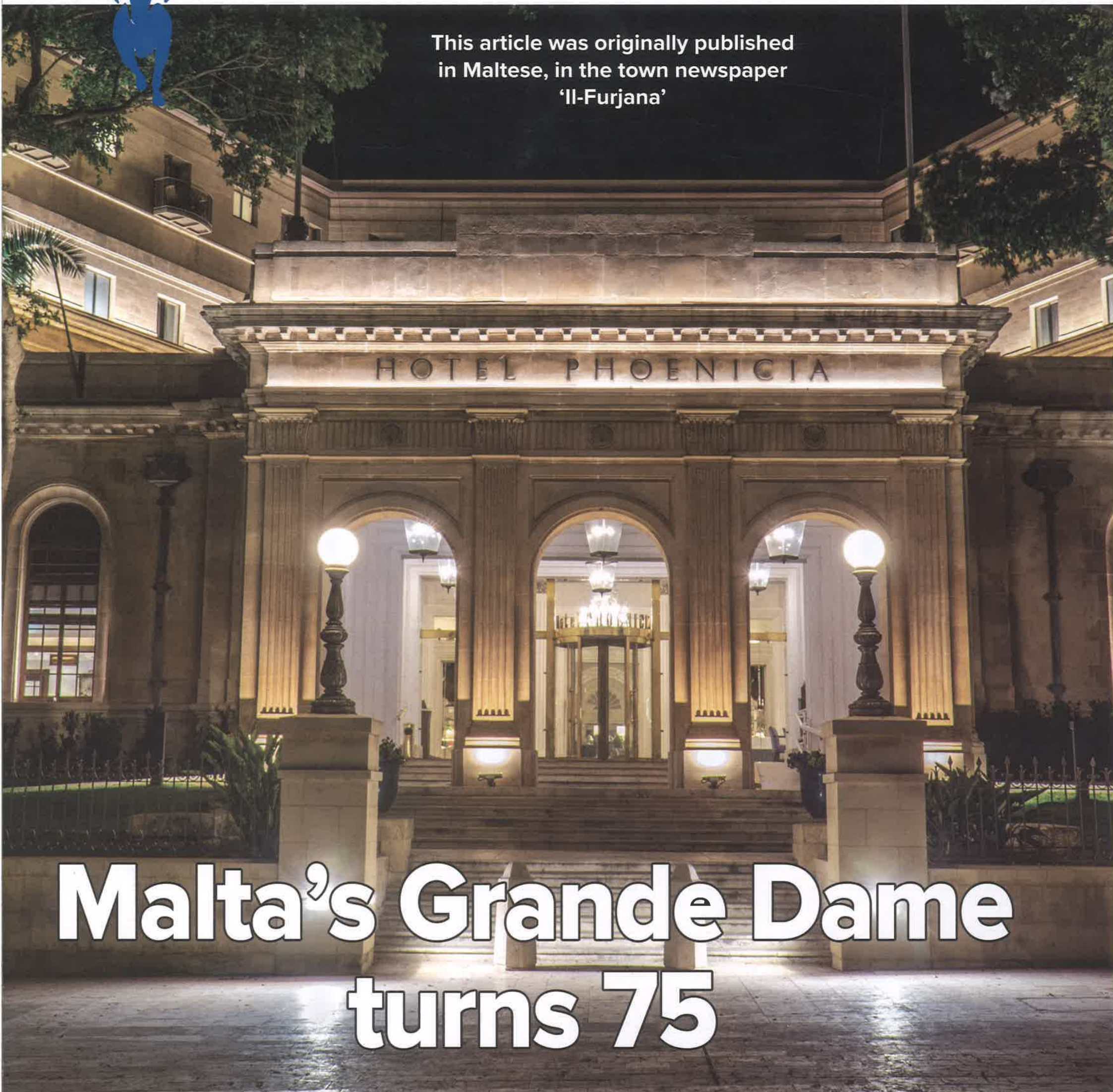




THE PHOENICIA MALTA (1947-2022)

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Malta's Grande Dame turns 75

The main entrance to the Hotel Phoenicia Malta that immediately shows the classic design of the building which is a landmark in Floriana

By **MARTIN CAMILLERI**

On the November 3 2022, THE PHOENICIA MALTA, one of Malta's oldest hotels, will be celebrating its 75 anniversary. Three quarters of a century during which its fame has been established

well beyond Malta's national borders, particularly in the United Kingdom and in other of its former colonies.

Unfortunately it happens that we take our surroundings for granted without much effort to get to know their history and their raison d'etre.

So this anniversary is the right opportunity to get to know the history of THE PHOENICIA MALTA a bit better.

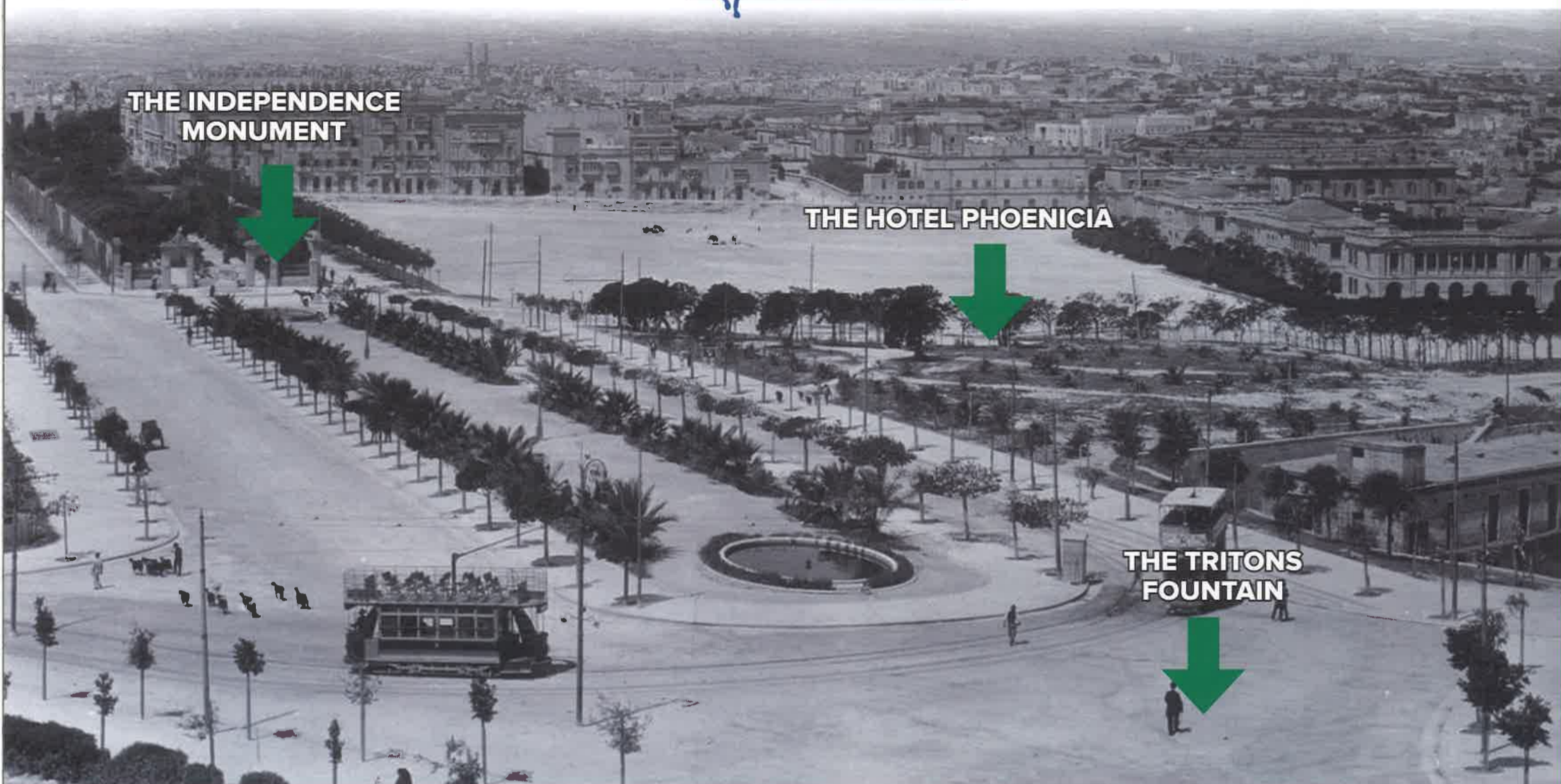
It is generally believed that the idea to build a first-class hotel in Floriana on Valletta's landfront to be able to host incoming dignitaries,

cropped up between the last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century. In this context, what we know for sure, is that the first time the idea was mentioned in public goes back to February 1902 when the first tenders were issued by the Public Works

Department (PWD).

This development was a result of a wide discussion regarding the best use for the relatively big area in front of Porta Reale, which appeared after a low bastion outside Valletta – which was originally intended to

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THE INDEPENDENCE
MONUMENT

THE HOTEL PHOENICIA

THE TRITONS
FOUNTAIN

An Imperial War Museum picture that looks as if it was taken in 1905 from the Valletta bastions, when the tram service started and 1919, when the Monument to Christ the King was erected. It shows the Balzunetta part of Floriana, the Xaghra, where the Hotel Phoenicia was eventually built.

The Strickland couple were behind the project

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further protect the entrance to the capital city – was demolished.

As a matter of fact, this part of the bastion did not have any continuity with the fortifications of Valletta. This is proved by the fact that there was even a road separating them from each other. This was actually the only access

point to enter Valletta. This low bastion was known as St. Magdalene's Ravelin.

The wide discussion about these whereabouts, however, did not produce anything substantial. Furthermore, in the intervening period, Malta found itself immersed in the First World War (1914-1918), during which it served as 'The Nurse of the Mediterranean'

when hundreds of wounded soldiers were sent to the island to be treated. Obviously, with Malta being a colony of the British Empire, that was of utmost priority, way above any other consideration.

In February 1923, when the great conflict had already come to an end, Antonio Cassar Torregiani, without any

undue publicity, wrote to the government asking for that piece of land in Floriana to be leased to him so that there he will be able to build a high-level hotel just outside the capital city.

He did not receive a very positive reply. He was told by the Minister in charge of public works that public land and projects like the one who was proposing were decided through a competition between architects who submit their proposals.

Eventually, a year later, a new Public Works Minister issued a call for proposals regarding various projects just outside Valletta, including a modern hotel with 200 beds. This call for proposals, however, was highly objected to by Maltese architects because this competition was opened to British architects as well, and having British conditions.

The issue soon became a hot political one and it was of no surprise to anyone that it was keenly debated in the Maltese National Assembly. This sparked a great controversy, the result of which was that more than ten years had to pass before another attempt was made.

At this juncture we find

Margaret Strickland nee Hutton at the heart of this episode, and who had an important role in the history of THE PHOENICIA MALTA.

Lady Strickland was the second wife of Lord Gerald Strickland, the Maltese Prime Minister between 1927-1932. Both of them, Lord and Lady Strickland, put forward their proposal to the effect that the approaches to the capital city be developed to include a new hotel.

At the beginning of the nineteen thirties a government decision gave another important push to the idea. Government had given its go-ahead to the British airline Imperial Airways to operate flights to and from the island.

This created further scope for an adequate hotel to receive passengers and crew members who will be on the way to Australia and the Far East. Up till that time there was no such hotel in Malta, and that was an important impetus for the tourism sector in Malta.

In September 1935 a call was issued for a hotel be built there. Government accepted the proposal coming from Malta Hotels Co. Ltd, a company with



(Picture: Facebook Hotel Phoenicia)

The couple Lord Gerald and Lady Margaret Strickland (first two on the right) during one of their visits to the site where the Hotel Phoenicia was being built



Part of the damaged done during the April 27, 1942 bombing attack



Searchlights during the Second World War in the vicinity of the hotel

Bombed on the eve before St Publius church was hit

majority shareholding of Lady Strickland and a minority shareholding of Marquis de Bute. But after the hotel started being built, this minority shareholder retired from the company resulting that the hotel was now wholly owned by Lady Strickland.

The eventual agreement between the government and this company was signed on December 1, 1936. At the same year, a Scottish architect, Lieutenant Colonel William B. Binnie, arrived in Malta after being commissioned by Lady Strickland to finalise plans for the new hotel.

Binnie was a well-known architect largely due to his various important works such as the London Grand Central Station and also for being responsible for a particular stand at Arsenal's Highbury Stadium also in London.

It is interesting to point out that Chev. Emmanuel (Lolly) Tonna, a Floriana well-known personality, had written in his book, 'Final Focus on Floriana', that he had met Binnie on the ship coming to Malta from Britain where he went to further his studies. Binnie actually showed him his design for the new hotel on the understanding that he would not divulge any details. Binnie was reported to have said that through his design he wanted to express the 'Maltese spirit', and also tried to include particular Maltese characteristics by using the local stone. It soon became obvious, however, that other materials were not available in Malta and had to be imported

A National War Museum Association picture showing St Publius church and a part of the Hotel Phoenicia that were the target of the German bombers



for the style chosen, which was Art Deco.

Proper work on the hotel started in 1938 and by 1939 it was nearly finished. Both Lord and Lady Strickland used to supervise works from a very close range and were often on the site.

The Strickland couple made an official visit to the construction site on the 12 February 1938, accompanied by Governor Sir Francis Campbell. Also present were Lord Strickland's daughter Mabel Strickland, building contractors Giuseppe Azzopardi and Carmelo Scicluna, and James Gialanzé and Robert Paton from the Malta Hotels Co. Ltd.

Work, however, came to abrupt stop when the Second World War raged through Europe creating havoc even in Malta. The island, actually, was the centre of incessant attacks from the air forces of Germany and Italy. Notwithstanding that the building of the hotel was in a very advanced stage the hotel was also a victim of such attacks. It was widely believed that the main reason for these attacks was the fact that the already finished part of the hotel – the part facing Floriana Independence Arena – was requisitioned by the British military authorities to be used by RAF personnel on their day off.

Without any doubt, the 27 April 1942 should be considered as a very black date for THE PHOENICIA MALTA, just a day before the ruinous blitz which destroyed the St. Publius church in Floriana as well. It was said that on that day no less than 100 bombs were dropped on the 7.2 acres of the hotel, including its gardens. When the war was finally over in 1944, the government asked Binnie to return to Malta so that he personally conducts its continuation, reconstruction, and ultimately to finalise it.

Though the official inauguration of the hotel happened on 3 November

1947, in the presence of Lady Margaret Strickland, Governor Sir Harry Luke and Archbishop Michael Gonzi, the hotel was completely finished a year later.

When inaugurated, the hotel had three floors with 108 rooms and 8 suites with views of Marsamuscetto Port (known also as Quarantine Harbour) or of Floriana, with magnificent views of the Grand Harbour, exclusive panoramas wherever one happens to be.

The hotel's format was not so conventional and it had a large yard behind the main entrance. This was given a roof years later, so that a

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Panorama Floriana, Malta.



Witness to historical events and a



An 1950's picture showing the first part of Floriana as one leaves Valletta. There was still a lot to change till today — but the Hotel Phoenicia is already there,



When Queen Elizabeth II visited Malta in 1954 she attended a rally to welcome her. Picture shows the Queen at St Publius Square with the



(Picture: Facebook Hotel Phoenicia)

Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh; Dr George Borg Olivier, Malta's Prime Minister and Sir Maurice Dorman, Governor General, leaving by the Ballroom of the Hotel Phoenicia, during Malta's independence celebrations in September 1964



A spectacular view of Floriana after sunset. Highlighted are the Hotel Phoenicia

A postcard from the beginning of the last century shows a panorama of Floriana when leaving the capital city from nearly the Grand Harbour to the Marsamxett Port. You cannot bring yourself to believe what changes have been brought about to the confines of Floriana outside City Gate which in fact is not there anymore although the area still bears its name



all the changes outside City Gate



where she was welcomed by thousands of schoolchildren and youths who gave her a huge Hotel Phoenicia at the background.



St John Paul II blessing the crowd at St Publius Square on the first visit to Malta of a pope



oenicia and the Tritons Fountain outside City Gate



The Hotel Phoenicia's facade specially decorated for the end of the Marian Congress held at St Publius Square in May 1949. Note the lights forming the letter 'M'

Roofed yard turned into a breathtaking hall

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colossal hall was created and given the name of Palm Court Lounge which is found when one enters the hotel from the main door.

A legitimate question: why Phoenicia? It was rumoured that when workers were excavating the hotel's foundation, they found a rare coin pertaining to the Phoenician era and on which there was the mythological Greek figure of the winged horse, Pegasus. However, most probably, the true reason is somewhat different. As a matter of fact, Lord Strickland was of the opinion that the origins of the Maltese were Phoenician. He was so convinced of this theory that he wrote a book on the subject, explaining why the Maltese were direct descendants of these Mediterranean people who had their land where we find Lebanon today.

The Phoenicians navigated incessantly across the Mediterranean and spoke a language with many similarities to Maltese. Recent archeological discoveries confirm that the theory that the Phoenicians also came to Malta is a good possibility.

On the strength of this theory it was so obvious for Lady Strickland to choose this name for the new hotel and, by so doing, perpetuated the line of thought of her husband who died in 1940. Thus, also, the reason why Pegasus was chosen as the hotel's logo as it still is now.

Apart from the luxury in every part of the hotel it is safe to say that THE PHOENICIA MALTA was the first in Malta to offer various services to its clients, services which we nowadays take for granted.

THE PHOENICIA MALTA has exceptionally beautiful gardens which overlooks Marsamuscetto (Marsamxetto) Port. Amongst such fabulous scenarios, we find a gorgeous swimming pool which was also a 'first' for Maltese hotels. It has a part of the bastions on its side which complete these fabulous surroundings.

A great number of Maltese couples have memories of their wedding right there and it is still a popular venue for



(Picture: Facebook Hotel Phoenicia)

Part of the yard that was in the middle of the original building of the Hotel Phoenicia at the end of the main entrance



(Picture: Facebook Hotel Phoenicia)

Palm Court Lounge that took place of the roofed yard

The Hotel Phoenicia Malta booked by thousands during its 75 years



(Picture:Hotel Phoenicia)

Marsamxett Port as seen from the swimming pool of the hotel near the bastion



(Picture: Facebook Hotel Phoenicia)

The bastions embellishing the gardens of the Hotel Phoenicia



Dom Mintoff, leader of the Malta Labour Party, addressing one of the party's political meetings in Floriana, with the Hotel Phoenicia in the background

many Maltese for wedding ceremonies and receptions.

THE PHOENICIA MALTA complex includes other sections which are also well-known and popular with the Maltese as well as foreigners. These include the Ballroom, known as The Grand Ballroom; the former laundry which unfortunately stopped functioning in the early years of this millennium after some fifty years of service; and the former Pegasus Bar & Restaurant.

The Ballroom was always considered as a value-added to the hotel. The British Forces when in Malta organised many balls there for which, between 1949 and 1951, even Princess Elizabeth and her husband Prince Philip used to attend. According to a book written by a very close friend of Queen Elizabeth II she was very enthusiastic about these balls and still has very good memories of people she met there.

In 2016, dailymail.com included THE PHOENICIA MALTA as being among the best hotels Queen Elizabeth II stayed in during her voyages. Various other members of the British Royal Family were guests of the hotel as well throughout the years.

Lord Mountbatten, Prince Philip's uncle, lived with his wife for two years at the hotel while Villa Guardamangia was being refurbished. Later on, Mountbatten made the villa available to Elizabeth and Philip when the latter was stationed in Malta.

Many an important event took place at the Phoenicia Ballroom, but the most emblematic would have been the Malta Independence ball which took place on Sunday 20 September 1964 during which Prince Philip was guest of honour representing Queen Elizabeth II.

During the seventies the Ballroom was very popular with hundreds of Maltese youths, who frequented dances held there. Other cultural, religious, political and sporting events were also held at this venue. The Phoenicia laundry ceased its operations in June 2002 when the hotel was taken over by Le Meridien group.

It is to be noted that THE PHOENICIA MALTA changed its owners more than once. In August 1966 the hotel was bought by the English millionaire Charles Forte, considered at that time to be one of the wealthiest persons in the world. Interesting to consider that nearly every time the hotel ownership changed hands it had to pass through a phase of refurbishment. It was especially during the Forte ownership that the swimming pool originated and the yard roofed.

From 1971 it has become a tradition for new foreign ambassadors presenting their credentials to the Maltese President to depart from THE PHOENICIA MALTA which, in most cases, will also be their 'headquarters' during their stay in Malta.

Another refurbishment was undertaken in 1990s when it was closed in 1994. It was during this time that THE PHOENICIA MALTA was given another floor so that the number of rooms is now 132. During the Forte administration in 1997 the hotel's name became Le Meridien Phoenicia. Incidentally that was the 50 year since the Floriana hotel started receiving its first clients.

New hands took over the hotel in 2007 and became Hotel Phoenicia Malta once again. It was closed yet again for 18 months, during which the hotel was regenerated through another refurbishment to the tune of 15 million euro.

It is estimated that during these 75 years many thousands of clients were received at THE PHOENICIA MALTA. The majority of these clients are what we conveniently call 'ordinary guests', but quite a big number of VIPs made use of the hotel throughout its life, such as three great actors, Gerard Depardieu, Oliver Reed and Arnold Schwarzenegger who were all in Malta for filming.

Floriana is very proud to host this hotel which as the official address states, is situated at 'The Mall, Floriana'. On this happy anniversary we salute this Grande Dame as had been described by The Telegraph (UK),



Getting to the Saddle Club Ball with Governor General Gerald Creasy



As a princess during the Malta Garrison Ball in 1951



Signing the visitors' book of the Hotel Phoenicia Malta in 2005

(Picture: Facebook Hotel Phoenicia)

One of the hotels preferred by Queen Elizabeth



Princess Elizabeth and her husband dance separately at one of the balls held at the Hotel Phoenicia Malta



The future royal couple dancing at the Hotel Phoenicia Malta

(Picture: Facebook Hotel Phoenicia)



The Hotel Phoenicia seen at the background during a visit by the royal couple at a children's rally in 1967

(Picture: Facebook Hotel Phoenicia)



Princess Elizabeth with an English military official