Report by Prof James D Floyd

On visit to Malta GC, in November 2007 to study the conservation of buildings, carved stonework and other architectural materials, with particular emphasis on heraldic panels.
Frontispiece: *Porte des Bombes, Valletta, Malta. An example of the triumphalist architecture from the time of the knights, richly adorned with heraldry. Even the pilasters are carved into the shape of cannons.* (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_008895a)
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INTRODUCTION
My name is Prof. James D Floyd, aged 60, and I am a professional geologist with the British Geological Survey in Edinburgh. I am of British Nationality and recently gained an MSc (with distinction) in Building Conservation at the School of the Built Environment, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh. My dissertation concentrated on the conservation of heraldic panels in Scotland, a subject which has always been dear to my heart. This degree was undertaken with a view to a modest career change from geology into the conservation profession.

In the immediate future, I will continue to build a computer database and illustrated gazetteer of architectural heraldic panels in Scotland. This project, for which I have received a grant from the St Andrews Fund for Scots Heraldry, includes documentation of the present condition of the panels and their future conservation requirements. No such database of public heraldry in Scotland exists at present.

The Travelling Fellowship was originally brought to my notice by Prof. Phil Banfill, my MSc supervisor at Heriot-Watt University.

STUDY TRIP
The chosen destination for my study trip was Malta, where I intended to investigate conservation methods used on the local buildings and architectural features, with particular emphasis on carved and inlaid stone heraldic panels. My aim was to gain hands-on practical experience and knowledge in this field with a well-established conservation organisation. This work was carried out over 4 weeks in November 2007, a time of year deliberately chosen to be cool, relatively devoid of tourists (and mosquitos!) and with cheaper accommodation therefore likely to be available. A small self-catering apartment at the Manoel Theatre in Valletta was therefore arranged via Heritage Malta.

FINANCE
The total budget was £1500, of which the Fellowship awarded £900 and I raised the balance of £600 from my own savings.
REPORT

Malta is the largest island of a small archipelago (316km²) located in the Mediterranean between Italy and Africa, and lying some 93km south of Sicily and 300km north of Libya (Figures 1 and 2). Like all island communities, and especially those in the Mediterranean, Malta has had a long and tempestuous history of sea-borne traders, pirates and invaders seeking fresh water, food, plunder, slaves and occasionally to settle.

At present a Republic within the Commonwealth, Malta has had, largely due to its strategic position in the Mediterranean, a succession of colonial-style administrations from at least the time of the Romans. As might be expected from their island location and heritage, the Maltese people (pop. 402,000) have a long tradition of seafaring and trading, driven in great part by the largely rocky nature of the island and consequent very limited agricultural possibilities. Indeed, for many centuries, Malta has not been able to feed itself from its own resources and has had to import huge quantities of food, timber, metals and other raw materials and necessities, mainly from Sicily.
Since the rise and spread of Islam in the 8-10\textsuperscript{th} centuries, Malta has always been on the frontline between Christendom and the Muslim world, sometimes lying on one or other side of the divide. One of the most important watersheds in the history of the islands was the donation of Malta, in 1530, as the base of the Sovereign Military Order of St John (The Knights of St John) by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V of Spain. The knights had just been expelled from Rhodes in 1522 after a bloody siege by Sulieman the Magnificent and had been seeking a new home. As a military and hospitaller order, dating from the time of the Crusades, they proceeded to build their fortified headquarters in Fort St Angelo on the south side of the Grand Harbour. After another heroic and this time successful defence against the Muslims, who besieged them in the Great Siege of 1565, the Knights decided to build a new fortified city (named Valletta after Grand Master Jean de la Valette, their commander during the Great Siege) on the north side of the Grand Harbour on the rocky Scieberras peninsula. For the next 230 years, the Knights maintained an almost siege mentality and spent a fortune developing massive fortifications, mostly around Valletta but also elsewhere on the islands. It is the remains of these structures, and the elaborate Baroque-style churches, palaces, ‘Auberges’ (Figure 3) and
Figure 3. Auberge de Castille, Valletta, built 1574, rebuilt 1741. This was the Maltese base for knights from the langue of Castille, Leon and Portugal. Constructed from Globigerina Limestone it is now used as the Office of the Prime Minister of Malta. Note the huge twin coat of arms at roof level (inset). (Source: J D Floyd, Images JC_008814 and JC_008757)

Figure 4. Coralline Limestone used for gently sloping steps, St Ursula’s Street, Valletta. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_008760)
memorials, commonly adorned with magnificent coats-of-arms, which constitute the principal architectural and heraldic interest in Malta. The Knights were expelled from Malta to Italy in 1797 by the French, who were in turn ousted by the British in 1800. As part of the Treaty of Paris in 1818, until independence on 21 Sept 1964, Malta was a British Dominion. The island was obviously of major strategic military importance to Britain, especially as a naval base and staging post on the way to India, and the story of its heroic defence during the Second World War is well known. On 13 December 1974, Malta GC became a Republic within the Commonwealth, joining the EU on 1 May 2004 and the Eurozone on 1 January 2008.

Figure 5. Among the most characteristic features of Malta are the buses, of which almost every conceivable make, model and age can be found. Here a Sunday morning scene at the Central Bus Station, Valletta. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_008807)

Geologically, the Maltese islands consist almost entirely of limestones and marls of Oligo-Miocene age, in a layer-cake arrangement of hard Lower and Upper Coralline Limestones and intervening layers of soft Globigerina Limestone, Greensand and Blue Clay. Due to their hardness, the Coralline Limestones were originally used for paving stones (Figure 4) and for work near to the sea, where the stone’s natural resistance to decay enabled it to withstand the action of the waves and salt crystalli-
sation. However, most of the buildings in Malta are built of the Globigerina Lime-
stone, which is known locally as Franka. This stone can be easily sawn and carved
and also hardens on exposure to air but is susceptible to decay from (acid) rain and
wind and particularly from the internal crystallisation of salts derived from sea
spray. This means that there is a huge backlog of stone conservation work required
on buildings in the islands.

Work and study programme
For my study trip to Malta, I was hosted by the Conservation Division of Heritage
Malta, the official government heritage and conservation body which has a similar
remit to its sister bodies of English Heritage, Cadw and Historic Scotland in the
UK.

My principal host was Arch. Ruben Abela, Manager of Architecture and Objects
Conservation at the Conservation Division, which has nine separate sections:

- Conservation and Restoration Project Management Office
- Preventive Conservation (environmental monitoring)
- Diagnostic Science Laboratories (analysis, decay problems)
- Documentation (photographic, survey, Library)
- Paintings and Polychrome Sculpture Conservation (on canvas, wood, plaster)
- Objects Conservation (pottery, metal, glass, wood, stone)
- Textiles Conservation (tapestries, military uniforms etc)
- Books and Paper Conservation (manuscripts, vellum)
- Architectural Conservation (buildings and monuments)

The Conservation Division is based at Bighi, on the opposite side of Grand Harbour
from Valletta (Figures 6-7), in classical-style buildings which were formerly part of
the British Naval Hospital (Figure 8). Close links are maintained with the Institute
of Conservation and Management of Cultural Heritage at the University of Malta
and a number of under- and post-graduate classes and practical courses are held at
Bighi.

On my first day at Bighi, I was shown around the well-equipped laboratories, work-
shops and library and discussed my plan of work. Since I had expressed an interest
in conserving heraldic items, and with my geological background, a selection of
carved stone panels had been prepared for me to work on during my visit.
Figure 6  General area of Valletta and Grand Harbour, with various localities indicated. (Source: modified from Google Earth)

Figure 7  The former British Naval Hospital at Bighi on the end of the Kalkara peninsula, with Heritage Malta Conservation Division indicated. (Source: modified from Google Earth)
Workshop-based activity

Stone Conservation 1

The first panel tackled was a beautiful carving of the arms of Grand Master Martin Garzes (GM 1595-1601) in off-white marble dating from the period of the knights (pre-1797). Since such stone is not found on Malta, it must have been imported, probably from Italy, either as a rough block or already carved. Although this piece had been in storage at the Maritime Museum, its precise provenance was not known and it was in a poor state of conservation, with spots and patches of cement, mortar, lime-wash and general grime over the entire surface (Figure 9). A tide-mark of mortar around the centre-line of the piece suggested that it had been sunk into masonry at one time, and four rusty stains on the side indicated the likely position of iron cramps holding it to the wall.

Under the guidance of Frank Chetcuti, stone conservator and sculptor with Heritage Malta, a systematic programme of conservation was carried out on the carving. This involved careful description and documentation of the work in its original pre-
Figure 9a-c. Marble arms of Grand Master (GM) Garzes before (above left), during (above right) and after cleaning (below). In 9c, note the darker horizontal banding within the marble. (Source: J D Floyd, Images JC_008616, JC_008641 and JC_008671)
conservation condition, with particular emphasis on any areas of special concern such as fragility or decay. Scaled digital photographs were taken of every aspect and elevation of the piece before the conservation work commenced.

Cleaning of the surface was then carried out using a fine scalpel, cotton wool swabs and de-ionised water, with repeat photography after each additional stage. During this process, the normal method was to divide the surface into several areas with tape and clean one test area first to check on any adverse effects before proceeding to clean the remainder. Though time-consuming, the softer mortar and lime-wash surface deposits were easily removed using this method. However, the cement-based mortar was too hard for this technique and, as this was mostly on the reverse side of the piece, no further action was taken to remove this material.

Since the marble was quite hard, yet still had a certain amount of ingrained grime, gentle scrubbing with toothbrush and conservation-grade detergent was carried out, the soiled water being removed using cotton wool swabs. As a final stage, the marble surface was whitened using a 10% ammonium carbonate solution soaked into cotton wool poultices and applied to the surface. Each poultice was left in position for about 5 minutes before removal and the surface scrubbed with toothbrush, de-ionised water and cotton-wool swabs to remove the last of the chemicals and grime. As before, this technique was carried out initially on less vulnerable areas at the side of the piece in order to test for any adverse effects before commencing work on the main surface.

Stone Conservation 2

The second conservation piece tackled was a remnant of the British period, a memorial panel dated 1913 commemorating the award of a competition cup to No.2 Company, Royal Malta Artillery (RMA) (Figure 10). The RMA was a locally raised unit with Regular British Officers, which some 3 decades later showed outstanding service and courage manning anti-aircraft guns against German and Italian bombers during the Second World War aerial siege of Malta.
Figure 10. Commemorative panel for the Royal Malta Artillery, 1913, before conservation. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_008662)

Figure 11. Royal Air Force Station Krendi badge probably from the entrance gate to the former RAF Station. It features a phoenix rising from the flames on a background of a Maltese Cross. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_008685)
This panel was in soft Globigerina Limestone and required much more gentle treatment than the marble. Similar problems of limewash splash were apparent together with some physical damage to the façade. Detailed documentation was followed by careful cleaning with cotton wool swabs. The names of many of the soldiers recorded on the panel reveal the characteristic highly restricted selection of surnames prevalent on the island, such as Attard, Cassar, Spiteri, Vassallo and Xerub.

Stone Conservation 3

The third stone conservation project was the station badge from RAF Krendi carved in Globigerina Limestone and possibly dating from the Second World War (Figure 11). The façade was damaged in several places and several of the letters had been replaced by ‘plastic repair’, a term coined for the superficial building up of missing stonework using various mixtures of lime or cement mortar or resin. As with all repair work, the skill of the craftsman is crucial and in this case the workmanship was obviously of a very crude nature. The conservation challenges were similar to the RMA panel and required delicate removal of grime and superficial debris.

Field work

As well as gaining conservation experience in the workshop, visits were made to various sites and buildings in the care of Heritage Malta to inspect and assess conservation work in progress and appreciate the ongoing problems which require to be tackled.

Fort Ricasoli

This fort, on the peninsula forming the south entrance of Grand Harbour, has a mix of structures (as is commonly the case in Malta) dating from the time of the knights right up to the British period. However, due to its exposed nature on a clifftop, erosion by storm waves is gradually destroying the seaward side of the structures (Figure 12). As a result, collapse of the roof of a sea cave had resulted in the formation of a large crater (Figure 13) through which several iron cannon had fallen into the sea. Marine conservation of underwater artefacts is a growing aspect of
Figure 12. Sea erosion of fortifications at Fort Ricasoli. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009250)

Figure 13. Hosts Frank Chetcuti (left) and Ruben Abela (right) inspecting collapsed sea-cave at Fort Ricasoli. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009241)
work in Malta and an attempt was to be made to recover and conserve the cannon. However, consolidation of the main stonework destroyed by the sea is probably a lost battle as the costs would be very high indeed and the rewards fairly limited.

However, as a result of its long military history, iron cannons are quite plentiful on Malta, with many of them used as bollards along the quays. Some recovered examples awaiting conservation at Bighi are shown in Figure 14.

St John’s Co-Cathedral, Valletta

This church, in the centre of Valletta, was the main chapel of the Knights of St John. As such, it was lavishly endowed with valuable paintings, sculptures and gold leaf and each ‘langue’ or tongue (sub-groups of the Knights broadly representing the different languages spoken) had a chapel of their own. Many of the Grand Masters and knights were buried either in the crypt or under the floor of the church, commonly below elaborately decorated marble slabs displaying their coats of arms (Figures 15-17). This heraldic extravaganza has led to the floor of St Johns being described as *the most beautiful floor in the world* (Munro 2004) and is certainly without equal in the western world.

However, the conservation problems associated with such a floor and the surrounding chapels are considerable, partly due to the sheer quantity of material but also because the church is still in regular daily use both for services and for major events such as university graduation ceremonies. The coloured marble marquetry insets on the tombs are remarkably thin (only a few mm) and concentrated loads can easily

![Figure 14. Iron cannons awaiting conservation at Bighi. Most have been previously used as bollards. The lower two may have exploded during use. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_008716)](image-url)
Figure 15. St John’s Co-Cathedral floor, with elaborate marble marquetry on knight’s tomb. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009114)

Figure 16. St John’s Co-Cathedral floor. Skeletons figure quite regularly in the imagery of death on the tombs. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009124)

Figure 17. St John’s Co-Cathedral floor. This example is typical of the triumphant style of many of the heraldic monuments in Malta, with flags, swords, cannon and trumpets surrounding the shield. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009130)
crush the delicate stone. Although shoes with pointed heels have been banned from
the building, the legs of the many chairs which are constantly being re-arranged can
have a similar destructive effect. The high humidity in Malta can also be a prob-
lem with wood carvings and paintings. Through the good offices of a local heraldic
colleague, HE Adrian Strickland (former Maltese Ambassador in The Hague), I was
introduced to the Conservator of St Johns, Dr Cynthia de Giorgio, who gave me a
conducted tour of some of the normally closed parts of the Cathedral to see a few of
the conservation problems that she has to deal with.

Finally, I was able to purchase a copy of the massive book describing the floor of St
Johns (Dane Munro 2004), complete with coloured photographs of every tomb and
with English translations of the hundreds of Latin inscriptions.

Rabat

The historic capital of the island was the fortified city of Mdina, situated on a rocky
plateau of Upper Coralline Limestone almost in the geographic centre of the island
and therefore furthest from the reach of marauding pirates. In the adjacent suburb
of Rabat, the extensive St Paul’s catacombs dating back to the Roman period have
been excavated out of the soft Globigerina Limestone. A current conservation
problem was caused by a leak from a sewer serving nearby houses, which was al-
lowing foul water to enter the catacombs. Although really requiring an engineering
solution to locate and repair the broken pipe, it is an example of the type of unusual
conservation problems which arise with historic structures from time-to-time. A fur-
ther ongoing concern is the growth of green algae on the stone in the catacombs
caused by the artificial light required for visitors’ safety (Figure 18). This is a com-
mon conservation problem with underground visitor sites throughout the world.

Mdina Cathedral

This church (Figure 20) lies within the fortified walls of the old town of Mdina and
the floor features dozens of beautiful marble marquetry tombs similar to those on
the floor of St Johns in Valletta. However, at Mdina, the memorials are to the bish-
ops and other high dignitaries of the local Catholic Church (Figures 21-22). The conservation issues are similar to those at St Johns, though tempered by the fact that much of the work is of considerably younger vintage, and the foot and other traffic is also probably much lighter.

Figure 18. St Paul’s Catacombs in Rabat. Note the green algae growing on the walls close to the light source. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009045)

Figure 19. Evidence of the British period still abounds in Malta—here a post box in Mdina still retaining the Edward VII monogram. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009474)

Figure 20. Façade of Mdina Cathedral. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009739)
Figure 21. Inlaid coloured marble arms on the tomb of Joann Andreas Sceberras, floor of Mdina Cathedral. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009712)

Figure 22. Inlaid coloured marble arms on the tomb of Joseph Salnitro, floor of Mdina Cathedral. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009564)
Zeitun

Zeitun, located about 7km south of Valletta, is one of the oldest villages on the island, and has a large ‘new’ Parish Church dedicated to St Catherine, the patron saint of the village. Part of the façade of this building is under conservation by Heritage Malta and the work in progress was assessed from the scaffolding. Much of the stonework is decayed from a variety of causes (Figures 23-28) and some of the worst affected pieces will need to be completely re-carved. This project is being used by the building conservation students at the University of Malta as an example of how to carry out various conservation tasks. Money for this conservation work has been donated by anonymous donors, apparently a common occurrence in Malta, at least as far as church buildings are concerned.

In contrast, the ‘old’ Parish Church of St Catherine in Zeitun (Figure 29) is a much more modest structure but perhaps surprisingly, the stonework is in a far better condition than that on the newer structure. It also has a magnificent series of coats of arms of the parish priests going back to the 1400s painted on the plaster around the vestry wall, though the painting is probably not contemporary (Figures 30-31). The paintings form a small but beautiful set of ecclesiastical armorial bearings relating to a single parish and indicate an appreciation of the significance of armorial bearings by the Maltese people and clergy. They nicely contrast with, and complement, the much more magnificent and expensive marble memorials present on the tombs of the Bishops in the floor of the Cathedral at Mdina. However, their location in a small church at Zeitun, with possibly unstable background plaster and unknown paint material used means that these coats of arms should be closely monitored for early signs of possible damage caused by humidity, thermal cycling or salt crystallisation.
Figure 23. St Catherine’s Church, Zeitun. Structural failure in carved stone, showing earlier plastic repair filling fissure above crown. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009296)

Figure 24. St Catherine’s Church, Zeitun. Shrinkage cracking of franka on eroded capital of pilaster. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009317)
Figure 25. St Catherine’s Church, Zeitun. Scaffolding and screen. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009326)

Figure 26. St Catherine’s Church, Zeitun. Eroded statue of St Gregory. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009331)

Figure 27. St Catherine’s Church, Zeitun. Black deposit of pigeon guano on capital of internal corner pilaster. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009314)

Figure 28. St Catherine’s Church, Zeitun. Cracking caused by expansion of iron fixing, with failed plastic repair. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009333)
Figure 29. St Catherine’s Old Parish Church, Zeitun. Main door. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_010096)

Figure 30. St Catherine’s Old Parish Church, Zeitun. Coat of arms of Barthol. Gatto, 1419-29, on the wall of the vestry. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_010132)

Figure 31. St Catherine’s Old Parish Church, Zeitun. Coats of arms of the local parish priests painted on the wall of the vestry. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_010148)
Gozo

The small island of Gozo (pop. 31,000) lies to the north of Malta, across a 6km channel in which lies the even smaller island of Comino (also inhabited). It is accessed by a modern double-ended ferry which shuttles across the Gozo Channel (Figure 32). Gozo is like Malta in miniature, though rather more hilly, and has shared its history, even if it tended to suffer more than its larger neighbour from pirates and sea-borne raiders over the ages due to its small size. Indeed, in July 1551, Gozo was attacked by the Ottomans and Barbary pirates and almost the entire population of 5000 individuals was rounded up and carried off into slavery in Libya. Gozitans sometimes consider themselves a (superior) group apart from the Maltese, a sentiment naturally reciprocated in reverse by the latter. The main city is Victoria (sometimes known as Rabat) which exhibits many of the architectural features common throughout the islands. The Citadel in Victoria is the main fortified structure on the island and was traditionally the place where the population retreated in times of danger. Most of the existing fortifications date from the time of the knights and feature numerous elaborately carved coats of arms on walls and over gateways etc.

Figure 32. One of the pair of Gozo ferries, double-ended vessels which shuttle between Malta and Gozo. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009863)
Gozo, and its capital Victoria, were visited with a view to documenting what architectural heraldry was present and to examine its condition. As at Mdina, the main Cathedral (built 1697-1703) lies inside the fortified walls of the Citadel and has the carved stone arms of Grand Master Ramon Perellos (GM 1697-1720) and the See of Gozo on the façade. The arms of Mgr. Mario Grech, the incumbent Bishop of Gozo since 2006, are painted on a metal cartouche over the main door (Figures 33-34). The main part of the citadel (Figures 35-36) was built by the Knights of St John and their coats of arms can be seen on many of the walls. Some are very eroded, even to the point of being indecipherable (Figure 37).
Stone carving

As part of my study, I was shown how to begin the process of carving the local Globigerina Limestone. This involves splitting pieces off the quarried blocks initially using steel axes. Both the sharp blade and the blunt hammer ends of the axe-head were employed, depending on the stage of work, the blade being used more in the later stages of dressing the stone.

Some practice was necessary to achieve a good split where required, but I found my previous experience of breaking other rock types to be very useful, and a good technique was acquired quite quickly (Figures 38 to 41).

The next stage of carving would be to use small steel chisels and mason’s mallet to create the detail, but there was no time left to start on this subject, which in any case requires at least a modicum of artistic talent!
Figure 38. Splitting Franka stone. Note the technique of placing two fingers on the blade to get best control of the axe. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_010009)

Figure 39. The author dressing Franka (Globigerina Limestone) at Bighi. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_010024)

Figure 40. One of the conservation students splitting Franka using the blunt (hammer) end of an axe. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_010023)

Figure 41. Frank Chetcuti of Heritage Malta demonstrating how to split Franka. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_010018)
CONCLUSIONS

It was an interesting experience to work in another Government institution and to observe how they tackle conservation in a practical way. The ongoing day-to-day situation of trying to balance what is desirable with what is practical given finite resources is a problem common to all conservation organisations, and is especially acute in Malta given the amount of historic material available.

The staff in Heritage Malta were extremely welcoming and well versed in their own profession which, on the architectural side, deals with a rather restricted range of building stone. They were therefore keen for me to give a lecture on the connection between the geology in Scotland, the consequent variety in vernacular architecture and the local conservation problems encountered as a result.

I certainly learned good lessons in how to systematically conserve stone objects, starting with the overall description, listing of any physical, biological and chemical damage, and followed by careful conservation (cleaning etc) in a methodical and recorded manner. It taught me how to observe objects very minutely and try to draw reasonable and justifiable conclusions from my observations – rather like a forensic investigation. It was also good to work alongside professional conservators and appreciate how they tackled real problems. There were certainly differences in their methods and approach to stone conservation, for example they would happily use plastic repair with mortar in a situation where we would almost certainly use pieced-in replacement stone. Of course, the absence of any freezing conditions in Malta is undoubtedly a factor which has a great influence on stone decay, as their soft limestones would have long since crumbled to dust in a Northern European setting. It is therefore possible that plastic repairs are quite acceptable in Malta where they would not be in Britain.

My study visit to Malta has been a valuable learning curve by giving me practical experience in conservation with a well-respected heritage organisation as well as in living and working abroad. This is certainly quite different from going to a country on holiday – if only because you associate with the local workers and not with other holidaymakers. The canteen gossip was about a completely different range of subjects from the UK and the letters page in the Malta Times was especially hilarious.
on occasion. At the same time, I came to appreciate the value of the ex-patriot community in a place like Malta as, after a while, it was good to have a meal and a chat with folk from home. I made contact with the local St Andrews Scots Church in Valletta and found it a useful place to meet people, as it can take some time to make personal contacts in a strange country. However, after a month I was starting to make friends and notice the same people on the 7:30 am bus to work each morning. The buses could be quite an adventure at times, as most of them are real antiques (Figure 43), rather like those I remember in Britain as a child. Fortunately, after a month I had learned my lesson about Malta buses and allowed plenty of time for any critical journeys. Indeed, on the way to catch my return flight to London, I had to use 3 separate buses as the first two broke down en-route to the airport!

The only slight problem with my overall programme was that it took a few days to establish what each party in the arrangement hoped to get out of my visit. This would not have been a problem during a longer visit, but was obviously of greater significance for a short stay when time was of the essence. The language might also have been a difficulty in the longer term, as nowadays Maltese is increasingly being used in preference to English, though almost everyone is also fluent in the latter.

Nevertheless, and in conclusion, I am extremely grateful to the Trustees for awarding me a 2007 Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship which encouraged and allowed me to visit Malta. Although not exactly on the other side of the world, nor involving an extended stay, I would probably not otherwise have gained the impetus and enthusiasm to organise my work, family and other professional commitments in order to give me a clear 4-week window in November 2007 to go to Malta. However, it has whetted my appetite for this tiny but historic and fascinating island country and I will certainly return in future when I have the opportunity.
Some final memories of Malta.

Figure 42. Horse-drawn carriage plying for tourist custom in Mdina. The purpose of the Cardinal’s hat on the horse was not clear. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_009471)

Figure 43. Ancient Bedford bus. These are all lovingly maintained by their drivers and usually have small shrines inside, with pictures of their saint and family. (Source: J D Floyd, Image JC_008806)