

Bravery in a time of Pandemic

John Bathurst Thomson MD

Surgeon, 69th (South Lincolnshire) Regiment of Foot, 1813 – 1850

He gave his life for others

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Memorial to John Bathurst Thomson, at Upper Barrakka Gardens, Valletta

‘He fell a sacrifice to his unshrinking fidelity in the discharge of his duty during the prevalence of cholera in Malta’¹

¹ Inscription on marble plaque on the monument honouring John Bathurst Thomson at the Upper Barrakka Gardens, Valletta, erected by his fellow officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the 69th (South Lincolnshire) Regiment of Foot. The Regiment was raised in 1758 and continued in service until 1881, when it was amalgamated into the Welsh Regiment. Photograph of memorial taken by the author in April 2018.

John Bathurst Thomson's memorial

Visitors entering the Upper Barrakka Gardens, Valletta will instantly notice, on their left, a prominent and beautifully tended memorial. It commemorates a young Army Medical Officer, a graduate from Edinburgh University, Dr John Bathurst Thomson MD, who died of cholera in the Military Hospital, Valletta on 18 September 1850, aged 36 years. He had cared unflinchingly, going practically without sleep for three whole weeks, for the officers, men and families of his Regiment who had fallen ill during the devastating 1850 cholera pandemic, before at last succumbing as a victim himself.²

The memorial is surrounded by a wrought iron fence bearing Maltese crosses and the numerals 69, denoting the 69th (South Lincolnshire) Regiment of Foot, to which John Bathurst Thomson had transferred on 3 September 1847 from the 17th Regiment of Foot. The 69th Foot arrived in Malta in December 1847. Following Bathurst Thomson's death there three years later, the officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the Regiment paid for this memorial to be erected in his honour (each donating three days' pay). The 44th (East Essex) Regiment lost Assistant Surgeon John Caughey Gray to cholera earlier in the same epidemic, but did not erect any memorial, perhaps because they lost so many others as well. Bathurst Thomson's memorial is a wonderful tribute to the esteem in which this young doctor was held. Though in need of restoration, it is also the most impressive of the very few surviving memorials to other deceased doctors of the Malta garrison.³

The inspiring and ever relevant story of this young Scottish medical officer, who unstintingly risked and finally gave his life for others in a dread epidemic, has been recorded for posterity in the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps by a Maltese military medical officer, Major (now Colonel) Walter Bonnici RAMC.⁴ This article, and additional historical details, can also be downloaded directly from Walter Bonnici's excellent website 'British Army Medical Service and the Malta Garrison 1799 – 1979'.⁵ Other articles have been written about the memorial, its heraldry and uniforms, with additional biographical detail, by Beverly Bergman and Denis Darmanin.⁶⁻⁷

Burial at Msida Bastion Cemetery

John Bathurst Thomson was buried with full military honours in Grave 205 at the Msida Bastion Cemetery, the final resting place for many of the British military garrison and their families in 1806 – 1857.⁸⁻⁹ His funeral procession was supremely attended, with two military bands and much of the Garrison turning out in force. His coffin was carried on the shoulders of the men of his regiment for the final mile of its journey, from the city gate of Valletta to the cemetery, as a mark of their respect.

² Malta Mail and United Service Journal, 20 Sept 1850. 429

³ There is a bronze plaque at Ta' Braxia Cemetery, and another at the Museum of Military Medicine (in UK), in memory of Principal Medical Officer, Colonel William Owen Wolseley, who died of Malta Fever (brucellosis) in 1906. A monument at Ta' Braxia mentions a medical officer amongst other men of the Staffordshire Regiment.

⁴ Bonnici W. *John Bathurst Thomson MD 1813 – 1850 – An insight into the Times of a Regimental Medical Officer*. *J R Army Med Corps* 1992; 138: 50-53

⁵ <https://www.maltaramc.com/> <http://www.maltaramc.com/regsurg/t/thomsonjb.html>

⁶ Bergman B. *John Bathurst Thomson – the 'Scottish' Heraldry Stray in Malta*. *The Heraldry Society of Scotland* TAK TENT Newsletter 45, October 2009:10-11. Article available from Col Vassallo via djvassallo@aol.com

⁷ Darmanin D. *Surgeon John B. Thomson MD, 69th Regiment of Foot*. 2013. Available via djvassallo@aol.com

⁸ Zammit C. *Survey and Report Msida Bastion Cemetery 1930 Museum Dept Valletta*. Malta 1930

⁹ The Msida Bastion Cemetery Malta – a brief history of the Msida Bastion Cemetery and the research conducted by R G Kirkpatrick (Ed: James Cannon, 1990) (available to visitors to the Cemetery)

Msida Bastion Cemetery – now the Msida Bastion Historic Garden

Msida Bastion Cemetery effectively closed to new burials in 1857, with further burials occurring in the newly opened Ta' Braxia Cemetery, Pieta. Over the succeeding 150 years, the cemetery fell into neglect, suffering the indignities of vandalism and the effects of weather and erosion, with the worst insult occurring in 1942 when a bomb destroyed part of the bastion. Eventually, the volunteers of Malta's Din L-Art Helwa came to its rescue,¹⁰ with their conservation efforts being recognised by the European Union's prestigious Europa Nostra Silver Award in 2002, and by the National Geographic magazine naming it in 2014, and again in 2018, as one of Europe's five loveliest cemeteries. The cemetery is now renamed the Msida Bastion Historic Garden, and is open to the public.

The restoration of John Bathurst Thomson's grave

The final resting place of John Bathurst Thomson, Grave 205, is clearly marked on the Cemetery plan as lying in a perimeter row of Section A. Over time that whole row of graves had become covered over with soil and rubble, and therefore lost to view. In June 2018 the author, a Maltese Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, who had recently retired after 34 years service as a military surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps, resolved with the aid of the Cemetery's warden, Paolo Ferrelli, to uncover and restore this grave, in recognition of the unstinting care for his patients shown by this brave young military doctor during an epidemic, to serve as an inspiration for others.

It was soon found that the overlying limestone slabs had been removed and lost, and the grave filled with rubble. It was determined to leave the lower two thirds of the grave undisturbed, to re-align the partially collapsed side walls, and to procure new limestone slabs and a suitable inscription. A small team of volunteers, particularly Charles Cilia and Stephen Clark, accomplished this by the beginning of October 2018, when a visiting high ranking party of medical historians and retired RAMC officers, including a Brigadier, two Colonels and a Lieutenant Colonel, were the first group to pay their respects at John Bathurst Thomson's restored grave. They would not be the last.



Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13

¹⁰ The Msida Bastion Garden of Rest – a Visitor's Guide by A N Welsh. (Din L-Art Helwa, Malta, 1995 & 1999) (Available to visitors at the Msida Bastion Historic Garden)



With heartfelt thanks to Din L-Art Helwa and its volunteers¹¹

¹¹ Din L-Art Helwa (National Trust of Malta) Historic Garden, Floriana <https://dinlarthelwa.org/properties/419/>