

H.M.S. Melita – The Only British Warship Built in Malta*

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The ironclad sloop HMS MELITA had the distinction of being the only Royal Navy warship built at Malta. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had ensured that Malta became an important coaling station on the imperial route to India and a strategic naval base in the Mediterranean. The dockyard facilities had been increased by the construction of the Marsa extension to Grand Harbour in 1864-65¹ and by the opening of the “Somerset” or Number 3 Dock at Senglea in 1871². However, when the Fleet was away the dockyard workers were often underemployed. This fact influenced the British Admiralty to take an experimental decision to build a warship to ensure that the capacity of the Malta Dockyard facilities were fully used and, indirectly, to improve employment prospects in the island³.

HMS MELITA was one of six MARINER class composite screw sloops built between 1882 and 1888, details of which follow below:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Builder</i>	<i>Launched</i>
MARINER	Devonport Dockyard	23.6.1884
ACORN	Milford Haven Shipbuilding Co.	6.9.1884
ICARUS	Devonport Dockyard	27.7.1885
MELITA	Malta Dockyard	20.3.1888
RACER	Devonport Dockyard	6.8.1884
REINDEER	Devonport Dockyard	14.11.1883 ⁴

The vessels were originally rated as gunboats, but were re-rated as sloops in 1884. Their dimensions were 167ft x 32ft x 14ft (50.90 x 9.75 x 4.26m) with a displacement of 970 tons. All the sloops were barque-rigged except for ICARUS

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1. Parliamentary Papers. XXXVII. 1864-65.
2. ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS. 30 May 1871.
3. THE GRAPHIC. 14 April 1888. London. An illustrated weekly newspaper.
4. Conway's *All The World's Fighting Ships. 1860-1904*, Conway Maritime Press 1979. Hereafter CONWAY'S.

which was schooner-rigged with square top sails on the foremast⁵.

The machinery for MELITA was built in the Malta Dockyard and was a single-shaft, horizontal compound expansion engine of 1200 horse-power which produced a maximum speed of 12.5 knots. On paper, this should have given a better performance than either ACORN, with 1380 horse-power which produced a speed of 11.5 knots, or ICARUS, with 1230 horse-power producing the same speed as MELITA. However, I can find no record of how they performed at sea⁶.

MELITA's armaments, according to a contemporary report⁷ were eight 5-inch breech-loading 40cwt guns, one 7-pounder boats gun, four 1-inch 2-barrel Nordenfelts and two 5-barrel and two 2-barrel Gardner guns⁸. Two of the 5-inch guns were mounted just forward of the mainmast and placed behind shields. The other two were mounted by the mizzen mast. The other four guns were broadside mounted⁹. Other MARINER Class sloops were similarly armed.

These MARINER Class sloops were all designed by Sir Nathaniel Barnaby whose career spanned the changeover from sail to steam and who rose from being a humble apprentice at Chatham Dockyard to become Director of Naval Construction. He retired as Director in 1885 so these sloops were amongst the last ships designed by him¹⁰.

HMS MELITA was laid down on 18th July 1882¹¹. A special slipway had

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *THE GRAPHIC*. 14 April 1888.

8. Nordenfelt and Gardner guns were newly-developed quick-firing weapons named after the men who developed them. The Nordenfelt was a hand-operated machine-gun used by many navies to protect against torpedo craft. It consisted of a number of fixed barrels that could fire 30-50 rounds a minute and was operated by pushing a side handle to-and-fro. This fed ammunition from an overhead feeder, chambered it and fired in a series of volleys.

The Gardner guns were cone-mounted machine-guns of two or five barrels and used in some numbers by the Royal Navy. Firing required two operators: one to feed the ammunition into the over head, vertical feeder and one to control the gun. The mechanism worked by means of cogs and ratchets and was operated by cranking a handle to the right of the square breech.

I. Hogg and J. Batchelor, *Naval Gun*, Blandford Press, Dorset 1978.

9. *CONWAY'S*.

10. Sir Nathaniel Barnaby's long life (1829-1915) spanned the stages in shipbuilding from wood to iron and thence to steel and from sail to steam. He was the first to adopt steel for warship building. As a youngster in Chatham in 1842 he watched the launch of two ships on the one day: the wooden-wall 80-gun line-of-battleship HMS GOLIATH and the other the new steam frigate HMS VIRAGO; and this remained a datum line throughout his life.

TRANSACTIONS OF THE INSTITUTION OF NAVAL ARCHITECTS. 1915.

11. *THE GRAPHIC*. 14 April 1888.

been made for her construction on the Senglea side of French Creek. This was still known as the "Melita Slip" into modern times. However, work on the vessel proceeded very slowly. If there were other ships to be repaired, all work on MELITA stopped and by 1886 the hull was still a long way from completion. By this time, construction costs had risen so much that, when the ship was eventually launched, it had taken far longer to build than the other sloops in the class¹² and the construction costs were about 20% more than the sister ships built at Devonport and Milford Haven¹³.

In 1887 the new Admiral Superintendent for Malta, Admiral R. Gordon Douglas, was sent out from Britain with specific instructions to get MELITA afloat¹⁴ and the sloop was finally launched on 20th March 1888.

The launching ceremony was performed by Princess Victoria Melita, the twelve-year-old daughter of the Duke of Edinburgh, Queen Victoria's second son, who was Commander-in-Chief of the British Mediterranean Fleet¹⁵. The Princess was presented with a model of the ship she had launched and an olivewood casket containing a carved mallet and chisel¹⁶. The occasion was attended by many people, as the contemporary photographs show, and the event was reported under "The Court" in *THE GRAPHIC* – an illustrated London newspaper¹⁷. The launch was also reported in *THE ARMY AND NAVY GAZETTE*¹⁸, which commented, rather sourly, "... it would be invidious to make any remarks about the length of time she (HMS MELITA) has been building. Let us hope she will prove a staunch and useful vessel".

12. *CONWAY'S*.

13. *Ibid.*

14. P. Elliot, *The Cross and The Ensign. A Naval History of Malta*. 1789-1979, Patrick Stephens Limited 1980.

15. *THE GRAPHIC*. 14 April 1888.

Princess Victoria Melita, a grand-daughter of Queen Victoria after whom she was named, was born in Malta. The daughter of Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh and his wife Marie Alexandrovna, Grand Duchess of Russia.

16. One wonders if these souvenirs still exist in some family archives somewhere!

17. *THE GRAPHIC*. 24 March 1888.

18. Issue dated 24 March 1888. The full text reads "The launch of the Melita, sloop at Malta Dockyard must have been quite an event in the history of the island. Under the circumstances, it would be invidious to make any remarks about the length of time she has been building. Let us hope she will prove a staunch and useful vessel. In the presence of the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh and many notabilities, the little daughter of the Commander-in-Chief, Princess Victoria Melita, christened the vessel which left the way without a hitch."

Although naval vessels continued to be repaired at Malta, and barges and similar craft constructed, their Lordships at the Admiralty did not repeat the experiment and HMS MELITA remained the first, and last, warship to be built at Malta. HMS MELITA was commissioned at Malta with a complement of 122 officers and men¹⁹ on 27th October 1892 under the command of Commander George F. King Hall. His second-in-command was Lieutenant Edward Inglefield, later to become Rear Admiral Sir Edward Inglefield, who had been sent to Malta in 1889 and, whilst serving on MELITA, invented Inglefield Clips for attaching signalling flags. The first set of prototype clips was made up in the Malta Dockyard and by 1895 Inglefield Clips were standard issue to the British Royal Navy²⁰.

MELITA remained with the Mediterranean Fleet and was recommissioned at Malta in October 1895 and again in the October of 1898²¹. HMS MELITA then left the Mediterranean Fleet and was moved to Devonport, England in 1901 and by 1904 was being offered for sale²². The Admiralty must have changed its mind for the *NAVY LIST* for the second half of 1905 lists HMS MELITA as being a Boom Defence Vessel at Southampton. The ship remained at Southampton for the next nine years and was still there at the start of World War I in 1914.

MELITA is recorded in the *NAVY LIST* for October 1915 and January 1916 under "Vessels available for Subsidiary Service" and was still based at Southampton as a Boom Defence Vessel.

Perhaps it is an indication of the losses sustained by the Royal Navy by enemy submarine action that by April 1916 HMS MELITA had been taken from her subsidiary service and was now recorded on the active service "List of Ships and Vessels of the Royal Navy" under the command of Commander Longuet M. Darbyshire. This change of duty was also marked by a change of name and the ship was renamed HMS RINGDOVE (late MELITA).

At this stage it is confusing to trace the movements of HMS RINGDOVE (late MELITA) through subsequent volumes of the *NAVY LIST* as there had already been an HMS RINGDOVE, a near contemporary of HMS MELITA and launched at Devonport in 1889²³. It will be helpful, here, to look at this second ship.

19. *THE GRAPHIC*. 14 April 1888.

20. *MARINER'S MIRROR*. The Journal of Nautical Research. Vol. 26.

21. *NAVY LIST*.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *CONWAY'S*.

This HMS RINGDOVE, a composite gunboat, was one of nine REDBREAST Class launched in 1889. The displacement was 805 tons with dimensions of 165ft x 31ft x 11ft-13ft 9ins (50.29 x 9.45 x 3.35-4.19m). The machinery was a single shaft, triple expansion engine of 1200 horse-power with a maximum speed of 13 knots. RINGDOVE had a complement of 76²⁴.

After the launch in 1889 RINGDOVE was fitted out for service on the Australian Station²⁵ and was commissioned at Devonport in October 1890²⁶. RINGDOVE then spent from 1891 to 1900 on the Australian Station, being recommissioned at Devonport in 1897²⁷ and returning to England for good in 1901²⁸.

During the first six months of 1903, RINGDOVE is listed as being at Devonport as a vessel available for subsidiary service²⁹.

RINGDOVE was recommissioned at the beginning of 1905³⁰ and then employed as a fisheries protection vessel off the coast of Scotland under the Admiral Commanding Coast Guard and Fisheries³¹.

RINGDOVE remained on fishery protection duties for the next seven years³¹ and was recommissioned at Devonport in 1910, 1911 and 1913³².

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 found RINGDOVE back at Devonport where the ship remained until 1916³³.

The confusion between HMS MELITA and HMS RINGDOVE starts from this time. In the April 1916 edition of the *NAVY LIST*, under "List of Vessels available for Subsidiary Service", RINGDOVE also undergoes a change of name and henceforth is listed as HMS MELITA (late RINGDOVE)! There is no

24. *Ibid.*

25. *NAVY LIST*.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

indication why their Lordships at the Admiralty decreed that HMS MELITA should become HMS RINGDOVE and HMS RINGDOVE become HMS MELITA, but the change of name would explain some uncertainties over both ships' subsequent movements. This was perhaps compounded by the similarities of displacement and dimensions of the two vessels, together with the superficial similarity of their appearance with the single slender funnel set forward of the main mast³⁴.

HMS RINGDOVE (late MELITA) saw out the remaining two years of the 1914-1918 war under the command of Commander Darbyshire³⁵, but there is no indication from the NAVY LIST as to what the ship's duties were ... presumably because of the necessary wartime security measures. The vessel may even have returned to the Mediterranean as there is an account³⁶ of MELITA passing through Malta in 1919 under the name of RINGDOVE and being in use as a salvage vessel.

At the end of hostilities in 1918 RINGDOVE (late MELITA) is again on the list of steam vessels, tugs, etc. and remained on that list until July 1920³⁷.

HMS MELITA (late RINGDOVE) is listed in the 1917 July-September edition of the NAVY LIST under "... Store ships, small steam vessels, tugs employed on harbour service." and was employed for the remainder of the war as a salvage vessel under the command of Lieutenant RNR John W. Miskin. The ship continued in the same role and under the same command until the end of 1919 when it was listed to be sold as an obsolete vessel³⁸.

There is no entry in the NAVY LIST of either HMS MELITA or HMS RINGDOVE – under either guise – after March 1920. J.J. Colledge in his comprehensive *SHIPS OF THE ROYAL NAVY*³⁹ lists RINGDOVE (ex-MELITA) as being sold to the Falmouth Docks Board in September 1920 and records the sale of MELITA (ex-RINGDOVE) to the Ship Salvage Corporation in the

34. Adjacent photographs in W.P. Trotter, *The Royal Navy in Old Photographs*. J.M. Dent, London, 1975.

35. NAVY LIST.

36. W.A. Griffiths, *HM Dockyard, Malta*, Malta 1917. "A Brief Outline of the Foundation and Development of HM Naval Establishment at Malta. Compiled at the request of Rear Admiral G.A. Ballard CB by W.A. Griffiths, 1917." Unpublished typescript in the National Library, Valletta.

Although dated 1917; additional material was added later as the information about MELITA/RINGDOVE is clearly post-1927.

37. NAVY LIST.

38. *Ibid.*

39. J.J. Colledge, *Ships of The Royal Navy*, Greenhill Books. 1967.

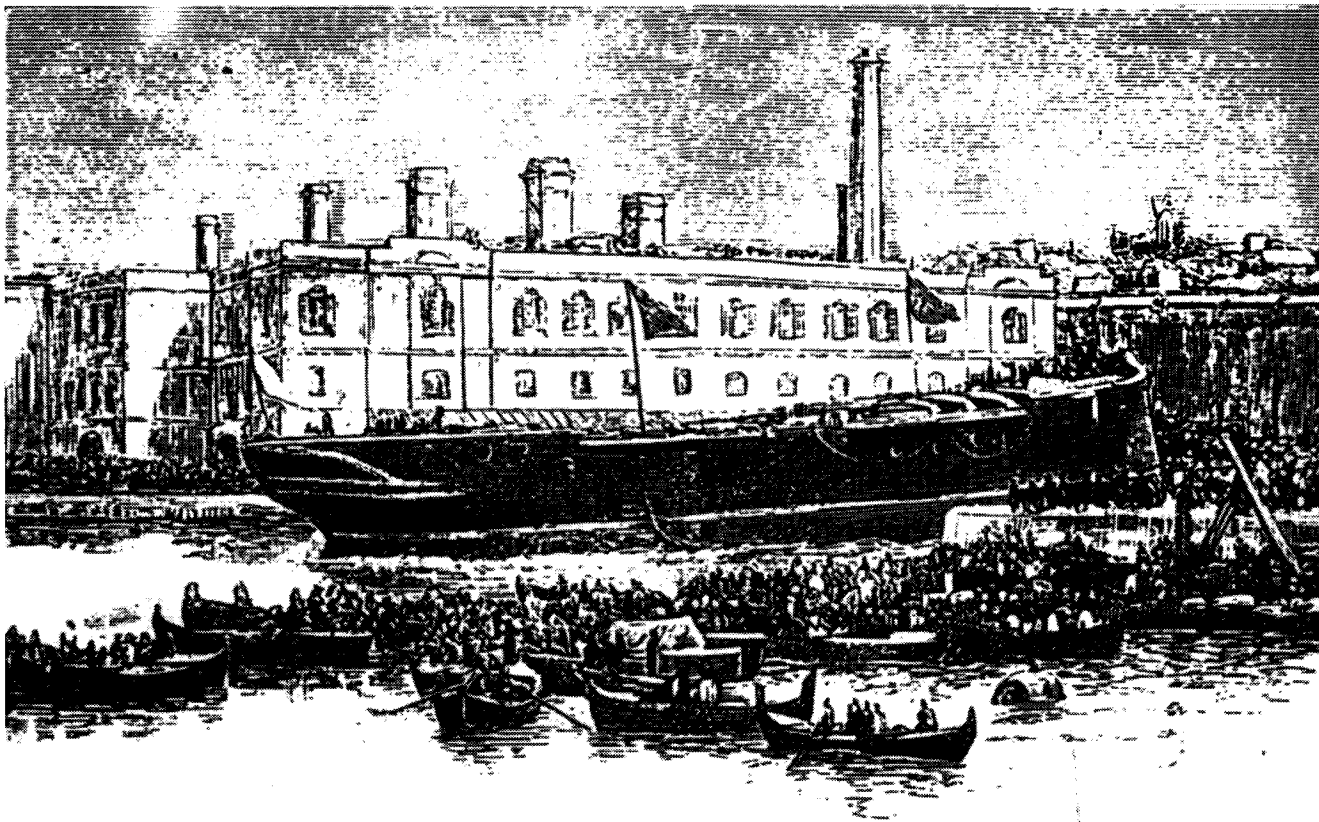
January of that year.

I have been unable to find anything further about the fate of the original RINGDOVE beyond the information contained in Colledge (see note 39) and have been unable to trace the Ship Salvage Corporation to which the vessel was sold in 1920.

There still remains a query regarding the fate of the original MELITA (named RINGDOVE since 1917). Colledge (see note 39) lists only the sale to Falmouth Docks Board in 1920, but Griffiths (see note 36) states that the vessel was sold in 1922 to the same company and renamed RINGDOVE's AID, later to be sold on to the Liverpool and Glasgow Salvage Association which applied in 1927 to change the name to RESTORER. This information is repeated in the magazine *SEA BREEZES* under "Tug News" for January 1969.

One further point: a researcher⁴⁰ working on the history of the Falmouth Docks writes that "In 1920, the Falmouth Docks and Engineering Co. formed a salvage organisation and purchased the ex naval salvage steamer 'RINGDOVE' (ex gunboat)." In querying which vessel is RINGDOVE, it is worth remembering that the old MELITA was a sloop and not a gunboat. Was it the same vessel? Did there continue to be confusion between the MELITA and the RINGDOVE? We have no clear picture, but HMS MELITA, the composite screw sloop, surely proved the staunch and useful vessel demanded at her launch in 1888 ... the one and only British naval warship built in Malta.

40. Mrs. P.J. Maunder of Falmouth in a letter to the writer dated 25 February 1992.



LAUNCH OF H.M.S. "MELITA" AT MALTA

The First Ironclad Launched from the Malta Dockyard. (From "The Graphic" 14 April 1888)