

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Norman

Grech

Date

23 November 2021

Primary Maker

Norman Grech

null

Dimensions

53 minutes 33 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.AV0094

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. Norman Grech joined the shipyard in 1978. as an apprentice on Yacht and Boat building. In 1979 he started at the Manoel Island Yacht Yard working on various repair jobs. He worked at different levels at the yacht yard up to his retirement as a manager in 2022.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) Education-Apprenticeship process (00:30) In 1978 he had the opportunity to join the Malta drydocks. He sat for the examination followed by an interview and joined the yard as a ‘Yacht and Boat builder’ apprentice on 4th September. They were given an induction course to familiarise themselves with the workplace and then they were sent to Hay Wharf at the Nautical School, where the drydocks had a workshop managed by Joe Baldacchino who gave both practical and theory lectures to the apprentices. After one year, in 1979, they were transferred to Manoel Island yacht yard to continue their training. When they finished the course of yacht and boat building, they began to integrate themselves with the work at Manoel Island, which consisted of work on yachts, work of wood, aluminium etc. the work varied a lot involving yacht interiors, overhauls, etc. Education-Interesting training and skills (04:30) During that time, decking was one of the most interesting works that was carried out. The teak wood planks, with a thickness of 2 inches, were fitted directly on the steel deck beams. The process involved the dismantling of the complete interior outfit of the yacht, the steel deck beams were grit blasted and painted. The teak planks were then fixed to the beams with screws from the underside. The edges between the planks were then caulked (imqalfat) from the underside, and filled with hot

tar (qatran) from the upper side. Tar was then substituted with a compound that made the process easier and safer. Nowadays, due the lack of teak wood, the system of decking changed completely. The solid teak wood is only ½ inch thick and placed on marine plywood. The teak wood edges are made in a way so as to eliminate the process of caulking. Education-Interesting training and skills (07:15) In order to keep the original design of the deck planks, they used to take notes and sketches, measurements, and sometimes times they even took photos. A small detail about decking is that the deck has three important points: the two margin planks and the king plank with joggles (dras). The planks follow the shape of the margin plank and fit into the joggled king plank. The king plank collects the planks together, in other words, it is the meeting point of all these plank joints (fili) at the centre of the boat. The screw fastening has been eliminated and glue or rubber compounds were used. (11:00) On bigger boats, a new system they used, was to make a template of the deck and in the workshop the plywood is cut according to the template, which is then fitted on board and apply glue to the plywood and stick it to the deck. Education-Interesting training and skills (13:30) Other work that was carried out at the yacht yard was on wooden hulls with the frames also made from wood. These frames were heavy and shaped, so they required band-saw machines to cut to shape. They used different fastenings. The wood stringers were fitted longitudinally to hold the frames in place. Then there was the planking covering the hull of the boat starting from the bottom, moving upwards to the deck. They used to put the planks (tavli) in an oven, steam it to make it more malleable and shape to fit on the frames and fix it to close the hull. Grech gives detailed information about working methods used on the wooden hulls, such as the marking of the shape of the planks to have a faired finish and the method to make the hull water-tight. (19:45) In 1984, they had a yacht named 'Lilly', re-named 'Sahret', that had 2-inch thick hull planking on steel framing. This had a lot of warping which led a lot of problems on the plank joints. It also had corrosion at the bottom parts of the frames. So, their task was to renew them. They marked all the planking with number by rows. Once removed the planks were sanded and treated. Then the next step was to renew the bottom part of the frame using a planned sequence so as to have the least possible distortion of the hull. Then they refitted the teak planks, using a new technique by cutting a rebate on the edges of the planks and fitting wood strips glued with epoxy, that ensured the water-tightness of the

hull. This yacht owner was very satisfied with the work and is still a client till present day. Education-Projects (28:45)

In 1984 and 1985 an Italian company built four hydrofoils in Marsaxlokk. These Aliscafi (Hydrofoils) were fully outfitted at the Manoel Island Yacht Yard. They installed the main engines and all the machinery, electrical installation, fire systems, insulation and accommodation, etc. It was a major big job. They were made of aluminium plating and the connections were riveted. They used a compressed air riveting machine. They had other yachts which were riveted, but these were iron rivets that were heated and were larger than the aluminium rivets used on the Aliscafi. (35:15) He remembers that Brian Wilks was the last British manager at the Yacht yard, Then, if he remembers correctly, there was Ray Balzan. The staff was quite numerous with about 120 workers. At that time, Manoel Island was building two type of boats/hulls which were quite popular: the 22-foot Sailing boat Calypso, and the Melita, which was a single-engine motor boat. They carried out all the work on the fibreglass moulds, the engine outfitting, windows, seats, etc. they even went to compete with them in England at a London Boat Show. Family and Social Life-Other family working in the yard (40:00) Grech mentions that his mother, Carmelina Grech worked at the Manoel Island Yacht Yard as secretary of the general manager. The offices were also well manned with estimators, accounts, etc. There were two foremen, Spiru Vella and another one. There were departments for every trade. Everything was done in-house. At that time, he remembers that there was the issue where everyone wanted to work over-time. The textiles section was transferred to Manoel Island from the Drydocks. The textiles eventually took over the Life-rafts section that overhauled and certified life-rafts. Family and Social Life-Friendships between workers (44:30) At Manoel Island they had a social club, where they organised parties for children during Christmas time. He remembers that when he was young, he attended some of these parties, where they were given food, drinks, and sweets and at the end they were all given a small present. Then there was another party for the workers and their families. (46:30) In the morning they used to go and buy a ticket for food, they order what they like and then go to pick it up from the dockyard from the canteen. The area had a football ground, huts, etc. The football ground did not have turf so walking through it all day did not feel so good.