

PRESS RELEASE

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INAUGURATION OF HERITAGE MALTA HEAD OFFICE

The inauguration of Heritage Malta's Head Office at the prestigious Old University Buildings in Merchants Street, marks an important milestone in the Agency's development.

Heritage Malta is the national agency of the government of Malta set up in 2002 under the provisions of the Cultural Heritage Act. It came into being on 1st January 2003 and is entrusted with the management of national museums and heritage sites and their collections in Malta and Gozo, including seven UNESCO World Heritage sites.

The Agency is obliged to ensure that museums, collections, sites, buildings and property, movable and immovable, forming part of the cultural heritage owned or administered by it, are conserved, restored, administered, managed, operated, marketed, studied and presented for exhibition, in the best possible way. In order to achieve this, Heritage Malta also seeks to develop relationships with entities and stakeholders who uphold common values and interests.

Malta's heritage is an enduring legacy that the agency is bound to preserve and pass over from one generation to the other whilst creating further awareness and access for all local citizens as well as international visitors. Heritage Malta therefore seeks to act as a champion for education and outreach programmes through various initiatives as well as in the provision of physical and intellectual access to a wider audience in all its sites and museums. The new Head Office embodies the values Heritage Malta upholds. The building itself has undergone careful restoration. Conservation treatment is also being carried out on the wall paintings of this wing of the building by the Malta Restoration Centre, bringing back former dignity to this site.

The new Head Office will also host a lecture/multi purpose room that will be made available for training and development activities and events. This links to the early origins of the building when various attempts were made between 1553 and 1592 to open a Jesuit school/college in Malta. It was in 1592 that Pope Clement VIII ordered that a school be opened to cater for the teaching of philosophy, theology, grammar and humane letters. The local clergy opposed

the location, preferring Mdina to Valletta. However, teaching started in a nearby house in *Strada San Giacomo* (now Merchants Street) Valletta for non-Jesuit students.

In September 1595, the foundation stone of the college was laid by Grand Master Martin Garzes. Two years later, the construction was advanced enough to allow the transfer of classes to the new building which was completed in 1602. The site was approximately divided into the church and the school. The *Collegium Melitense* run by the Jesuits, immediately became the leading teaching establishment in Malta.

Following an explosion in the nearby ammunition powder magazine (Order of St John) in 1634, the premises suffered extensive damages which required radical remodeling in 1647 (design by Francesco Buonamici). In 1639, the Jesuits were accused of political interference by the Knights of St John and were expelled. The school was temporarily closed. However, the Jesuits were readmitted a short time later and the college functioned again as normal.

In 1768, the Jesuits were again expelled by Grand Master Pinto and the college, now known as the Public University of General Studies, and church were placed under the responsibility of conventual chaplains appointed by the Grand Master. Between 1775 and 1779 studies at the University was suspended due to lack of funds. In 1798, Bonaparte ordered the closing of the University and substituted it by a Central School. Following the departure of the French from Malta, lectures were resumed, but attendance was poor. During the early 19th century parts of the building was “rented” out to various entities.

In 1833 Governor Ponsonby requisitioned the ground floor of the building from the University to host Malta’s leading secondary school – the Lyceum. In 1919, the building was again the target of destruction during the *Sette Giugno* insurrection.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, the building was utilized as the Air Raid Precautions Centre for Valletta district. The Lyceum was then split up into five regional branches which dealt with the problem of having all the children concentrated in one place. As time passed, the building became increasingly inadequate and a new Lyceum had to be built in Hamrun in the 1950s. In 1968, the University moved to a new site in Msida. In 1983, the lower floor was inaugurated as the Arts and Design Centre, which subsequently moved to Targa Gap in 2001.

This chequered history of the building is now being conserved after extensive refurbishment of the wing on Merchants Street by Heritage Malta who inaugurated the new premises as their Head Office on Thursday 25th September 2003.



The Heritage Malta website can be seen on www.heritagemalta.org and the contact e-mail is info@heritagemalta.org. The new telephone numbers are 21222966/21222976/21222977 and the fax no. is 21222919.