



# PHT Newsletter

Issue 97 /March 2010



**PENANG  
HERITAGE  
TRUST**  
*Persatuan  
Warisan  
Pulau  
Pinang*  
**PHT**

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## Editorial

### *Penang Hill Railway*

*In this issue of the Newsletter we unabashedly celebrate Penang's funicular railway while lamenting the shortsighted decision to dismantle this major heritage asset that has been identified worldwide with Penang for almost ninety years. Since the closure of the Penang Hill Railway in late February the mainstream media have published a stream of letters from people in Malaysia and abroad making it clear that scrapping the historic railway will destroy a unique attraction that has drawn tourists not only from Malaysia and the region but from all over the world. One foreign tourist suggested that destroying the historic funicular would be like San Francisco abolishing its famous trams.*



*Last ride: A funicular train coach heading up Penang Hill yesterday amidst widening works along the track.*

*The Star 22 February 2010*

*As a measure of the value of the Penang Hill Railway there has even been an indication of interest in acquiring some of the specialized equipment and machinery for use in restoring an historic funicular railway in Europe. This would be akin to getting rid of the family silver because we are buying new stainless steel cutlery.*

*In anticipation of the closure of the railway, the Penang Heritage Trust decided on a farewell trip on the historic funicular for its monthly site visit in February. The result was a record turn-out of almost ninety PHT members and friends for a nostalgic and unforgettable afternoon in February that included an informative and magical visit to the winding-engine house at Upper Station.*

*No reasonable justification has been given for the decision to replace the Penang Hill Railway with a modern system. While there is no doubt that the historic railway needs some improvements, proposals for addressing this and ensuring better maintenance have been ignored in preference for an unnecessary high-cost project. The main rationale for the project appears to be to build a single-section system that will take a thousand passengers an hour up the hill in ten minutes. What is the point? As many people have said in defence of the historic funicular, the scenic rail journey itself is as important as the hilltop experience of cool air and beautiful views.*

## Mounting Concern over Lack of Swift Action



There is growing concern that government guidelines soon to be issued on the breeding of swiftlets will fail to address the threat to heritage buildings and public health posed by allowing such agricultural activity in residential areas. Arguments by the swiftlet breeding

lobby that converting heritage shophouses for this industry does not endanger the health or homes of their neighbours are spurious and self-serving. Let it be clear that we do not oppose the breeding of swiftlets as a legitimate and profitable agricultural industry. Like pig farming or chicken and duck breeding, however, it should not be permitted in urban areas. Moreover, in the case of George Town such activity is demonstrably damaging heritage houses, hurting property values and threatening to drive city dwellers out of their homes in the heritage city. Therefore, it puts George Town's listing as a UNESCO World Heritage Site at risk. The choice is people or swiftlets. Which is it to be?

Guest Editor

## HISTORIC CEMETERIES

### UPLANDS STUDENTS RE-INK GRAVESTONES

On the morning of Monday, 1st March I met seven International Baccalaureate (IB) students from the International School of Penang (Uplands) taking part in their CAS (Community Action Service) programme at the Old Protestant Cemetery. They had agreed to volunteer their time to re-ink some of the gravestones in the cemetery. They worked for four days re-inking the stones.



Loh-Lim Lin Lee had given me the low-down on what the kids had to do, the technique and the materials -- chalk to rub on the stones so that you can see the lettering more clearly, small tins of black enamel paint and stiff pointed Chinese brushes so that you can get detail. Turpentine was also on hand to get rid of any smears immediately. Lastly a little care and attention was needed, with a show of respect for the dead and buried. The teenagers then got to work.

Lin Lee had arranged for the gravestones to be re-inked quite a few years ago, also with volunteers. You can still see that the ink has lasted so well on the stones nearest the entrance and in the centre of the cemetery. The only gravestones that they had been unable to finish were the ones in the left back corner of the cemetery. So it was here that these students concentrated.

Please visit this gorgeous cemetery and see the work these students have done. They have made it all much easier to read the inscriptions on the gravestones and we are very thankful for their time and effort.

By Rebecca Duckett

*The importance of the Old Protestant Cemetery and the adjoining Old Roman Catholic Cemetery to the George Town World Heritage Site cannot be overstated. They provide a record of some of the earliest settlers of high and low rank, of many nationalities, civil and military, young and old, who came to Penang. The condition of the cemeteries is often remarked on by overseas tourists who are seen visiting them every day. It is gratifying that local volunteers, including members of the Penang Veterans Association (as reported in our last Newsletter) and young people such as the Uplands CAS students, are prepared to devote their energies to cleaning and improving the historic cemeteries. Is it too much to expect the municipal authorities to acknowledge their responsibility to maintain, upkeep and repair the cemeteries on a regular basis? Editor*

## DRIVING UP PENANG HILL, 1914

SIXTY YEARS AGO four young adventurers blazed a trail which has since not been followed - driving a car 2,500ft. up Penang Hill.

“We did this long before the project to build a hill road was contemplated,” Mr. Tye Poh Sun, the only surviving member of the quartet, recalled today.



*(top) Keat Kwong trying to reverse the car at a sharp corner, in the back seat is Lim Cheng Hoe. Poh Sun is standing on a boulder*

In 1914, when they accomplished the hazardous journey in two days, there were very few bungalows on the hill - and no hill railway. “Our destination was the Crag Hotel (now the Uplands School),” Mr. Tye, 74, said. “But we had to stop just before the post office which was next to the Penang Hill police station.”

Mr. Tye said the trip was made in his father’s car, a Willys-Overland. “I was then in the Junior Cambridge (now Form Four) and at 14, was the youngest in the group,” he said.

The other members were his elder brother, Keat Kwong, who had then just left school, Mr. Chan Hoe Pan, a businessman, and Mr. Lim Cheng Hoe, a brother of Mr. Lim Cheng Ean.

The four adventurers went up the hill through a path next to the entrance of the Penang Botanic Gardens, with Keat Kwong at the wheel.

“It was a pleasant drive, and we felt ourselves in tune with nature when we heard the calls of the insects and birds in the thick foliage of the surrounding jungles,” Mr. Tye said. “The going was a challenge to the sturdy car which responded well to Keat Kwong’s handling. The gradient at certain sections was 1:2.”



There were small “ridges” built diagonally across the jungle path to control the flow of rainwater down the hill; and the adventurers had to cut breaches on a number of them to facilitate the drive. “The Government discovered this, and filed a claim for damages, which we paid,” Mr. Tye said. “It then put up concrete posts at the foot of the path to discourage others from driving up again.”

Mr. Tye said they set out early in the morning from his father’s house in

Gladstone Road. “The engine behaved beautifully and didn’t even stall once,” he said. “There was no mishap. I remember Keat Kwong had difficulty trying to negotiate a hairpin bend along a steep incline with a big boulder at the side. “The car was at more than 30 degrees facing upslope. Keat Kwong manoeuvred the vehicle front and back several times, but finally had to give up trying to reach the Crag Hotel that way.

"It was then getting late. So we left the car there overnight and walked back to town. "We came back early the next morning and resumed the journey via another road to the post office and police station." There were very few people living up the hill in 1914. Apart from the Crag Hotel, the buildings up there were the Christian Brothers' Bungalow, Halfway House, and Mr. Loke Chow Thye's Mon Sejour (My Rest). The other bungalows were built after the Penang Hill Railway started operating in 1923.

After a night's rest on the hill, the four adventurers started their descent the following morning, joined by Mr. Khoo Theam Hock of the Crag Hotel. Keat Kwong handled the car expertly on the journey downhill. Often, he had to switch to the lowest gear to help check the momentum of its forward roll.

Mr. Tye said an account of their adventure, together with photographs, was sent to England and published in a motoring magazine. "Unfortunately, I have lost my copy after all these years," he said.

#### NOTES:

*Keat Kwong died in Boston. His widow built a bungalow at Leith Street which is now used as the Red Restaurant. She was active in the Ladies Chin Woo Association. Cheng Hoe was the elder brother Lim Cheng Ean, the lawyer and Legislative Councillor of the S.S.*

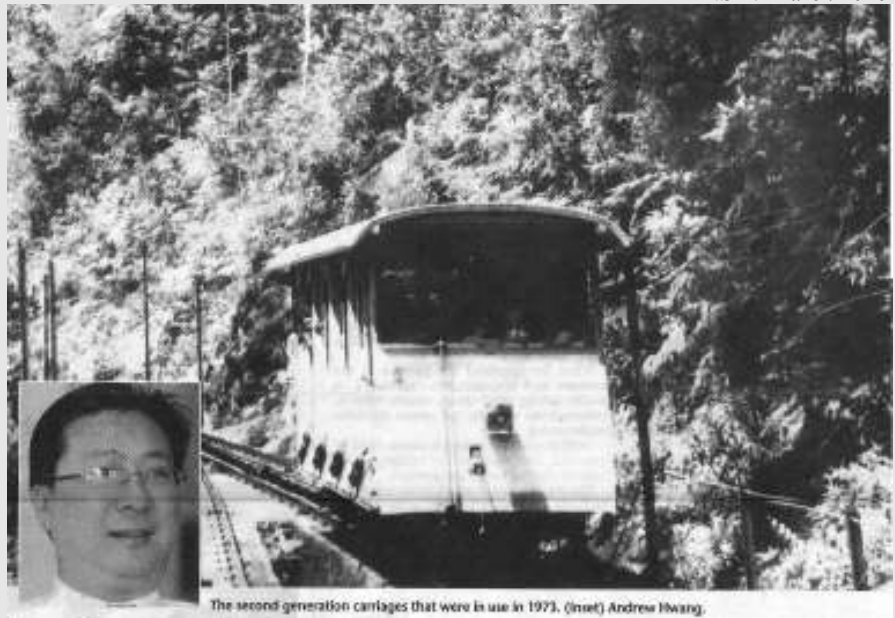
<http://www.theoofamily.com/ThePenangfileb/nov-2007/page1156.htm>

Story in the Sunday Times of September 15th, 1974 by OH KEE TIANG

## MEMORIES OF PENANG HILL

NST 7 March 2010

First, there is no such thing as Penang Hill! That is only a collective name for the hills upon which the British built their hill resort away from the heat of the lowlands. The funicular railway which just closed recently for upgrading works was built on Flagstaff Hill (hence the Malay name, Bukit Bendera or Seng Kee Sua in Hokkien). The very first memory I have of going up the hill was in 1970 using the funicular railway. It was then the old wooden carriages which were not enclosed and passengers could reach out and pluck flowers or feed monkeys. The air was very fresh and much cooler in those days – bracing, like a very cold air-conditioned room. And you could smell the jungle everywhere and hear faint jungle sounds over the increasing stillness as you ascended. The sound of the city would just fade away and a sense of calm descended over everything. There were plenty of 'monkey cups' everywhere which was what we used to call pitcher plants and rattan plants. The monkeys were quite visible and came near the railway as passengers used to throw nuts and food to them. When it rained, some water did get in and we used to have to huddle until we got to the top or opened our umbrellas. I cannot remember the fare but they had adult and children's tickets and they were cheap by today's standards. Inhabitants of the hills enjoyed a lower fare.



The second generation carriages that were in use in 1973. (Inset) Andrew Hwang.

When I was still in school, we went up maybe two or three times a year during school holidays. Usually I had my cousins over or we had visitors from outstation. When I was older, in my teens, I went up more times, not only by using the railway but also hiking up the hill or walking up using the newly laid road for 4WD vehicles.

There were many bungalows all the way up the hill and around the top. There were three major stations – Lower Station (at the foot of the hill), Middle Station and Upper Station. There were other stops – the Jade Emperor's Pavilion temple stop, Claremont, Moniot Road, Viaduct Station, Lower Tunnel Station and Upper Tunnel Station. We used to board at the Lower Station, get out and change trains at the Middle Station and get off at the Upper Station. The whole trip took just under thirty minutes.

And we used to run around at the top when we were younger, only stopping to buy ice-cream. If our parents were with us, they would want to stop at the Tea Kiosk and forced us to sit down and have tea and maybe some fried noodles! There was a police station, the Penang Hill Hotel, Strawberry Park, and further along was the Crag Hotel which was no longer a hotel but the premises of the Uplands School, today the International School of Penang (Uplands), which was the premier expatriate private school in those days offering a British curriculum. Uplands moved out in 1977 and my uncle was one of the teachers.

The names of the nearby hills were also very English: Strawberry Hill, Crag Hill, Government Hill, Halliburton's Hill, Western Hill, Mount Edgecumbe and Mount Olivia, among others. The appearances of the various hill bungalows would have reminded British visitors of far-off Britain or Europe. They had grand names like Mon Sejour, Claremont Estate, Fairmont, Belle Vue, Browhead, Halliburton's Bungalow and Grace Dieu.

The surrounding trails were excellent for walks which stretched for miles all around and one could literally walk to Balik Pulau using those trails! I recall hiking up the hill as a teenager using the Moon Gate trail which began at the white Moon Gate (today painted in various colours) on Waterfall Road. This circular gate was the original pedestrian entrance to the well known Chinese millionaire Mr. Cheah Chen Eok's country villa, aptly named Villae (now in ruins), a short distance up the trail. Cheah was famous in Penang as the man who donated the Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee clock tower at the roundabout near Fort Cornwallis. The Villae was notorious for a dramatic robbery which took place on 10th July 1897 involving fifteen intruders. A Mr. Oh Cheng Chan broke his thigh bone in jumping out a window to escape the robbers but died, presumably from internal injuries suffered, four days later on 14th July 1897. This was reported in the **Straits Observer** of 13th and 16th July 1897.

The hill railway was designed by Arnold Johnson, the Senior District Engineer for the Federated Malay States Railway. He learned how to design a funicular railway line from the Swiss after the original 1906 line failed. The second line was built between 1920 and 21st October 1923 and was officially opened by Straits Settlements Governor Sir Laurence Guillemard on 1st January 1924.

The funny thing is that we have been informed that the new trains are supposed to go up in nine minutes after the ongoing upgrade. Going up Penang Hill is not as if you were riding a commuter train to go to work. Most people going up the hill are sightseeing, and that is when people like to take their time to take in the view and breathe in the fresh air. However, I realize that people have always complained about any changes to the trains. When the trains were changed from the open wooden carriages to the enclosed ones from Switzerland in 1979, people complained. It was largely because whenever the air conditioning broke down, the windows could not be opened making it hot and stuffy in the train whereas it was actually cold and refreshing outside. The problem was eventually fixed and the complaints ceased.

For a while I wondered why the carriages bore the colours of red and white and then one day it dawned on me those were the colours of the Swiss flag! I thought it would have been better if the carriages were painted in the Penang state colours but strangely enough up to this very day no one thought to do this.

After the four wooden carriages were replaced in 1979, one of them was put on display at the Summit, while the other two were displayed at the Penang State Museum and at Muzium Negara respectively.

The one at the Penang Museum even served as a souvenir shop for a time.

However, even before these four wooden carriages which were introduced in 1923 were used, there were actually two other wooden carriages – carriages No. 1 and No.2. They began service in 1906 but the railway had a faulty design and upon decommissioning they were eventually converted into chicken coops by a Punjabi railway guard! I got the story from one of the railway staff.

In 1985, my father, Ian Hwang Hong Yuan - who was then the Assistant Plant Superintendent of the Penang State JKR Workshop - was put in charge of the funicular railway maintenance. He would retain this responsibility until his retirement in 1995. I remember how I once followed him up the hill at night to supervise the replacement of cables. It was cold and quiet up there, and there were none of the noises you would hear at night in George Town. I could only hear the workmen talking, the sound of generators and crickets and other jungle noises.

Up ahead were stars glittering in the darkness. The view from the Upper Station area at night was more spectacular - far off in the distance you could see the lights of the Penang Bridge reflected off the lapping waves of the Straits of Malacca. It could get cold at night and the temperature could drop to 16 degrees. It was worse when it rained.

It was during this night visit that I learned about the lore associated with the Penang funicular railway from the workers and I also had a chance to read a book written by the English engineer who was in charge of it before it was handed over to Malaysians to run.

My father was a Federation Scholar and he was well trained by his British and American Peace Corps lecturers. He drew up a proper maintenance schedule and a system of ensuring a sufficient stock of spare parts. The spare parts had to be available at all times so that there would be no extended down-time should there be breakdowns. Somehow, this system was not followed in the years after his retirement for by 2008 the railway had broken down without the required spare parts in stock.

To the best of my knowledge, no one has written a definitive book on Penang Hill covering the railway, the flora and fauna, the buildings and the colourful inhabitants who made it their home. This is something which ought to be done quickly before too many people pass away and irreversible changes take place causing all the memory, history and lore associated with Penang Hill to be lost forever.

By Andrew Hwang

*A version of this article appeared in the **New Sunday Times**, 7th March 2010. A member of PHT, Andrew lives and works in Kuala Lumpur. He is also an active member of the Malayan Volunteers Group (MVG); his grand-uncles Cho Siow Lim and Tam Kim Tee served in the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force and were killed in 1942. Editor.*



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VIEWS

THE STAR, WEDNESDAY 3 MARCH 2010

# It's not too late to review train plans

**P**ENANG lost one of its valuable heritage assets when its historic funicular railway was closed on Feb 22 to make way for a RM63mil upgrading project.

The old system is an engineering feat in the early 20th century. When it was built, it had taken into consideration the natural terrain of Penang Hill and the 20-minute journey offered passengers a great view of the hills' splendour and lush greenery.

The proposed new system, however, would take passengers straight up the hill in a shorter time, depriving them of a relaxed ride and to enjoy nature in a leisurely manner.

When the upgrading system funded by the federal government was proposed, local NGOs and representatives of the hill's residents submitted an alternative proposal which would take into consideration the carrying capacity, maintain the heritage value of the two-track system and take into account the feelings and needs of hill residents and small businesses to minimise impact of the upgrading works.

We agree that the upgrading work is necessary as there have been frequent disruptions to the hill railway service but we are not in favour of the new system. We are concerned that the new one-track system, which would inevitably involve slope cutting and earthworks, would cause undesirable impact to the fragile environment.

The Penang state government in its media statement stated that the new train will have a maximum capacity of 1,000 passengers per hour compared with 250 in the old system. We question the basis of projection because from our observations, the passenger load for an hour is never that many. We believe the projection figure is purposely inflated to justify the upgrading works.

We are not sure if there was consideration of the optimum number of persons at the hill top or if the environment can sustain without an unacceptable degree of deterioration of the character and quality of the environment, or the recreation experience that visitors expect

of the hill.

We are concerned that with increased human traffic, the natural surroundings, tranquillity and passive outdoor recreation would be gravely impacted as this ecologically sensitive area cannot sustain heavy use. Besides the ecological limits, there are also the physical limits that have to be considered, for instance water supply, quantity of public toilets, waste disposal issues, sewerage treatment, etc.

It is not too late for a review in anticipation of problems during the implementation of the upgrading works. The authorities should consult the local NGOs and hill residents who would be able to guide and provide valuable advice in the interest of the heritage value of the Penang Hill railway and the natural heritage of the hill itself.

**S.M. MOHAMED IDRIS,**  
President, Sahabat Alam Malaysia,  
Penang.

N16

NATION

THE STAR, MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2010

# No last-minute rush to hilltop

## Lim pays tribute to Federal Govt for the RM63mil rail service upgrade

By ANDREA FILMER  
and CHRISTINA CHIN  
www.thestar.com.my

**GEORGE TOWN:** Penangites pined for catching a last glimpse of Penang Hill's funicular train as the four iconic red coaches made their last runs to the hilltop.

The funicular railway that was completed in 1923 will cease operations today for at least seven months to make way for a RM63mil upgraded system.

A check by The Star at the ticket counter in the lower station showed that no more than the normal number of visitors had decided to ride the funicular trains yesterday, with the counter clocking in about 1,000 visitors at 2pm.

Even though there was no last-minute rush to the hill, a large number of visitors were still seen at the state's most popular attraction throughout the day, the majority of them being foreigners or other local tourists.

"We just arrived in Penang 24 hours ago and we had seen on the Internet that this would be the last day to experience the funicular train," said communications consultant Judith Sullivan, 64, an American.

Husband Steve Stamm, also 64, said they had done their research before arriving in the country and were looking forward to seeing the



**Final ride:** People boarding the funicular train on its final day of operation in Penang Hill yesterday.

monkeys, hiking trails and other attractions on the hill.

Retired rubber tapper Lim Poh Lai, 73, was seen making her second trip up the hill after 55 years.

"My first trip was when I was 18 years old. I came with three friends on a visit to the state," said Lim, who hails from Johor.

She said being back in Penang at

the time the funicular train was making its last run was purely a lucky coincidence.

"I just happened to be in the state for a holiday. I feel very lucky to be able to make one last trip on the train before it ceases operation," she said.

Meanwhile, a check at the middle station revealed that work has already begun to clear a wider space

for the new track.

Funicular train officers on the scene said the work, which has so far been done manually, started about three months ago.

In the upgrading project undertaken by the Tourism Ministry, visitors will no longer need to get off at the middle station as the new, spacious and air-conditioned coaches

will take passengers non-stop to the hilltop.

Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng who boarded the last train ride at 8.30pm last night together with state executive councillors, oversaw a closing ceremony of the present train which ran for 87 consecutive years.

He paid tribute to the federal government for allocating RM63mil to upgrade the Penang Hill rail service, saying this injection of funds would spark revival of the hill as the state's premier tourist attraction.

The new train system's construction time is only between five and 10 minutes, compared to the 30 minutes via the old service.

Lim also said that the contractor would preserve historic elements of the present track such as the tunnel and bridge, while the train could carry up to 15,000 passengers daily.

He added that the state would embark on a major cleanliness campaign atop the landmark before the new train service commences.

Lim also spoke on the need to conserve as many heritage buildings as possible on the hill, considering that Penang is enjoying an international heritage status as proclaimed by Unesco.

**By Sun Star/Media**

For more reports and photos

The Sun 22 February 2010

# Penang Hill train makes last trip

by **Bernard Cheah** and  
**Wong Wool Kean**  
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

GEORGE TOWN: Foreign and local visitors were surprised to hear that the iconic 87-year-old Penang Hill funicular train would make its last trip yesterday, and would be replaced with a new train system.

College students Tan Soo Ni and her friend Quah Sui Pheng were shocked to find out the train system will be closed for seven months beginning today.

"We woke up early (yesterday) morning so that we can get tickets to go up Penang Hill," said Tan, 19, who lives in Bukit Mertajam.

"We will keep the ticket stubs as mementos," she said.

Engineer Yousof Al Naabi, 27, from Muscat, Oman, who is visiting Penang for the first time, said he was fortunate to ride on the train yesterday.

University undergraduate Mohd Nazrin Mohd Pauzi, 20, did not know that his ride up Penang Hill with his friends from Terengganu would be his first and last on the funicular train.

"I did not know it (closure) will start (today)," he said. The Penang Hill Funicular Railway was built in 1907 and is a cable train pulled by steel cable electrically driven with 500 volts power.

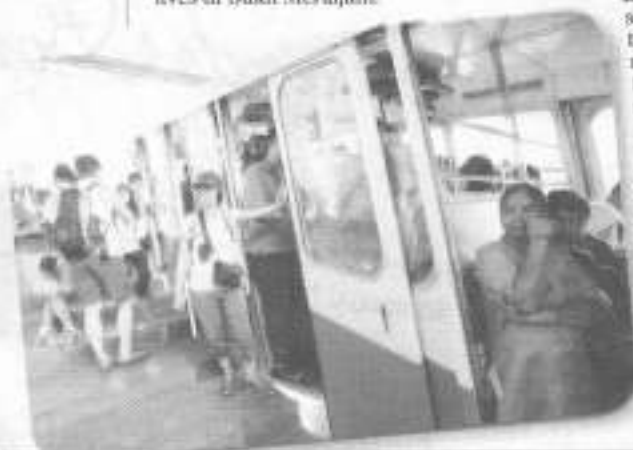
Penang Public Works, Utilities and Transport Committee chairman

Lim Hock Seng reportedly said recently that the new train system would take 10 minutes to ferry passengers from bottom station to top station, without needing to stop at the middle station, compared with the current 30-minute ride.

Lim said Penang Hill residents and hotel operators would operate a jeep service up the hill from the Botanical Gardens during the closure.

The RM65 million project is undertaken by the Tourism Ministry and is expected to be ready by the end of the year.

Some of the passengers using the services of the funicular railway for the last time.



## Star 5/3/10 Preserve charm of Penang's funicular line

I HAVE just become aware of the proposal to "upgrade" the Penang funicular railway and hope it is not too late to voice my concerns.

Twice in my life, I've been lucky enough to visit Penang – once in 1970, and again in 2008. Both times, the ride on the funicular was the highlight of my visit.

It is not just transport up a mountain, it is a trip back in history where you are very aware of the difficulties of building and maintaining such a marvel.

There are many, many places on the globe where you can blast up a mountainside and enjoy a good view, but I've never experienced anything to rival the charm of the Penang funicular.

Please think very carefully before turning this gem into just one more modern lift up a mountain.

**BETSY VAN HALDREN,**  
Quesnel, B.C.,  
Canada.

## Funicular train service a unique heritage

Star 24/2/10

THE closure of the unique funicular train service up Penang Hill must surely be met with great sadness and disappointment. Many of those who have taken the trip will readily agree that part of the thrill of ascending the hill is the charming and leisurely sojourn that they experienced getting to the top.

The 103-year-old working legacy is only one of two that is in existence in Asia and surely, this is good enough for the Tourism Ministry to list it as a national treasure.

Thus, it beggars belief that the relevant authorities have seen fit to dismantle the train and replace it with a modern one that will cost RM63mil.

I remember reading earlier that a retired engineer passionately argued that the train

service, albeit antiquated, could be repaired, improved and maintained at a fraction of the cost.

The construction of the new service will surely cause much damage to the forest neighbouring the railway tracks as widening the tracks is inevitable.

That it should take 30 minutes to reach the destination is not reason enough to replace the funicular train. We are often reminded by well-trodden travellers that it is the journey rather than the arrival that makes the visit all the more memorable.

At a time when we are aggressively promoting tourism to the world at large, we seem determined to undermine the effort by destroying our nation's beautiful and unique heritage, which is one of the main reasons

visitors are encouraged to come to our shores!

Let us not be left completely bereft of our unique and charming heritage, built or otherwise, which is swiftly disappearing in our hasty pursuit for all things new and gleaming.

Spare a thought for those wonderful old gems still remaining all around this country that never fail to impress and bring joy and pride to our collective consciousness.

It is my fervent hope that the powers-that-be will rethink the removal of this unique train system. If Hong Kong can preserve theirs, why on earth can't we?

**CJ. THOMAS,**  
Ipoh.



## Railway plan a giant step backwards

I AM astonished to learn of the planned replacement of the Penang Hill Railway. Please add my outcry to what must be a very significant groundswell of opposition to this scheme.

As a recent visitor to Penang, I was treated by my Malaysian hosts to an unforgettable ride up Penang Hill aboard this remarkable link to the past. While on tours around the city, I was shown much evidence that Penang is embracing its his-

tory and restoring its heritage buildings.

However, this proposal to replace the unique funicular railway on Penang Hill strikes me as a giant policy step backwards. It would be an enormous and irreparable loss to the rich fabric of the city and surely a decision to be regretted!

**RUTH FOSTER,**  
Belcarra, BC Canada.

The Star 01 March 2010

The Star 01 March 2010

## Penang rail proposal going the wrong way

I VISITED Penang twice in the past five years and a highlight of my last visit was a trip on the historic Penang Hill railway.

I have told many people here in Canada about the rich colonial history still evident in Penang – a history that is mostly eclipsed by modernisation and development in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and other large cities.

I was impressed by the effort made to preserve Penang's important heritage houses, graveyards, gardens and commercial areas so that visitors can experience the old charm of South East Asia.

This experience is refreshing.

I was therefore shocked and dismayed to learn that the Penang Railway is again closed and that there are plans to upgrade and replace it with a more direct, larger capacity link.

I think this is moving in the wrong direction and I urge those responsible to reconsider the proposal. Would San Francisco replace their trolley cars or New York replace their harbour ferries or Vancouver replace the Lion's Gate Bridge just because newer options exist? This would be foolish and valuable tourist revenue would disappear. If work needs to be done on the Penang Railway, preserving the character, the route, the vegetation, and the original equipment must be top priority. As a famous Canadian, Joni Mitchell, pointed out: "You don't know what you got till it's gone".

**SUE HABERGER,**  
Vancouver, BC Canada.

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theSun | THURSDAY FEBRUARY 25, 2010

news without borders

## Questions raised over new rail track

By Himanshu Bhatt  
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

**GEORGE TOWN:** Two days after the 87-year-old Penang Hill funicular railway was permanently closed to allow a RM65 million modern line to be built in its place – alarm bells are ringing over the secrecy surrounding the new project and its impact on the hill's environment and heritage.

The Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) yesterday expressed concern, that very little information has been made available about the project and how it will be constructed without affecting the slopes and obliterating the novelty of a historical engineering legacy.

Describing the closure as "an event of great sadness in the rich history of Penang", PHT president Khoo Salma Nasution said the old system, built by the British in 1923, had been hailed as an engineering marvel.

She pointed out that the railway had been meticulously built with respect to the natural terrain, negotiating many curves and bends

and using viaducts to circumvent drainage flows.

"The new project, which proposes a quick journey on a straight one-section railway, raises many questions," she said in a statement.

"Will the project require new hill cutting on steep slopes?" she asked. "Will the new railway involve unacceptable levels of stress on the infrastructure and environment and prove difficult and costly to maintain after the handover date?"

The project, with its budget channelled through the Tourism Ministry, will take passengers from the foothill to the peak in just 10 minutes, against the 50-minute trip with old the rail system. It will be able to transport 1,000 passengers in an hour compared to 280 persons with the previous rail service.

Khoo urged the authorities, project managers and contractors to consider the hill's heritage value in every decision and said PHT was willing to provide advice in this regard if called upon.

## MEDIA COVERAGE

# PENANG HILL RAILWAY

## PENANG HILL RAILWAY FAREWELL

In anticipation of the closure of the Penang Hill Railway on 22nd February for “upgrading” some 90 members and friends of PHT gathered at Lower Station at 2.15 on a hot Sunday afternoon 7th February to ride the rails in celebration of this historic and irreplaceable piece of Penang’s heritage. Most of those participating in this nostalgic trip up Penang Hill expected this to be their last opportunity to experience the leisurely ride on the classic 87-year old funicular railway. Following a briefing by PHT president Salma Khoo Nasution on the historical significance of the railway the PHT group boarded two trains at 3.00 pm and 3.15 pm. The trip revealed that contractors had already begun work to widen the cuttings for the new railway and realign the rail-bed near Middle Station to create a single track replacing the old two-section system. At Upper Station we were granted the rare privilege of entering the winding-house to be briefed by Penang Hill Residents Association president Rajah – who was born on Penang Hill -- on the workings of this marvel of early 20th century engineering. We all expressed our gratitude to Rajah for his time and patience in answering our questions. We then adjourned to the Food Court where the stall-holders will feel the brunt of the closure of the railway. The afternoon ended with the consumption of Penang Hill’s famous meat pies by probably the largest ever single group of aficionados of this delicacy. The group then broke up each to wend his or her own way down the hill. One small group chose to walk down the Jeep Track and follow Viaduct Road through the forest to Viaduct Station to catch the train home.

On the principle that a picture is worth a thousand words, this site visit report is accompanied by a selection of photographs taken during the visit.

*Text and photographs by Leslie A.K. James*



## Penang Hill Remembered...

*My* treasure on Penang Hill is not on the Hill at all but rather of the Hill. It is the Bottom Station of the Hill Railway, for I am a child of the Railway Age and my childhood is replete with memories of railway stations and the famous named trains of the now long gone Great Western Railway, the London Midland and Scottish Railway and the Southern Railway. Now, in my second childhood perhaps, it is the Hill Railway, *Keretapi Bukit Bendera*, to give it its proper name, which fills my yearning for the romance of rail.

True, the Hill Railway lacks the sonorous assurance of "The Cornishman", "The Royal Ducky", "The Lincoln Mail", or even "The Harrogate Sunday Pullman", trains of my youth, yet it is for all that a train, a complete railway system set laboriously into the side of Penang Hill, and for most Hill residents, their lifeline to Ayer Itam and to George Town itself.

*The* minutiae of trains, engines, their numbers and how they work have never appealed to me. No "Train Spotter" I. To ride the rails is the thing, and so it is with the Hill Railway. I will willingly accept that for its age the Hill Railway was a minor miracle of persistence and permanent way engineering. I will also accept that operational difficulties have much to do with the aged governor at Middle Station – why not a governess, I sometimes wonder. Not for me to delve into dimly understood detail.

No, a Hill Railway train is a community, drawn together by the lottery of tickets purchased at Bottom Station. Some days it is a very close community indeed, for on crowded public holiday weekends, when the queue snakes around the round about, one can acquire an astonishing degree of



4 December 1979 – Maiden trip by newly-commissioned Swiss-made coach and the last trip by old coach

intimacy with one's fellow passengers. Tourists, babbling many tongues, can become bosom pals of their Malaysian hosts in a very real sense indeed. Yet it is not this hurriedly assembled community welded together until Middle Station and then with the change of train there, unglued and then stuck back together in a slightly different order for the journey to Top Station, of which I write. It is of the community of Hill residents and Hill Railway staff.

The magic begins with arrival at Bayan Lepas Airport. Will the taxi be large enough to take yet another painting laboriously lugged from Bali or Bangkok? Will the driver agree to coax his asthmatic engine over the Relau Road thus saving the precious minutes which make all the difference between the six o'clock and six thirty train? Who will be on duty at Bottom Station? Who will drive the train and how packed will it be? These are the questions, the delights of anticipation which the journey to Bottom Station evokes.

Finally we are there, the same friendly faces, the usual enquiries, "Oh, just come from Singapore? Mr. Cheah's well, Peter's back is better", and so the community of the train assembles. Sometimes there are tourists who resent my intrusion with my pictures and my packages, above all those imprisoned behind the gate, waiting for the next train and seeing me sail on to the train with

apparent ease. Yet on quiet days the community consists only of Hill residents, with their uncanny knack of boarding the train with but seconds to spare just when, for once, you thought you had it practically to yourself, and the station staff. Above all there is the driver whose phenomenal memory for who gets off where without a word being spoken never ceases to amaze me.

*Yet* lest it be thought that my view is only of the present red Swiss rolling stock, let me reassure old Hill hands this is not so. Like all railway children I never forget a journey and I have never forgotten that magical day in the 70s when, as a young journalist en route for the Vietnam War, I stopped over in Penang and the uncle of a Penangite friend gamely took me up the Hill on the old train, his first trip, he told me, since 1947. A slow and creaking journey it was too and I vowed there and then to return, to become a member of this Hill Railway community. And so it has been. Now I creak more than the train, yet it is a precious moment when I enter Bottom Station and rejoin the community, and there's always the comforting thought that on the Hill Railway, as life itself, if you start at the Bottom, you cannot but go up!

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*This article was written by Tony Hughes in 1993 and submitted to Southbound Publishers Sdn Bhd & The Friends of Penang Hill for the publication Treasures of Penang Hill.*

## PULAU TIKUS CROSS-CURRENTS

We have lived in Pulau Tikus for six years. Friends overseas are puzzled by the name as we were at first. Pulau Tikus? -- Isle of Rats, Isle of Mice? We thought you lived on Pulau Pinang, the Island of Penang, they say. We explain that Pulau Tikus is not literally an island although it is an island of sorts, a village in George Town, bordering a bay shown on old maps as Pulau Tikus Bay named for a tiny islet called Pulau Tikus. That islet, nothing more than a rocky outcrop, lies offshore opposite the Penang Swimming Club. Perhaps at one time it harboured a colony of marooned rats!

Storied names abound in our Pulau Tikus. We live on Cantonment Road although our stretch of Cantonment Road between Gurney Drive and Kelawei Road officially bears another name, an acronym, the contraction of the name of a Malay social club with its premises across the road from us. Although the road signs proclaim this name, the road is still Cantonment Road to everyone including the residents, the post office, Telekom and the other utilities, water and electricity. We often wonder if the social club moved to new premises elsewhere whether it would take its street name with it. In any event Cantonment Road it is and Cantonment Road it remains, the name like Sepoy Lines suggesting the former presence of a military camp. Evidently not everyone, however, is aware of the meaning of cantonment for an office building housing a major bank on Cantonment Road is called Canton Square perhaps because the developer (a Cantonese?) thought cantonment had something to do with the capital of a province in south China.

Sir Henry Gurney, High Commissioner for Malaya, murdered by communist terrorists on his way to Fraser's Hill in 1951, is commemorated not only in the name of Gurney Drive along the north shore but in the name of a major shopping mall and the names of countless nearby buildings and condominium blocks (some not even completed), so many that the non-capitalised initial letter "g" suffices for the name of the newest hotel! The north shore, older residents tell us, was once an idyllic beach. All trace of that has gone, replaced at low tide by vast expanding mud flats, sprouting mangroves and created by ill-considered land reclamation for a massive housing

development along the shore to the west, referred to ominously by locals as "Tsunami Court".

Other Pulau Tikus names – Jalan Brother James, Leandro's Lane -- recall the once thriving Catholic Eurasian community that surrounded the institutions of the Roman Catholic church that were a feature of the area – the College General, St Joseph's Novitiate, Pulau Tikus Convent School, St Xavier's Branch School and the Church of the Immaculate Conception which this year celebrates its bicentenary amid controversy over plans to demolish the church's historic presbytery or parish house. Lorong Serani leads off Kelawei Road to the Penang Eurasian Association with its reputation for Eurasian cuisine and music, a sometime haunt of the much loved Rozells musical group. The Malay word *Serani* is a corruption of "Nazarene" (a reference to Jesus of Nazareth) and was in common Malay usage applied to Eurasians the majority of whom were Catholics. The quaint Eurasian bungalows combining features of English country cottages and Malay kampong houses are disappearing. Several on Kelawei Road, including one that was the home of 1950s musician and songwriter Jimmy Boyle, have been



converted into cosmetic clinics or up-market beauty salons (why so many?).

Much of the original Roman Catholic Church property in the area has been sold off to developers. The site of the once imposing College General is occupied by Gurney Plaza shopping centre. St Joseph's Novitiate is endangered by the construction of monstrous tower blocks. Even Pulau Tikus Convent School has been sold although not yet vacated. The shops in Belissa Row on Burma Road and the Belissa Court condominium on Leandro's Lane are all on former church property.

Pulau Tikus is the scene of a contest between the old and the new, the old infinitely more interesting and appealing, the new brash and boring represented by towering condo blocks along Gurney Drive each vying to be taller and emptier than the next. These are what the property market pundits tout as the future of Pulau Tikus. Despite their over-weening size, however, they pale in comparison to what was here before, elegant villas like the Loke Mansion built in 1924 and standing proudly if somewhat forlornly in the shadow of the ugly towers going up around it. On our stretch of Cantonment Road are several older houses still occupied by families or discrete businesses. The oldest, a bungalow in the eclectic Malay style built in 1918, houses a tax consultancy. Opposite us is a 1930s

art deco house and beside it a pair of outstanding 1920s colonial style two-storey houses, one a private club and the other still a family house.

Commercial competition and property speculation underlie the contest between old and new. The area already has two shopping malls, the one at Midlands falling into decline as Gurney Plaza has expanded. Meanwhile a mere stone's throw from the latter, piling has begun for yet another shopping centre on the former site of Uplands School. One wonders what kind of market survey was conducted before the developer decided to build a new shopping complex almost next door to an existing one.

Undoubtedly the most attractive road in Pulau Tikus is Bangkok Lane linking Kelawei Road and Burma Road. Running behind a Thai temple, Bangkok Lane is lined by two rows of forty outstanding two-storey semi-detached houses built in 1928 by entrepreneur Cheah Leong Kah for his family. These handsome houses are still owned by the Cheah family trust and those not occupied by Cheah descendants are rented to tenants. Although some tenants have opened businesses in their houses in recent years their signboards are discrete and regulated by the trustees. The houses are maintained according to a uniform colour scheme with no modifications to either the exterior or interior design permitted. Several tenants are clearly in competition to present the most beautiful display of shrubs and flowers adorning the front of their residences. The street is a delight to walk along and three days a week one is rewarded by a hawker selling *satay babi* from his trishaw stall – a rare treat indeed.

Kelawei Road and Burma Road run parallel with each other forming the east-west axis of Pulau Tikus. Where they cross Cantonment Road is considered the centre of the village. Two local banks on Cantonment Road have recently been joined by a branch of the Bank of China thus creating a mini-financial district. The post office is here too and next door is a *kedai tuak*. This is the official state-run toddy shop where fermented palm liquor is sold and consumed on the premises by Tamil working men in unbelievably grubby and inhospitable surroundings.



Cantonment Road Elegance



Burma Road (sometimes with the quaint spelling “Burmah”) is more commercial than Kelawei Road, with shophouses dating from the 1920s and 1930s in the area near the police station. There in plain view of the blue-uniformed men and women of “Malaysia’s finest”, motorcycle repair shops extend their activities not only into the five-foot way but into the kerbside traffic lane as well! Behind Burma Road is the famous Pulau Tikus market, reputedly one of Penang’s more expensive wet markets but nonetheless a magnet for shoppers from all over Penang. Illegal double and even triple parking often brings traffic to a standstill on Burma Road and Cantonment Road in this area, a problem that led recently to the posting of “Clamping Zone” signs. Failure to take action to clamp offending vehicles, however, has made a mockery of the regulations and the signs.



Bangkok Lane

Pulau Tikus is the site of two mosques. On Burmah Lane just off Gurney Drive is Masjid Lama Jamek with its frangipani-shaded cemetery and a sign in Malay that warns: “Pray before you are prayed for.” Nearby on Kelawei Road is Masjid Al-Munauwar which is under extensive renovation. Behind this mosque a lane leads to Burma Road winding through Kampung Syed past another old Muslim cemetery, old Malay houses and gardens of fruit trees -- limau, mango and chiku.

Elsewhere on Burmah Lane, between Kelawei Road and Burma Road, tourists and worshippers alike flock to two 19th century Buddhist temples, one Thai and the other Burmese, facing each other across the road. The Thai temple, Wat Chaya Mankalaruam, on land granted by Queen Victoria in 1845, is dominated by a golden stupa. The temple also boasts a 33-metre reclining Buddha, one of the longest in the world. Behind Wat Chaya is a Thai village and cemetery. Each year the Thai community celebrates Loy Krathong with a parade along Cantonment Road to the sea where candles are floated out with prayers from the Isle of Rats.

*Text and Images by Leslie A.K. James*

## PENANG MONUMENTS- CENOTAPH

### MORE HISTORY REVEALED – PENANG CENOTAPH BOMBED, THEN RE-BUILT



In the early 1970s I heard from a neighbour that the Penang Cenotaph and Ben Vermont’s Monument (never reconstructed) at the Esplanade had been bombed by B 29s on the same day St Xavier’s Institution (my Alma Mater) and the Government Buildings at King Edward Place and Downing Street were very badly damaged or destroyed in a huge bombing raid. My neighbour was then a teenager caught in the open during the bombing raid and she remembered the incessant drone and seeing many silver planes high in the sky dropping what turned out to be bombs.

The now out of print **Penang Through Old Picture Postcards**, published by the Penang Museum in 1986, confirmed that “the Cenotaph was destroyed during the Japanese occupation. Another one was rebuilt, modeled from the earlier one” (p.34).



Following Leslie James's excellent article on the Penang Cenotaph in Issue 96 of the **PHT Newsletter**, I decided to have a quick search on the online newspaper resources of the Singapore National Library. The bombing of the Penang Cenotaph was reported in **The Straits Times** of 23 June 1947: "The Cenotaph went down to an Allied bomb in January, 1945, and last year Remembrance Day was observed on the same site, a simple flagstaff marking where the monument used to stand."

There are two files in Arkib Negara on the reconstruction of the Penang Cenotaph entitled "Re-erection of the Cenotaph" (1957/0473217) and "Reconstruction of the War Memorial, Penang" (1957/0577852).

The files relate how the Japanese had been forced to undertake a systematic block by block demolition of the badly damaged Cenotaph to prevent it from collapsing suddenly. The Japanese, however, did their best to save 184 intact dressed granite facing blocks and all the bronze decorations and these were carefully kept in storage for future reconstruction.

In 1948, the Chairman of the Ex-Services Association of Malaya (Penang Branch), Mr. W. I. Legg, petitioned the Malayan Union Government ("the Government") to rebuild the cenotaph as two Remembrance Sundays had gone by and the ceremonies were conducted around a flagstaff on the site of the original cenotaph. However, the Government was unwilling to spend money on this. In frustration, the Ex-Services Association decided to pay for the full costs of the reconstruction.

To add further insult to injury, the Government then suggested that if the Ex-Services Association were to collect money on their own for the reconstruction, the Government "might in its magnanimity allow [the Ex-Services association] to spend it on [their] own Memorial"! (1) Messrs. Boutcher & Co, Chartered Architects of 19, Beach Street, agreed to design the new cenotaph for free. The cenotaph was re-built at the then low cost of \$3,500. The new cenotaph looked a bit different from the original as Mr. Boutcher had to make the best use of the remaining stone blocks thus restricting his ability to make a faithful copy. The steps were rebuilt with precast concrete slabs instead of granite slabs to lower costs. The cenotaph was rebuilt in time for Remembrance Sunday, 7 November 1948.

It is also very interesting to note from the correspondence that the Penang Resident Commissioner kept repeating that the original cenotaph was demolished by the Japanese, perhaps insinuating a deliberate act of wanton vandalism. This contrasts greatly with the Ex-Services Association view that the cenotaph was too badly damaged in the war to be saved. One thing was very clear; both parties were trying their best not to name the real culprit responsible for damaging the cenotaph in the first place – the Allied bombers.

Some people have speculated that there used to be a Roll of Honour plaque on the Cenotaph listing the First World War dead. A quick reference to **The Straits Times** of 8 November 1929 clarified that "owing to the great difficulty of obtaining a complete and correct list of names no Roll of Honour is inscribed, but a black panel under the crown of laurels can at a future date be used, and in fact has been specially designed for the purpose."

(1) Penang Resident Commissioner A. V. Aston's letter of 2 September 1948 to Lt Col. G. D. A. Fletcher.

*Researched and written by Andrew Hwang, a Kuala Lumpur-based PHT member.*



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reminded that the car park was a compulsory 10 and the meter was holding at 100 pounds – an effort to heavily tax long



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He said the owner was looking at the possibility of using the building as a parking garage, but he was not sure.

by Himanshu Sheth  
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It will also curb haphazard development.

Clay and his team are addressing concerns that inadequate enforcement was allowing

were undergoing inappropriate renovations that would affect George Town's ambience and status as a heritage site.

Prerna Ismail, Municipal

and NGOs to provide heritage education, outreach for property owners and architects who submit plans for building and renovation.

The Cultural Heritage Advisory Team said last month that it had recommended to trustees that were undergoing inappropriate renovations that would affect George Town's ambience and status as a heritage site.

She said WHO and MPTI were also co-operating with relevant professional bodies and NGOs to provide heritage education, outreach for property owners and architects who submit plans for building and renovation.

PHT MUSLIM  
AFFAIRS ADVISOR  
DATUK DR. WAZIR  
JALAN KARIM



## NIO NATION THE STAR, WEDNESDAY 20 JANUARY 2010

**By TUNKU SHAHARIAH  
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\*However, instead of returning the hospital, the British Crown in reference to a court order, appointed the George Town City Council as Trustees

had agreed to lease the building to the state for the purpose of turning it into the state museum once a lease agreement is signed with the Penang Museum Board.

Between 1955 and up to the 1980s, the building was occupied by various organisations such as the St John Ambulance, the Red Crescent Society and used as a vocational training centre for adults.

## CORE LIVING II

Well, it's been a year of living in the heritage core zone of George Town and the anniversary was marked by Chinese New Year itself falling on 15th February. The Year of the Tiger has begun. It is my year! It began with many festivals.

Thaipusam had already taken place and it was so busy down our part of town. Peacock feathers everywhere, people in orange, with saffron-smeared bald heads, the most beautiful outfits, cute children, and restaurants open all night. On the last morning of Thaipusam, the chariot made its last round down China Street. Tessa was late for school because we were "trapped" in our house. The chariot, lights still on, sunrise just colouring the sky, came down China Street. Many people from the shops, the businesses, gave offerings. There were entourages of cars, of people, noise, music and incense. We all hung out our windows to watch, Tessa was thrilled that we were blocked in.

We were so impressed by the organization of it all. The chariot went by and made its way back down Beach Street. Directly behind the chariot and crowd was the garbage truck, the sweepers working to put the rubbish straight into the truck, then the police, followed by nurses and first aid crew, all on foot. Tired couples, groups of friends all strolled to follow the chariot and then like a Hoover, the MPPP rubbish cleaners made the street clean again. It was suddenly quiet and Tessa happily went off to school.

On 17th February we got "lucky" and the travel programme hosted by Samantha Brown used our house for the Lion Dance segment of their programme



on Malaysia. We had a wonderful silver lion, a good crowd of friends and an extra long lion dance with loads of oranges. It was lovely and for me this gave the house a big thank you for the great year we have had living in it.

Then on the 27th night, Chap Goh May was celebrated in front of the Quan Yin temple with a street market and an acrobatic contortionist show. We wandered happily out of No.25 and into the crowd, tasting food, eating ice cream and ice kacang. We gave money to charities and threw oranges at gongs, wrote wishes on paper and tied them to a "wish tree". It was a great atmosphere!

The next night we had the totally amazing Tuah Peck Kong procession of floats, all on Beach Street, at the end of China Street! I dragged my mother-in-law, Tessa and my young Indonesian maid out to have a look at the spectacle. Each float carried their little Altar Gods set in fantastic landscapes. The floats were wonderful and we would have been so sorry to have missed this. We walked in a big loop from the end of China Street, onto Weld Quay, then around the front of the post office and back down Beach Street. This was very, very special and watching all the people, young and old, giving respects, hands together, forehead down to all the Altar Gods was wonderful. It was a gathering of good blessings for all.



Tigers were everywhere on the floats but one of my favorites had to be the one of the Penang ferry which rocked on the sea. They were all waiting to begin the procession round and down to Gurney Drive. Here it was on our doorstep and they were all at a standstill, waiting in line and so we really got to have such a good look at all the hard work so many of Penang's



people had put in. Tradition is so alive and it was great to see so much enjoyment and pride in the floats.

The aftermath of all these festivals has been cleaned up by, I keep saying, the hardworking garbage collection guys and I say "Thank you!" The festivals have to remain on the street like this. This is something that is so special in George Town.

We do, however, all need to look at the way we treat garbage. There were no extra garbage bins put out for these festivals. There were tonnes of plastic cups, polystyrene plates and what happened? They all got piled on the street and worse, dumped in the open drains. The day after Thai-pusam, the drains outside the house were jammed with polystyrene and I have to say, "I totally hate the stuff!" At best the poor MPPP guys have to drag it out by hand, at worst it goes into the sea as non-biodegradable pollution.

People always ask me about hygiene. What they mean is, how do you handle the smell, the dirty drains, the rats, the roaches etc., etc., in George Town? On China Street, and in George Town generally, restaurants do not use grease traps. Excess food goes into the open drain; so most times, what's in the drain looks like dhal. It's not pleasant. When it rains it gets flushed out but when its dry, like it has been, it hangs around and ferments and at times it does smell a bit. On China Street we don't have problems with smell but I do worry about the sea. On other streets the smell can be terrible and the treatment of drains as open sewers does have to change. Partly it's education, partly it's getting people to spend the money to put the system in and partly, a bigger part than all the others, it's enforcement. The Council really does have to stand up and be more responsible in terms of enforcement for all non-compliance and look at the job from a more holistic point of view. We need to take into account our future, we need to look ahead and not just clean our immediate area and not worry about where it goes after that.

When we moved in last year, David had to go off on business after about two nights. I decided to take a break and look at the stars from the courtyard. I had a glass of wine and settled down on the granite steps. There was a movement in the corner of my eye and I jumped up like crazy when I realized that it was indeed a rat, and a big one at that. I got my broom and started whacking at the pot plants to chase it out and it tried to go back down the drainage hole of the courtyard. I was in the way so it jumped into the hole of a pull-up drainage tile at the side of the courtyard. I then got a couple of pots and put them over the hole, and I immediately got a roll of wire and stuffed it into all the water drainage openings around the whole house. David came back, a couple of days passed and I remembered the rat and told him. Apparently it was not a drainage hole and it is sealed. Anyway there was no smell of dead rat so David investigated. It was well alive, leapt out and went straight to the drainage outlet hole. I then scrambled to pull out the wire and the thing whizzed down and out of our lives, so far, forever! We have had no rats since then. So this is a big tip -- block your drainage holes with wire as soon as you move in! The rats stay outside and we see them outside just occasionally when it's quiet at night.

As for cockroaches, we do get the occasional one but it's certainly not a problem. I try not to have any dark closed spaces and all my kitchen cupboards are slatted for air ventilation and light. This keeps the roaches out and avoids the problem of rising damp. Actually, we do not have a problem with damp. The terra-cotta floors allow evaporation, as does the lime plaster. What we do get is salt coming up and evaporating out through parts of the walls. This is called "blooming" -- such a lovely name -- and gives you the blotchiness of colour that you see often on lime walls. I love the blotchiness and I've actually tasted this powdery stuff. It is indeed salt!

"Hygiene" is also a matter of attitude. We separate out our rubbish. I collect all the paper and cardboard, tins and glass in bins at our back kitchen. At night we tie up our "wet rubbish", which actually isn't very much and seal it in

biodegradable bags. We put it out in front of the house last thing at night and it is collected each morning. If sealed properly, we do not get the problems of cats or rats ripping the bags.

All the recyclables we put out at intervals in open boxes -- paper in one, tin and glass in another. There are men on flat topped trishaws who come around at intervals day and night to collect all this stuff. They sell it on for profit.

When we first moved in I realized quickly that the recyclers would rip open our garbage bags to find the paper, tin or glass. Once they realized we separate our rubbish out, our sealed "wet rubbish" bags no longer get ripped open. The recyclers provide a very efficient service and by making it easier for them to add to their profit, the whole system works better.

I feel strongly that as a citizen of George Town I have to take some responsibility if I want systems to improve. Little adjustments make huge differences all down the line but we need the Council and the State to improve their enforcement doctrine to help push people in the right direction. Why should the rubbish guys have to spend time clearing up a total mess of rubbish just dumped haphazardly on the road outside a restaurant or hawker centre? If the restaurant/hawker owners would just ensure that it was packed properly, the rubbish collection would be much more efficient and the streets cleaner for everyone.

We, also, cannot expect the foreign labourers who work in all these places to suddenly be "educated" about things like rubbish collection when they have come from places that have no idea what rubbish separation is. The owners of these restaurants must take responsibility and begin the system on their premises. This doesn't cost money, just a little time.

Grease traps must become the norm in George Town, not just to improve the immediate area but to halt the practice of using our poor sea as a dump. These should be a requirement for the license approval.

Living in George Town is wonderful and is made more meaningful by taking responsibility for your own environment. If I want improvement I have to be willing to take the time and effort to make it happen. I'm learning this more and more as time goes on.

*Text and images  
by Rebecca Duckett*

## NOTICE

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**26 Church Street (Lebuh Gereja)**

**City of George Town**

**10200 Penang**

### (1) LIME PLASTER

For the most part, the early mortars and renders were composed of lime and fine aggregate while occasionally clay could have substituted where lime was not available or they proposed to construct a lower strength plaster or mortar.





Lime is first produced by driving off CO<sub>2</sub> from limestone at around 1000o C. The material is then ground to a fine powder. Before it can be used it is first slaked with a small portion of water to produce quicklime, the material most likely that was used to mix with fine aggregate and water. Another option would have been with lime putty that had matured but kept moist so it did not cure. The setting process is caused by carburization of the lime as it mixes with CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere. When it is fully cured it reverts back to almost the same composition as the original limestone drawing almost as much CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere as was initially driven off in the manufacturing process. Lime plaster is therefore largely environmentally carbon neutral. Cement production on the other hand contributes about 8% of the industrial CO<sub>2</sub> pushed into the atmosphere.

Another feature of lime plasters is that even though they can become rock hard when they are set and if they are prepared with the correct lime/aggregate/water ratio, as they revert back into a limestone they are still more flexible than Portland cement/lime plasters (called stucco) and will not crack in the same way cement plaster will crack.

Being porous, lime plaster will allow moisture from the atmosphere or the substrate to travel through it without detrimental effect since it is experiencing the same stresses as the substrate. This is unlike Portland cement plasters that often have salts leaching out caused through their inability to deal with rising damp.

Ideally, the plaster should be softer than the substrate or in this case the brickwork. Early bricks were made from low temperature kilns that burnt coal to fire them rather than high temperature gas fired kilns in use today. Accordingly their strength is quite low when compared to later methods of brick manufacture. While Portland cement renders are more durable and have better moisture retarding features they are much harder than the substrate and unable to swell in the same way lime plaster can swell to match the movement of the underlying brick and lime mortar. The long term result can be a series of cracks appearing in the cement plaster work.

Penang buildings were designed and constructed with materials that breathe along with the high humidity that exists here. They require lots of natural ventilation and good drainage. When we alter that by using new technology materials, in this case Portland cement, as the binder in the plaster we are attempting to go against the combined nature of all those other materials.

In essence, the wall plaster that is ideal for Penang heritage buildings is one composed of lime and aggregate in the fashion of their original construction. Lime as hydraulic lime comes in various grades of strength and durability suitable for both interior and exterior use. They can be left untreated giving rise to pristine white buildings or depending on the clay content can produce a variety of attractive hues. An alternative is to coat them with a variety of natural colours. Originally this was a lime wash mixed with natural tints.

The next article in this series will be concerning the correct paints and surface coatings that we should be using in heritage construction.

*By Steve Hutcheson*

*Steve is an Australian Engineer who until recently has been engaged in renovating government buildings in Afghanistan and now seeks the quieter and more urbane life that Penang offers. He has started his company Redcoat Developments Sdn Bhd with the view to assist small contractors and manufactures who work with heritage buildings to either establish new businesses or expand existing ones manufacturing and using the correct materials and techniques to create quality and authentic heritage restorations. Steve is a new member of PHT and can be contacted at [steve.hutcheson@redcoatdevelopments.com](mailto:steve.hutcheson@redcoatdevelopments.com)*

## WHAT IS GOING ON?



Entrance to the Gardens 1920's



Entrance to the Gardens 2010 !!

Founded in 1884, the Penang Botanic Gardens were set up as a botanical research and propagation centre and the earliest plant houses from the 19th Century still stand on site. The Gardens provided cool lush greenery and a quiet haven for the growing population of the city and have always had a very special place in the hearts of Penangites. The end of the 1980's saw a hard won battle by the public against the redevelopment of Penang Hill and our Gardens.

Recent changes, new colossal concrete structures and what appears to be ad hoc additions to the extended Gardens, including canalization of its streams and widespread loss of greenery, have caused much consternation and dismay among the general Penang public.

More importantly, there is a strong sense of bewilderment and uncertainty. There has been no consultation, no display of any master plan and no briefing for the public. The people of Penang are greatly concerned and understandably upset. Attempts by NGOs to put forward recommendations have come to naught. The bulldozers and concrete mixers and cranes continue relentlessly.

**We request the Authorities to hold a Public Briefing and Forum on the overall plans for the Penang Botanic Gardens as soon as possible, before greater irreparable damage is done.**

*by Loh-Lim Lin Lee, PHT Council Member*



**Conservation Talk by  
Bruce Pettman at George Town World Heritage Office  
Monday, 18th January, 2010**



**Valuable :** (Right) Pettman presenting his talk at the World Heritage Office (top) in George Town on Wednesday.

## Protection the key to conservation

Expert stresses on “early expert advice” and “what can or cannot be done”



**The Straits Settlements & Malayan Volunteer Forces  
Wednesday, 27th January, 2010**



Men from all walks of life in pre-war Malaya – planters, tin miners, businessmen, bankers – and from all ethnic backgrounds joined the volunteer forces for military training. These “weekend soldiers” as they were called were mobilized when war came in December 1941. They fought alongside the regular troops from Britain, India and Australia and following the capitulation of Singapore they went into captivity, many dying in POW camps and others in the construction of the Burma railway. **Rosemary Fell** is secretary of the Malayan Volunteers Group (MVG). Her father was a Malacca Volunteer, having been headmaster of a school in Malacca. He died on the Burma railway.

The MVG is based in the United Kingdom but with members as well in Australia, Malaysia and Canada. Visiting Kuala Lumpur, Malacca and Penang in January Rosemary gave a talk at PHT on 27th January on the origins and wartime history of the Straits Settlements & Malayan Volunteer Forces. She also outlined the aims and work of the Malayan Volunteers Group, an NGO formed to raise awareness of the role of the Volunteers in the Malayan Campaign and their experience as prisoners of war. Rosemary’s talk attracted an audience of some 50 PHT members and guests who included the president and members of the Penang Veterans Association. There was also extensive coverage in **The Star** newspaper following her visit to Malaysia.

## Heritage in Britain – Role of the National Trust and its Volunteers, 24th January 2010

On Sunday afternoon 24th January Malaysian-born Jenny Lo, a National Trust volunteer, provided PHT members with an overview of the National Trust and its place in the UK heritage and cultural landscape. Founded in 1895, the National Trust is the UK's largest charity. It has many members and volunteers and protects and opens to the public over 350 historic houses, gardens and ancient monuments. Jenny Lo was formerly Commissioning Editor of the BBC / Open University as well as Executive Producer for BBC Television and Radio. She was also Regional Director of the Association of Colleges London. She is now a writer and consultant for private-public sector partnerships. She has over thirty years experience of volunteering and as a case study described in detail her work as a volunteer at 2 Willow Road, Hampstead, the house built by Modernist architect Erno Goldfinger and now a National Trust site.



The talk was followed by a volunteer workshop on 31 January which was meant to do recruitment of volunteers for PHT. The workshop was facilitated by Jenny Lo, assisted by Sheau Fung. The workshop managed to recruit more than 15 volunteers and we look forward to work closely with the volunteers in the near future.

*Reported by Leslie James and Sheau Fung*

## Book Launch, 6th February 2010

On Saturday evening 6th February, a reception at Gallery 29 on China Street was the occasion for the Penang launch of the book **Penang under the East India Company 1786 - 1858** by author Andrew Barber, a former British diplomat residing and working in Kuala Lumpur. The author and his book were introduced by Dato' Anwar Fazal. Copies of the book were available for purchase with profits going to support the Penang Heritage Trust and the Lighthouse Children's Home.



*Newsletter Guest Editor~Leslie A.K. James  
Production~ Sheau Fung*

*Unless specifically stated, the views and opinions expressed in the articles are the author's own and do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of PHT*

