Object Summary

Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Anthony Grech

Date

22 September 2021

Primary Maker

Anthony Grech

null

Dimensions

1 hour 23 minutes 24 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.AV0073

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. Anthony Grech started his apprenticeship in 1971, followed by higher education and then work as a mechanical fitter on shiprepair projects. Tony moved to the Drawing office where he also worked on new buildings, until he left the yard in 2009 during the closing-down process.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) Education-Dockyard school (00:30) Grech describes the system to join the Dockyard. He begins by stating that first applications are submitted, then whoever is interested should apply and sit for an exam. The exam was an aptitude test, which came from the English system and was probably still based on the Admiralty system. This was a test to determine the technical thinking ability of the applicant, and was done near the Bormla Gate (probably refers to South Gate), where there was the canteen on the left-hand side. Then, according to the one' s placement in the test, one would attend for an interview for the final assessment. Grech states that in 1971, about 60 apprenticeships were chosen. The choice of trade was given according to the order of merit, for example if someone came first, he would have the benefit to choose first. He states that at that time, the trend was to choose the role of a mechanical fitter. He adds that previously, in the 1950s, the trend was that trade of electrical fitters had priority. Education-Apprenticeship process (03:00) When he started his apprenticeship, he attended the training centre. He remembers that since they were a group of 60, they were divided into 8 groups of 7, which adds up to 56, but the Education commission introduced textiles as a trade for the first time, and therefore, they were divided into group of 7 coming from different trades, meaning that not all 7

apprentices of the group were mechanical fitters. Then they started the different trade modules, which included; forge work, wood work, sheet metal, pipe work, bench fitting, machining, welding and gas cutting, brazing and electrical. Every module lasted forfourweeks. The training was basically hands on experience like forging, they learned to do a chisel (skarpell), hook (ganc), box spanner, etc.-they learned the basic things that one would learn in forging. (05:00) They were also taking theory lectures related to the trade module. Once forging module was finished, he would go onto the next module, and he went on woodwork. There he learned the basics as well, for example how to make a wood-joint (mincott), and how to use manual tools and not machines. Education-Apprenticeship process (05:30) There they also learned how to make the famous wood box for tools. Once it was done, they paint it and write their name and number, which in the case of Anthony Grech it was 7135. To a certain point, the box was done as they required it throughout all their working lives. Because, lockers in 1970s and 1980s did not exist. They also made a steel box, mostly used for tools. (08:00) Grech mentions that all modules were interesting. In fact, he states that once the modules were over, they were not masters but were capable of offering a lot. In addition, he states that 99.9% of the Dockyard employees, installed by themselves the house electrical system. They had Nardu Farrugia as their electrical instructor, who taught them basic domestic installation, like, main switch, distribution box, power point, power line and lightning. (09:15) During pipe work they learned the conventional way, example, that they have to cut the pipe and then weld it. They also learned the basics there. The use of modules was that when one goes afloat, these trades would become useful. (09:45) Forge work was interesting too, and there they learned how to do hardening and tempering of chisels (Skripel) and also learn molecular change of the material. There was also, gas cutting and welding.Since Grech was coming from a technical school he already had some basic technical knowhow, but of course, there were others that did not have any idea of handling a tool. (10:45) When all modules were completed, there would be three more months remaining from the first year. Then the three months the apprentices would be given intensive training related to their trade. In fact, he states that he did a bench vice (morsa) and v-blocks, in order to learn how to use the shaping machine.Grech adds that apart from the practical work, they had to attend technical courses. The apprentices were allocated to different

levels of courses depending on their qualifications. Grech and others fitters had O-Levels passes and during the first years they attended the MT Course. The dockyard also offered scholarship for those who did well and Anthony was one of them. The scholarship was on a period of four years, full time at MCAST. They either attended to courses in OTD or HTD, which were English City and Guilds examinations. (13:30) They were privileged because the Degree course of the mechanical engineers were not held at University of Malta but took place at MCAST. So, they had the same lecturers that taught the Degree level. Mr De Gray, who worked with the education used to check up on them and gave them any stationary that they needed, and above all, he also used to give them their wages, amounted to 4 pounds (erba liri) per week. (15:00) During the summer holidays, they were back in the shipyard as apprentices, continuing training. Grech mentions that they could be allocated, two months in a factory (machine shop), or a garage or at the drawing office. For the first 2 years, they were not sent afloat. In this way, they were exposed to the various works within their trade and in a way to other trades. (16:30) The apprentice was based on a 5-year period, but there were some exceptions, that if one is successful in his course examinations, his apprenticeship would be reduced by 6 months or even a year. When he went with the afloat section as part of his trade apprenticeship, he was sent with an instructor who was an established tradesman who helped him to gain experience. Education-Apprenticeship process (18:30) When the apprenticeship period is over, they are asked to sit for a test job. Grech, as a fitter did this test at the training centre. His trade test was the machining of cast valve. (20:15) When he became a fitter, the possibilities were various such as: the machine shop, the afloat section, the Yard plant section or the garage. Grech was sent with the chargeman Salvu Pace. Usually a guy (or gang) of fitters consisted of 6 pairs. He states that everything that one has learned during the apprenticeship, now had to be put in practice. In the yard it was common knowledge that the gangs with their continuous experience of the types of jobs that they carried out, were actually on different levels depending on the type of work they were given. (23:30) Grech states that the gang he formed part of, had work which consisted of main engines, generators and other machinery. Some of his friends did not like to work overtime, and the manager did not like this attitude and this affected the type of work that they were given. Entering the dockyard-Dockyard layout (26:30) Grech mentions that now come the use of the

‘famous’ wooden box. It was like a hall where racks made of two tiers were located. The boxes were located in these racks. He mentions that the hall relatively small in size. In fact, Grech used to joke and say that they were like in a ghetto of Varsavia. This place was their changing area, with no lockers or clothes hangers. The situation in this place that they were in was unimaginable. (30:00) Grech’ s chargeman was Salvu Pace, who had the defect list (work list), and it was divided sections such as engineering, electrical, etc. The chargeman is given the jobs with their numbers (job numbers) that he had to do with his gang. Jobs such as: generator cylinder head to be lifted, cleaning of heads, grinding and so on. So, the chargeman gives these job numbers to the workers (generally in pairs) to perform that assigned tasks. Family and Social Life-Friendships between workers (32:00) Grech states that the workers treated their superiors seriously and there was no familiarity. He mentions that workers could only talk only to the next line superior. This did not mean that they were not allowed to communicate with a foreman or a shiprepair manager. (33:15) The engineering work was varied, for example to removal of a propeller, which was hard work. By time this changed to better processes which reduced the hard work. (37:15) He also speaks about the main engine. The classification of a ship, generally requires that every three years, certain main engine work has to be done on the cylinder heads, pistons, etc. He mentions that a medium sized ship, from the sump up to the cylinder head, there is a height of approx. three storeys. After the work of the main engine is completed, the ship would carry out basin trials at the jetty (moll) where they test the engine by turning it slow, to make sure that the shell bearings (bronzini) are not overheating. Sometimes sea trials are also carried out. Entering the dockyard-Dockyard layout (38: 45) The dockyard facilities developed with the technical development of the ships. The yard had the facilities to make white metal bearings. Grech states that the Dockyard catered for everything and was practically self-sufficient. (41:30) He mentions also that the fitter had work in tanks or pump rooms. Entering the dockyard-Salaries, clocking in / out (41:45) The working hours at the yard was usually between 07:30 to 15:30, and with a 30- minute break. He states that overtime was usually two hours, but it depended on the work being carried out, because if they were working on main engines the work would be continuous. There was also a voluntary night shift. The first safety shoes, was introduced in 1978, and the worker had to pay half of its price. Before there was no health and safety.

Also, they were disciplined, for example if they punched out at 15:30, and the rule for afloat workers was that they can leave the ship at around 15:10. Then there was the night shift, but as already mentioned there was also another list of volunteers. (47:00) Grech together with his friend went to a travelling party in Libya, and he said that it was a good experience, where they had to change a crankshaft of an oil rig generator. The rig was so big that it could not enter the harbour. Then in late 1980s the rig came to Malta and anchored near Filfla. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (49:00) In the 1980s he went to the drawing office. Eventually the drawing office changed its nomenclature to Technical Support Unit. The difference in this department was that when they were given the defect list, they worked on their own and not in pairs, unless they were working on a propeller. They had to check where they were needed to assist the ship manager on the work requirements. They were involved in arranging the attendance of manufacturers' service engineers for specialised work, also the preparation of the technical specifications of any material or equipment required for the work. (52:15) For the material that was required to be bought like, valves, and other items, they had to go to three suppliers, to finally choose the best supplier in terms of cost/delivery time. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (56:00) With reference to the system of correspondence, he states that, at the time (around the 80s), emails and faxes did not exist. But they had the telex. Any correspondence with a supplier was through telexes. They used to fill in a telex form in the morning and at 10 the runner come and pick up the telexes. In the afternoon, the runner brought back a copy of the telex, in order to be checked to make sure there are no mistakes especially in the technical details.The same can be said for drawings. When there was the requirement to send drawings to suppliers, this had to be sent by post. However, for at those times, the dockyard was still technologically advanced. They had printers, a photographic system to take photos of drawings (the negatives of these photos were about 4 x 3 inches and were called stat-files), they had copying machines to make copies of tracings (Drawings on the tracing paper). Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (1:01:15) At the dockyard in the drawing office they had handwritten ledger books detailing all the equipment existing in the yard. Every item had a yard number and a bin card number, showing the day when it was

bought and the company name. They had all the records of every equipment too, example of every lathe, pump and crane. Then the mentality was, that any item that was scrapped, the blue prints and manuals would also be disposed. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (1:04:30) The drawings used to be made on a type of printing paper, which with water becomes like a cloth pure linen. In the dockyard, until 1960, the draughtsman used to draw on the boards. He showed some ink pens that were used in the older times.Once someone told him how they used to make copies of drawings. To make a print on a blue print, they used to put them on each other, then they used to put them in a big tray and fill it with some type of granules and leave them in the sun. Then with the sun the drawing on the blue print is passed on to the print. (1:15:45) When they were doing the cover on the No.3 dock, its measurement between the rails coincided with the position of three bollards, dating back to Queen Victoria. These were removed and donated to a foundation. These are presently at Rinella. (1:20:00) Prior the 1970s the drawing office, was involved in drawings for the new building. He recalls the Therese and Marianne which were the two small ships built in No.3 Dock. Then there were various new constructions for Single Buoy Mooring (SBM), as well as barges (braken). The involvement of the drawing office included a lot of shipbuilding, when they took the Chinese cargo vessels. The drawing office was also involved when the two Power Stations of Palermo and England were dismantled and re-assembled in Malta. After they ended up focusing more on rig reconstruction. (1:22:15) According to Grech, one interesting job that the drawing office did was the reconstruction of a propeller damage, were they assisted and reported on the work carried out.