



Images, context and structure:
the Richard Ellis archive (Malta) revisited *

Imagens, contexto e estrutura:
o arquivo de Richard Ellis (Malta) revisitado

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Abstract: Presentation of the Richard Ellis Archive, depicting his life and photographic work. The importance of that personal archive to Maltese national history is enhanced by its almost unique characteristic, that of still being organized in accordance with the original order Richard Ellis imposed. This includes also all the complementary non-photographic documents that were generated by the photographer during his activities. The visual essay intends to present a brief panorama of Richard Ellis photographs and their original finding aids.

Keywords: archival context; Maltese photography; personal archives; Richard Ellis Archive.

Resumo: Introdução ao arquivo pessoal de Richard Ellis, com destaque à sua vida e obra fotográfica. A importância desse arquivo pessoal para a história nacional de Malta é ampliada por sua característica quase singular de estar sendo organizado ainda em conformidade com a ordem original dada por Richard Ellis. Isso também é aplicável aos documentos complementares não-fotográficos, gerados pelo fotógrafo ao longo de suas atividades. O Ensaio visual busca apresentar um breve panorama sobre as fotografias de Richard Ellis seus instrumentos de controle originais.

Palavras-chave: Arquivo Richard Ellis; arquivos pessoais; contexto arquivístico; fotografia maltesa.

"Richard Ellis" is a household name in Malta. The idyllic photographs of Malta of yesteryear that grace so many books and which featured on so many postcards at the turn of the last century were taken by him. Born in England in 1842, he had a remarkable history and ended up on Malta's shores quite by chance. At the age of

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7 he was apprenticed by James Conroy and his wife Sara. The Conroys were in the entertainment business, forming part of a travelling circus. They travelled across continental Europe as strolling players. Six months after joining the Conroys, they moved to France, taking young Richard with them.

It was a time when photography was the emerging art of the day in France and James and Richard probably thought it would help if they learnt its processes. James enrolled as an apprentice at the Daguerre Institute in Paris while Richard ran general errands and helped in the laboratories. This way he learnt about photography and the various other related subjects. It would seem that Richard had a natural talent for this new form of art because he later developed into one of the best photographers Malta ever had.

Though the plan for the Conroys and Richard was to return to Naples, the confusion in southern Italy led them to believe it would be safer to head for Malta, where they arrived in April 1861. Richard was 19 by this time and it is unlikely that he had returned home to England during all these years. He did, however, remain in contact with his family, particularly his mother.

After settling in Malta, James Conroy decided to set up a photographic studio in Senglea, which was a prosperous area at the time with plenty of business related to the maritime activity of the docks, the harbour, and the military barracks of Verdala. Richard acted as his assistant. They produced Daguerreotype images and, using the collodion process and albumen printing, took studio portraits, photographed ships in Grand Harbour as well as important events. Business must have been brisk because some four years later they moved to premises in Strada Stretta, Valletta where they acquired additional premises by 1870.

In 1864, Richard married Alphonsa Curmi, a Maltese girl from Cospicua. Seven years after getting married, Richard split with the Conroys. This happened in 1871, when he was 29, and he set up his own studio at 43, Strada Stretta, Valletta. The street was a reputable one at the time and did not become known as 'the Gut' until later. Good-quality hotels and businesses were situated there and the street was sought after by photographers. Studios were usually situated on the top floors of the buildings, utilizing the natural northern light entering them through large skylights.

The 3 Cs – Content, Context, Charm

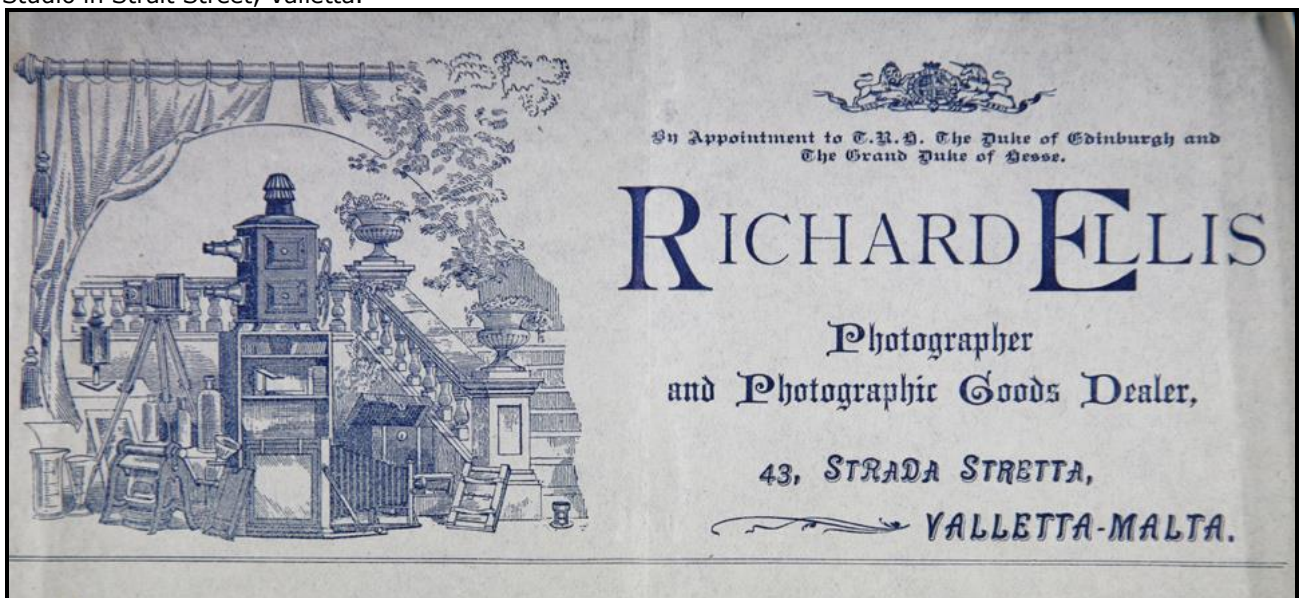
The strength of the Richard Ellis Archive derives from the fact that it is structured and one can study it for its content, context and the charm of the images it preserves. These three Cs make the collection stand out. In terms of content, the repository where it is preserved holds circa 36,000 glass plates. But these are not loosely organized. They are tied up together through an efficient system of intellectual control. Richard Ellis was a highly organized person and devised for his

Picture 1: Family Group Studio Portrait (c. 1900)



Richard standing to the left and son John to the right. His wife Alfonsa is seated center and daughters Amelia to the left and Maria to the right. **Source:** Richard Ellis Archive: 5301

Picture 2: An early Company Letter Head showing a Magic Lantern and an artistic impression of the Photo Studio in Strait Street, Valletta.



Source: Richard Ellis Archive: 5651

needs a finding aids system. Furthermore, apart from numbering negatives and describing them in ledgers, he had the foresight to preserve supporting documentation. His collection consists of accounts ledgers, outgoing correspondence registers, negatives registers and indexes to the negatives register. In some instances, the documentation preserves information about the aperture and shutter speeds used. Furthermore, the correspondence and financial registers give an administrative context to the business units operated by three generations of Ellis photographers.

The first grouping of finding aids consists of registers of negatives. For these there is an index giving out the topic and box number of each. The various clients Ellis had been registered in the Client Accounts Ledger. Even this has its index. The ledger itself then lists sales and payments received from the specific client including dates and brief description of works. This helped his business needs, but in hindsight this is also of great help for research by future generations. Richard also had the outgoing correspondence indexed in alphabetical order.

Picture 3: The finding aids links within the accounts ledgers.

1900
Apr. 10

1900
June 13

1900
June 30

1900
Sept. 22

The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty (Dock Yard Malta).

Dr.

10 1 set of copy. Foundation for new E Block. Right.
 1 " " new Gymnastic Block " "
 1 " " Boat sheds, erected on lake at Capt's garden.
 1 " " new Machinery Shop. (Exterior)
 1 " " " " " (Interior)
 1 " " Bassinella Wharf.
 1 " " L. Francisco de Paula Bastion.
 1 " " Head of French Creek.
 1 " " New Ghain Knieli Road.
 3 " " Gen view of E side from barracks. Parade ground.
 1 " " Old Boat House & Mast Shed. Waide of F. Creek.
 1 " " Lengths of D. Dams removed.
 3 " " French Creek Walls A. B. C.
 1 " " " " " D.
 1 " " Corner of boat sheds: Dams under construction.
 1 " " Naval Ordnance Magazine accommodation.
 2 " " " " " & site for new Laboratory.

22 sets of copies on Platine Brown Paper 20 p. per set

22

Index.

Name.	Page.
Lawthorne - S. A.	no. 1.
Zimmermann a.m.	" 5.
Britannia Work Co.	" 5. 152.
Lonsdale Brothers	" 7.
Rider Archibald	" 9.
Eastman Photo Mat ^o Co.	" 11.
Geiser, Jean.	" 13.
Eastman Photo Mat ^o Co.	" 13.
Gripping, John J. & sons.	" 15.
Leyland & Co. Fred.	" 17. 443.
Emmerson Kimrich	" 19.
Lacy-Lund, Humphries & Co.	" 21.
Badlett & Wall	" 23.
Piggar & Ljoda	" 25.
Kedak Ltd.	" 13. 39. 00. 152.
Ballmeyer, J. H.	" 27.
Photo Materials Co.	" 29.
Imperial Dry Plate Co.	" 31. 70. 152. 150. 150. 22. 27.
Luch, Raphael	" 33.
Bochholz Seedoro	" 35.
Paget Rigo Plate Co.	" 37.
Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty	" 41. 17. 49. 72. 66. 76. 98. 100. 102.
Levi James Ltd.	" 43.
Y. Ltd. Birmingham	" 44.
Gemstone & Co. Ltd.	" 46.
"	" 48.
"	" 50.
"	" 52.

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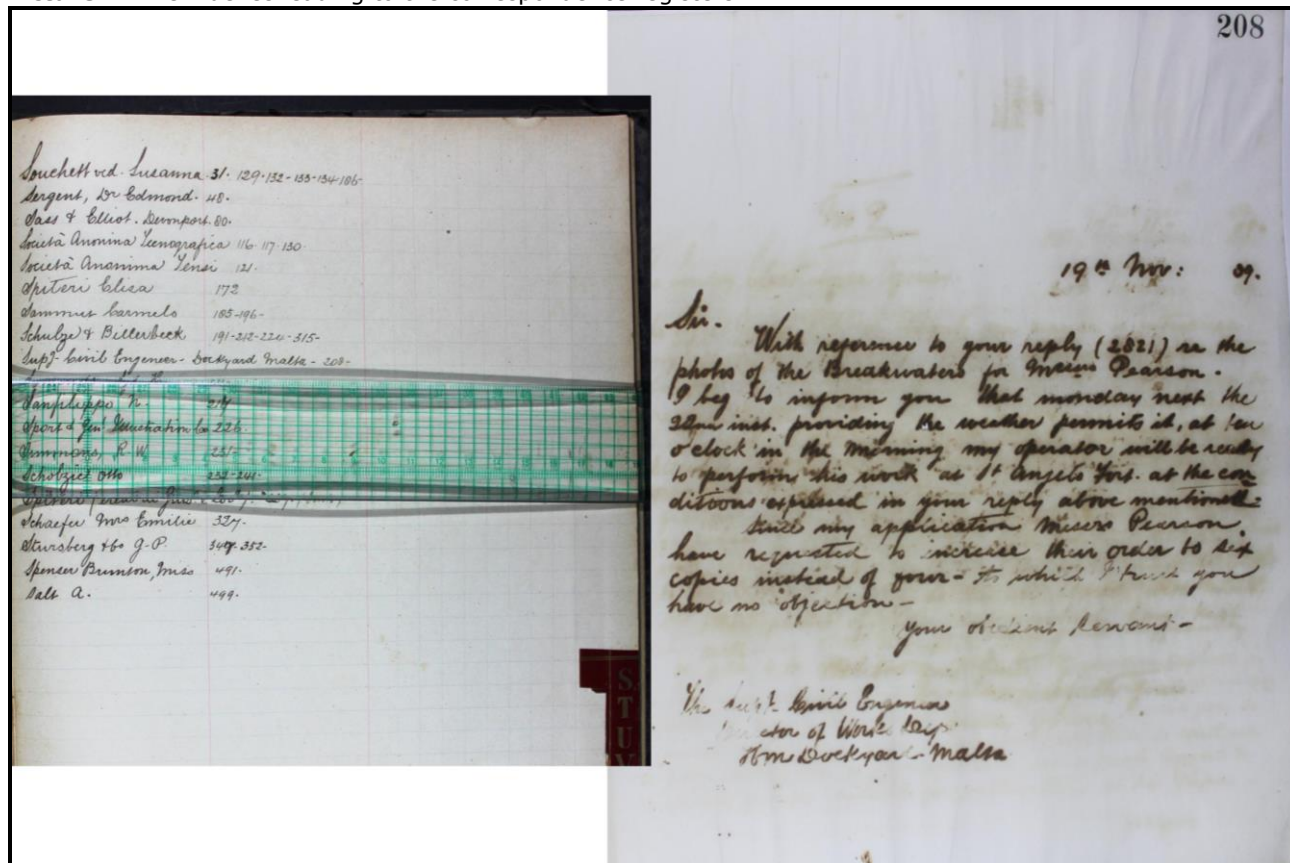
Over to be

Source: Richard Ellis Archive: Accounts Ledgers

The information in such ledgers is often enough for the historian to identify the place depicted and pin down the event or image to a date. However, in certain instances there are also technical details that are of interest even for anyone

studying the photographic techniques and technology used at the time. In certain cases, the images also have details of the aperture and speed used by the photographer.

Picture 4: The indexes leading to the correspondence registers.

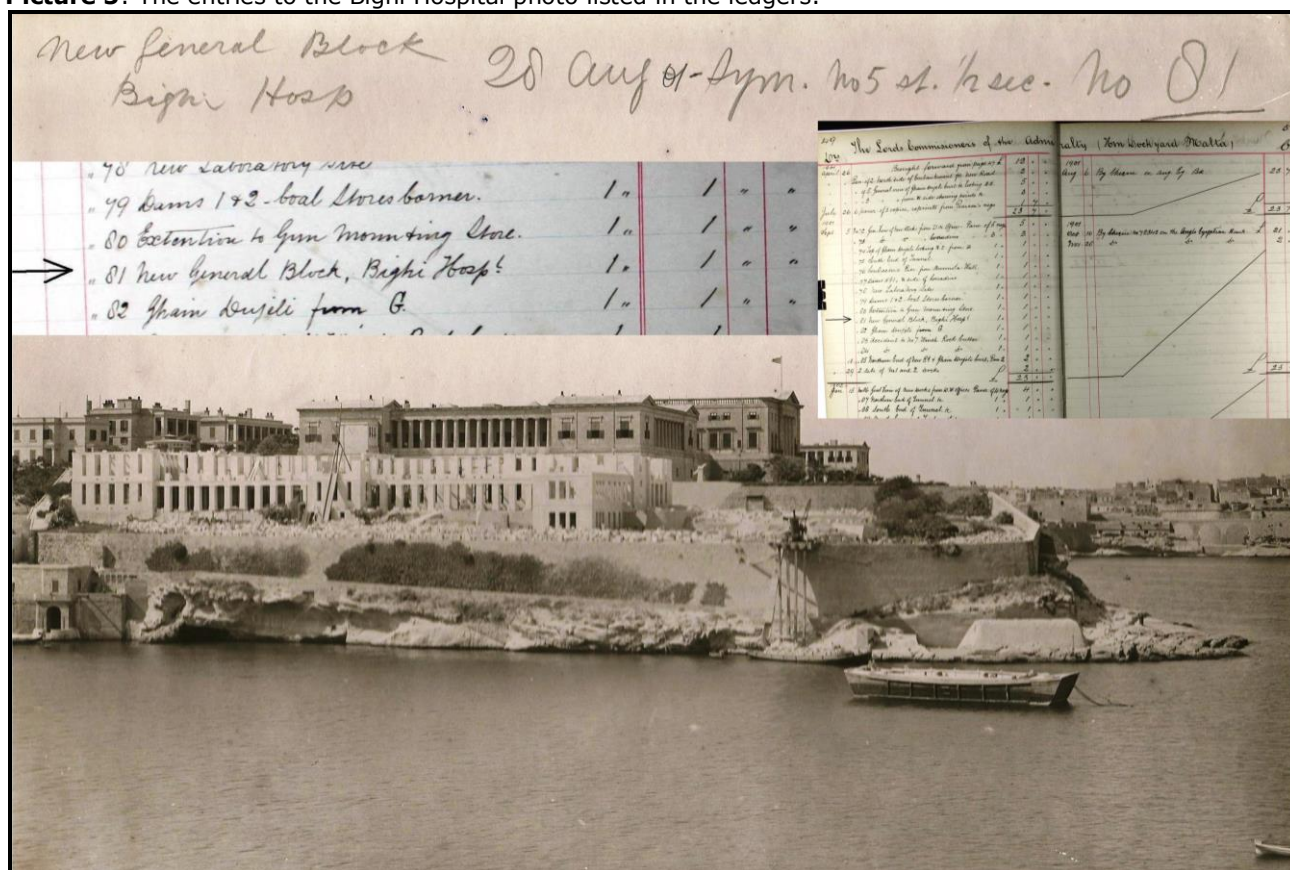


Source: Richard Ellis Archive: Correspondence

In terms of context, the background information and availability of correspondence facilitates the contextualization of this archive in the national and international archives milieu. A case in point, is the discovery of a number of experimenting photos that had to do with X-ray technology. When Richard's son John gave up a career in medicine and joined the business to help his father they produced what must be the first X-ray pictures in Malta and contacted the Royal Naval Hospital at Bigli, offering services to the medical staff.

X-rays were discovered by William Conrad Röntgen, a professor of physics at the University of Wurzburg who presented his findings on 28 December 1896. The news of the "new photography" reached Malta on 12 March 1897, but the editor of The Daily Malta Chronicle, which carried the news over two months after this was broken on the continent, expressed his regrets that he could not give readers "the full particulars of the recent advances made" because his science editor was in Morocco.

Picture 5: The entries to the Bighi Hospital photo listed in the ledgers.



Source: Richard Ellis Archive - Catalogues

John Ellis was probably experimenting in this field at the same time that Röntgen was, because before the news about the x-rays was published on 5 November 1896, he had already written to Sir Gerald Strickland, the Chief Secretary to Government. He enclosed several photos of X-rays he had taken of several objects ranging from coins in boxes, where only the metal coins were visible, to an X-ray of a hand, which is the first known X-ray photograph to have been taken locally.

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The documentation recording the exchanges between the Chief Secretary and Ellis is recorded and preserved at the National Archives. It took just over a month for the Chief Secretary to reply to this letter, on 11 December, he wrote saying that "the department concerned had been informed and that his (Ellis's) services could be used in cases difficult to diagnose". It is not possible to know whether these were in fact ever used. In the meantime, John Ellis appears to have been confident that the results obtained could be put to use in medicine as on 17 November 1896,

he wrote to Surgeon General Thomas Maunsell, sending him samples of his work and telling him that, if he deemed his services useful in the Military Hospital, he would be greatly obliged to assisted him. But again, it is not known whether Ellis's services were ever used. It was not before 1908 that the first x-ray equipment was installed at the Central Hospital in Malta.

Picture 6: One of a set of experimental images taken by Richard Ellis using X-ray techniques in 1896.



Note the missing portion of the middle finger on the right hand. **Source:** Richard Ellis Archive: 5847

This episode is evidence of the advanced level of activity the Ellis family was practising and also the diversity of knowledge which a proper exploration of the links between this archive and other archives can provide.

Categories

The collection is also diverse in content. A rough categorization of the holdings gives us about nine groupings in the form of (a) views; (b) royal portraits and events; (c) X-ray experiments; (d) private houses and interiors; (e) weddings; (f) assignments abroad (Smyrna and Messina); (g) infrastructure and events; (h) forensics; and (i) postcards. This photo essay gives a taste of the diversity of quality of the works.

The collection of works related to views were mainly commissions from the British government. Their value was appreciated at the time, but is even of more relevance considering the change Malta underwent after its Independence from Great Britain and during the last decades. Some of the views depicted have already been treasured for the valuable detail they have, which was often referred to during restoration projects on the bastions or important historical buildings.

Picture 7: The imposing residence of a “well to do” Maltese businessman in Sliema, Malta (june 1922).



The proud owner's children and carriage form part of the artistic composition. **Source:** Richard Ellis Archive: 6958

The category of royal portraits and events presents the researcher with a depiction of important happenings on the island. Royal visits were occasions for spring cleaning, elaborate decorations and great pomp and parades. All these are recorded in a detailed manner by the Ellis photographers. Photo sessions like the one organized at Ellis' studio in Valletta for King George V and Queen Mary in 1912 were events of high importance. What is even more important from an archival dimension is that the event left for posterity not only the prints, but also the documentation around it, and the oral history that is still alive. Members of the Ellis family still recount how the King and Queen were entertained to tea and biscuits while the photographers were busy checking that they got the images right. All this context is another bonus to an already fantastic collection of images.

Picture 8: The placing of the last block on completion of the Malta Grand Harbour Breakwater Project in 1907 and its official inauguration



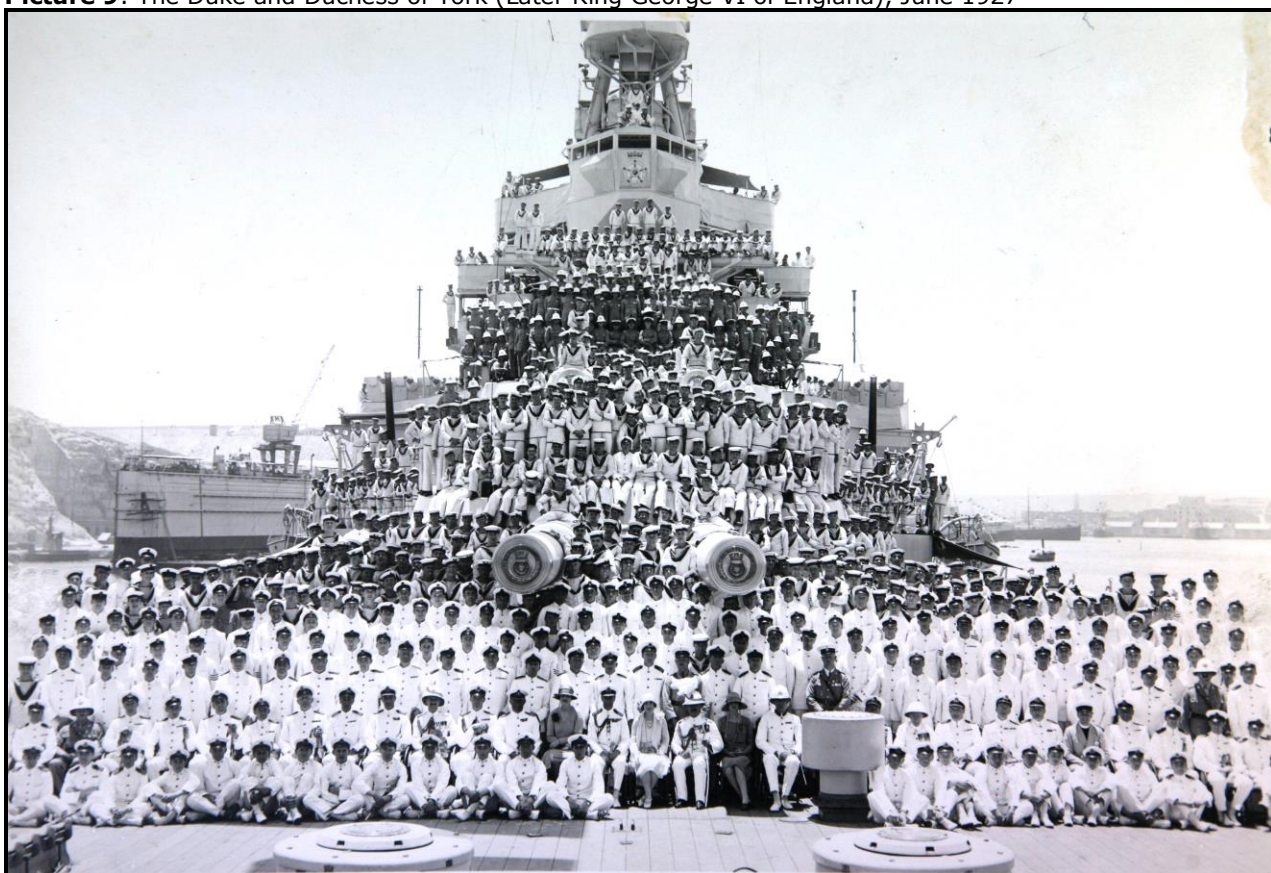
Note the splash from the champagne bottle on the final block (bottom Left). **Source:** Richard Ellis Archive: 9353

The photos depicting events are important and highly valued for their detail. The photo which follows depicts a celebration of the inauguration of the Grand Harbour breakwater. The initial temptation during the digitization was to remove what

looked like bruises on the negative. Closer inspection revealed that Ellis managed to capture the splashing of the champagne on the foundation stone. It is really a case of literally capturing the moment. This photo underlines the need of a multidisciplinary team when organizing this archive, in particular, getting historians on board to analyze the detail and context of each scene.

Another reflection that one can make is about the human element so prominent in Ellis' works. Group photos can be tagged with rich metadata that can lead images to link with biographies. For large spans of time Ellis had the contract to photograph military personnel serving in Malta. Each image represents a person, archival information about whom surely resides in other archival collections world-wide. Digital technology will make it easier to link such data and come up with highly interesting connections that can be of great benefits for genealogists.

Picture 9: The Duke and Duchess of York (Later King George VI of England), June 1927



Photographed with the whole crew of the warship HMS Renown while on their state visit to Malta. **Source:** Richard Ellis Archive: 5843

Of interest to genealogists will also be photos of family events such as weddings. The latter provided the photographer with a more intimate environment to work in. Yet, these settings also provide rich insights into social classes, fashion and also the sites used for the posed photos.

The collection also has small but important sections that can be labelled as photo journalism. Two such instances were the Smyrna refugees' crisis and the earthquake

Picture 10: A wedding group (September 1902)



This is one of many such images that form part of the archive. Note the photographer's crop lines and the inquisitive face peeping round the corner to the right. The actual composition is an exquisite example of Ellis's technique. **Source:** Richard Ellis Archive: 3127

Picture 11: The Messina Earthquake in 1908.



One of a series of images taken by Ellis during the rescue operations carried out by the British Navy stationed in Malta. **Source:** Richard Ellis Archive: 2730

in Messina. Due to a number of geographical and political circumstances, Ellis formed part of the British Red Cross and was present during these operations and managed to record these moments. His documentation of this tragedy is unique and shows the extent of human suffering caused by this natural disaster.

Picture 12: Rural View of the Maltese Countryside, "Mosta Wied Speranza".



One of a comprehensive collection covering the islands of Malta and Gozo. **Source:** Richard Ellis Archive: 7066

These records have a Mediterranean dimension, and it is one of the hopes of this project that collaboration be built with other photographic archival institutions in the Mediterranean in order to share and intensify the study on these photo assignments.

Conclusion

The Richard Ellis Archive is a treasure trove that is there to be studied. Lack of resources and expertise have hindered the momentum of such process in the past. However, the developments of recent years have seen a bridge building approach. The collaboration agreement signed in Girona opened up the possibilities of across borders collaboration in a field that is highly specialized. This article is another building block in this collaboration.