was still on an apprentice's pay, took his pay packet which contained about three pounds for a week and showed it to the commented commander and commented “... for this sir? Which, at least, you get for every day ...” Entering the dockyard-Salaries, clocking in / out (18:30) He used to work from 07:00 up to 16:30. Then there were various changes, for example the break instead of being 30 minutes was increased to 45 minutes. When working during the break they had the option to leave half an hour before the normal time. He also remembers the shift system, where the first shift started at 06:30 up to 14:30 and the second shift was a back-up force that shorter from 16:00 to 21:00 hrs. Some even stayed overtime until 23:00 hrs or till 01:00. He states they used to work a full week in the evening once in 2 months. (22:45) The wage of a tradesman, when he started working at the Dockyard was of £6/5s and sometimes it

went up to £7 with allowances, such as obnoxious conditions, danger money and others. (25:15) He couldn't say too much about the Admiralty time, as he was still an apprentice. During Bailey's management, Mintoff was biased against the situation, but when Bailey left there was a time when the yard was using a shift system, so there were a lot of things that were doubled like chargemen, foreman and managers and in his opinion, this was where the yard started to decline as the overheads increased. Once Mintoff held a meeting with the yard workers and stated the dockyard had more commanders (fizzjali) than soldiers. The number of workers per gang reduced, so the number of chargemen increased. (27:00) There was a worker who used to work with him and then became a surveyor. (28:00) He states that accidents happened every day, as they did not have safety shoes and instead, they wore sandals to work. Muscat mentions when, one was passing through the boiler-room and a brick fell on his head and as a result had to have 15 stitches. Muscat is deaf from the right ear as he worked in loud noises coming from the tools that they were using and with noise coming from working generators. However, by time safety was given importance and the workers were given safety equipment. When Muscat was a chargeman, he was quite strict with his men on safety wear and practices. Looking back-Skills gained(33:30) Muscat mentions that he learned everything at the Dockyard. In fact, he states that when he bought his own place, he did all the electrical installation and the bathroom work all by himself. Of course, he asked an electrician to ensure that everything was done well. He also fixed the tiles. (34:00) After he retired, he continued manual work for his children. He employed a person to dig a well and then he coated it with cement by himself. He did the drain system too and also did the bathroom rooms of both his daughter and son. (34:45) As hobbies he used to collect stamps and tele-cards. (35:30) He mentions once when he went to the tank cleaning station where there was a new Canadian ship recently delivered, to check a reach rod that was damaged. Unfortunately, there was a gas leak, that he noticed when his people were acting as if they were dizzy and sleepy. Luckily they got out of the tank in time and before it was gas-free they did not carry out more work.