FRANCISO FERNANDES TERRES

The historian Micaela Mata, in her book:  “Menorca Británica volume 1 – Queen Anne and George I, 1712-1727”  gives reference to the Isla del Rey

The Isla del Rey, where the Aragonese King took the land almost five centuries ago, became “Bloody Island” to the Navy upon being transformed into a Naval Hospital from some ravines and shelters, which already existed when General Stanhope arrived.  Admiral Jennings contributed in his characteristic manner the first money towards the construction, in 1711,  refunded in 1714,   a delayed repayment of 468 pounds 3 shillings and sixpence.  Despite his timely generosity,  the first construction work was of poor quality which soon became a ruin and the patients had to be transferred to the San Francisco Convent, outside the city walls of Mahon (from where 20 of the 25 resident monks had had to be dislodged) until the constant demands from Vice Admiral John Baker to his superior in the Admiralty, Mr Burchett, resulted in the reconstruction of the building in 1715.

The hospital, constructed in the middle and highest part of the Isla del Rey,was the harmonious unification of a single storey,  not without a certain beauty.  Orientated to the south east, the three wings forming a “U” shape around a square; the chapel in the centre, was the most outstanding feature, which leant the construction an architectural balance which characterised it.

Four stylised columns at its entrance held up the dome, all of which,  although somewhat simplified, was close to the gracious style of the works of Wren at that time.  On each side of the chapel, solid arches and rows of columns were planned around the covered galleries which enabled communication between the wards.

The uneven territory had enabled – or required – two storeys on the outer wings with access to them via an atrium, decorated with two columns, which supported a balcony, the level surfaces of which were also crowned with stone columns.

Whomsoever the designer had been,  achieved the double merit of having created a building both attractive and practical.  The interior of the hospital had been undertaken with intelligence and harmony, and was much more comfortable than other heartless sanatoria of that time.  The fourteen wards, of some 28 x 35 feet in dimension (8.5 x 10.6 m) enjoyed high ceilings and good ventilation, and in each one of them the 24 patients occupied single beds, an uncommon luxury in those days.

Moreover, of the 336 sailors which the hospital could accommodate,  independently of the separate sick quarters,  the building also had room for naval officials, watchmen, sailors who linked the island to the mainland etc

The quarters of the surgeon and his assistant were close to the wards and opposite a room which served as an office for the administrative personnel, on the other side of the square.   The nurses and assistants occupied the western corner, and the kitchens and ovens the eastern.  In some of the half-basements, on the north side, the provisions were kept, and,those on the east and west were reserved for the requirements of the surgeon and the director of the hospital.

The islet was not badly set up…the latrines were located outside the main building, the well was in front of the chapel,  but on the outside of the square, and a natural cave on the Cala Llonga side was used to store tar,  pitch and other naval stores.

On the same coast a pier was constructed, reachable on foot, and on the side opposite the island, facing Fonduco,  another shallow landing stage, supported by a small beach.

The term “Bloody Island” does not deserve its alarming name and we only deduce that it derived from the more human “Blood Hospital” or first aid centre.

With some modifications, the exterior appearance of the hospital lasted more than 100 years, well beyond the British dominations.  The work was granted to Antonio Segui for an estimate of 800 pieces-of-eight payable in three instalments,  in a document signed on 4 August 1715, the contractor agreed to finish the repairs before the month of October, with a year’s guarantee, as was customary on the island.  The  fixed price did not include transport of materials nor the carriage of water nor the digging of a well (would it be the same spring which was discovered so opportunely by Alfonso the Liberal, upon invading  Menorca in 1287?).  In exchange the admiral offered to transport

the sailors to enable the quick completion of the repairs to the hospital.

Baker was particularly interested to see the works finished to see if the sick recovered better on the Isla del Rey than in Mahon, where there was an abundant supply of the indigestible local wine, whereas with the good fresh air of the island, which, as would be written after the recent transfer of the sick to “Bloody Island”, was  clearly demonstrated during that winter of great cold and rain.

Baker would appear to have been an officer who was particularly attentive to the needs of his men,  achieving unaccustomedly good conditions for the hospital inmates.   Three pennies a day and a sailor were assigned for,the maintenance and safety of each pensioner,  demanding the assistant, William Corbett,  to provide water, plates, dishes, spoons and a diet approved by the chief surgeon.  Moreover, there would be provision for fires and candles, and one of the competent inmates, of an agreeable disposition, would oversee the hygiene of the patients.

The Admiral,  a practical man albeit a little parsimonious, considered that the hospital area was big enough to house valuable provisions, which according to estimates, would save the governor 40 dollars a year, payment  which could be put towards renting various houses and courtyards to protect them from inclement weather “and also other things” he declared, making clear reference to certain defects amongst some of the Menorquins.

After three years, the work of John Baker ( who had died in Menorca in November 1716) was deemed to be appropriate for the occupation of the wounded sailors from the Battle of Passaro (1718).    Many, notwithstanding those who recovered, died there, between them 100 of Captain Matthews’ men, and of the ships GRAFTON, KENT and RUPERT who had brought another seventy who were gravely ill.