

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Frans

Scerri

Date

4 March 2021

Primary Maker

Frans Scerri

null

Dimensions

29 minutes 15 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.AV0030

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. Frans entered the shipyard in 1955 as a joiner apprentice. On completion of his apprenticeship, he worked in the Joiners' Shop at the No.1 dock area. In 1964 he became an estimator with the industrial section and in 1980 he moved as leading estimator in the Newbuilding section. This Newbuilding section was moved in 1986 from the Malta Drydocks to the Malta Shipbuilding at Marsa, from where he retired in 2001 as Estimating manager.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) He entered the dockyard as a joiner apprentice during the Admiralty, hence it was six years long. As a joiner apprentice, they had the following workshops:- The Main Shop, where all the large projects were carried out.- Wheelwrights, which took care of works on wood wheels.- Sawmills- Sprayers- Submarines, this is where he was allocated. (01:45) During the Admiralty, they had to go to school while learning the trade, where a qualified tradesman is in charge of teaching them the knowhow of the trade. In his case, he had already attended a technical school so he already had an idea of the trade such as using the right tools and how to make dovetails (mincotti). During the dockyard, he went to school at the dockyard college for four years, where the teachers were all British. Furthermore, during his time, since they were a lot of apprentices, every year they used to halve the number of apprentices attending school. His entry had 240 apprentices, they ended up with a total of 30 students continuing school-all depending on the number of people needed within each trade. The last remaining apprentices were earmarked for higher technical positions. In fact,

during his 5th-year apprentice, he was given the position of a junior draughtsman, so that afterwards he could be promoted to a draughtsman. (04:00) Unfortunately during his apprenticeship, there was the transition from the Admiralty to Bailey, and when it came to getting the promotion to draughtsman, management wanted to pay them less than a joiner, so they did not accept and went back to their trade as joiners, where Frans stayed from 1961 till 1964. (04:45) In 1964, he then applied for a vacancy as an estimator with the shiprepair department. Since joinery work was not considered as a main trade in estimating, he was not chosen. Coincidentally, there was a section in the Estimating Department that did estimates for industrial work, that needed a joiner to make estimates for tenders. And Frans was offered that position instead. There he spent till 1980 taking on the work from the industrial section. (06:00) In the 1980s, the Shipbuilding section was started and he got the position of a leading estimator with the Shipbuilding section. In 1986, the section was then transferred to Marsa. Many people from the dockyard were transferred to the Marsa shipbuilding due to the fact that there weren't any experienced people in the shipbuilding section yet. After a while, they wanted to be transferred back to the dockyard but management did not accept this transfer. In 1989, he applied for the post of estimating manager within the estimating department of Malta Shipbuilding yard, where he stayed there up to 2001, up to retirement (08:00) The wheelwright section was in its last phase when he entered the dockyard as there were only a few wooden wheels left at that time. Entering the dockyard-Reasons for joining(08:30) Apprenticeship-as joiners, they used to buy their own tools, apart from the ones that they were able to do themselves. The instructor, during Christmas, as a present used to give them tools as well. (09:15) The Shiprepair dockyard was already doing shipbuilding works, A contract with a Russian client of 7 timber carriers-which was then moved to Marsa for completion. Then more tenders were issued for works, such as single buoy moorings, Norway tankers, tug boats, and supply vessels. However, the yard did not have competitive prices. He recalls, that in 1976, they were sending workers to Germany and Yugoslavia, to train before the shipbuilding came along.He, asked management to be sent for training so as to acquire the way the foreign yards were working in terms of production rates, etc. He was then sent for two months to Germany-their system was totally different because each job had an allocated timeframe. (11:30) The industrial section in the dockyard had a lot of work. Every

tender that was issued, the government would first send it to the dockyard even if it was not work that could be done at the dockyard. (12:15) The fabrication of the first cranes at the Malta Freeport was a tender that was given to the dockyard for estimation. The Malta shipbuilding shed and the Ta' Qali ground stand cover were other projects that passed through him. (13:00) Colleagues, estimators, within the industrial section, that he remembers: Chief (the manager, but at the time referred to as chief) was Mr. Cassano, Leading was Anthony Caruana (Known as Cineg), Emanuel Sammut, Joe Bugelli (14:00) The process of issuing the estimate was that of the estimator used to go initially to the leading estimator, who checked their work. The chief would then pass the work to the departmental manager to give the go-ahead and issue the tender. (14:45) At the New Building in the Malta Drydocks: Chiefs were Horace Fenech and Joe Meli. Frans was the Leading estimator, Vince Tabone on the mechanical section, Matty Saliba on the electrical section and Michael Cilia on the construction section. The tenders, apart from getting approval from himself as leading and the managers, needed to be discussed with the commercial manager (Charles Montefort). (15:30) They also carried out a post-mortem to evaluate the results of the projects. (15:45) When he was doing ship estimates, he got a lot of different feedback about the way he did the estimates, he adapted a system for himself by providing three values: the market value, his estimate and how much it will cost in practice. Entering the dockyard-Swan Hunter / Bailey / changeovers (16:30) Unrests in Malta-Bailey came into play, when the Admiralty decided that their shipyard in Malta was not required, however eventually for the people's sake, the Admiralty kept half of the workforce with the plan to taper them gradually. The other half of the workforce were transferred with Bailey's management, where the ships changed from naval ships to Commercial ships. The workers were not happy with the change. One of the issues that they had was the way they docked the ships, especially since the construction of the ship changed from v-shaped to a flat bottom. (16:30) The workers wanted to apply the system of shoring commercial ships as that applied to naval ships. Eventually they accepted the fact that much less shoring is required on a commercial ship. (18:15) When they transferred management, from Admiralty to Bailey, they had received a letter stating the conditions under the new management. The conditions practically remained the same. Entering the dockyard-Dockyard layout (18:45) The submarine section, where he was allocated, was situated in No.1

dock, Cospicua, while the other shops were on the sides of the dock. Next to theirs, there was the battery shop (servicing batteries for the submarine), the fitters' shop and their section, together with the instruments shop, was on top of it. (19:30) In their shop, they had the Planing machine (cana) and a sawing machine (lupa) and a band saw. Their main job was that of dismantling the furniture (although half of it was already broken by the sailors) and taking it to the shop for repair; they also changed the lining of the areas (this used to be made from plywood and eventually Formica was introduced)-the base between the frames (majjieri), stripping it from everything, including wiring and doing it all as new. (21:15) They would transport the batteries, which were about 4 feet, to the battery shop for servicing and to put them back, their job was, apart from coating it with tar, they used to make oak bearers, with gratings on it, coating it with wax because the acid did not affect the wax. Then, the electricians would fit the batteries accordingly, and then the joiners hammered in wedges (filsa) for alignment. Finally, they would do a catwalk, hanging from the ceiling. Since the batteries were live with electrical current, everything needed to be insulated, including tools and fixtures, to prevent electrical shocks from the high voltage. (25:15) Visits-Gaddafi visited the yard more than once. He remembers also the Chinese table tennis national team.