

ROOTS

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advocacy

Berlayar Beacon Saved

Longyamen replica moved after Heritage Soc raises red flag



Before (April)

Photo: Lim Chen Sian



After (July)

Photo: Kevin Y.L. Tan

On 27 April, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) announced in a *Straits Times* letter that it was "considering the feasibility of alternative sites" for its replica 'longyamen' rock. STB had been on the verge of replacing the World War II era Berlayar Beacon in Labrador Park with its proposed replica.

The surprise move by STB was in response to an earlier Heritage Society letter (ST 8 Apr), raising concerns about the plan. The Society noted that the location of the 'longyamen' rock mentioned

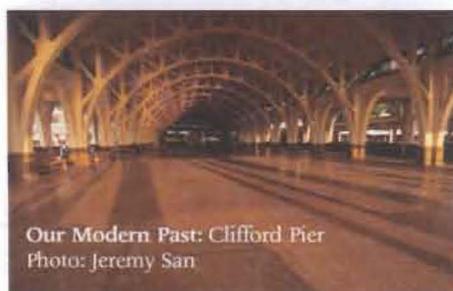
in ancient Chinese texts was unknown, and that historians had listed as many as five possible sites. As such, the Society noted, "a genuine heritage site will be erased and replaced by a 'replica' based on an invented past."

Since the STB reply appeared, construction shrouds and hoardings, which had been erected around the beacon in preparation for its demolition, were removed. The replica rock was then built around the corner from its original site, leaving the beacon untouched. ■

research

Society Awarded \$61,000 URA Grant

In September, the Urban Redevelopment Authority awarded an inaugural 'Architecture & Urban Design Excellence' grant of \$61,000 to the Society's ongoing research and publication project *Our Modern Past: Singapore's Architectural Heritage 1920s-1970s*. Only two out of 18 applications won grants in this round. The grant covers roughly a third of the project's budget. This project will lead to the publication of a two-volume book in 2007, to be written by Ho Weng Hin, Tan Kar Lin and Dinesh Naidu, with original photography by Jeremy San. ■



Our Modern Past: Clifford Pier
Photo: Jeremy San

education



Photo: Jeremy San

President Nathan Launches Ong Book

President S R Nathan launched the Society's latest book, *Ong Teng Cheong: Planner, Politician, President* on 29 July at the Old Parliament House. Guests ranged from ambassadors and CEOs to the late President's family, friends, cabinet colleagues and staff. Mr Ong's favourite foods were served and the music he loved was performed by pianists Low Shao Ying and Low Shao Suan, whose careers he had nurtured. The book was written by Tisa Ng and researched by Lily Tan. ■



SINGAPORE
HERITAGE
SOCIETY

Research • Education • Advocacy

president's message

As 2005 comes to a close, we can all look back at a very fruitful year. Activities for the Society have increased many-fold and our membership base has also now grown to some 130 members. Importantly, we have worked successfully with other kindred organisations to advance the cause of heritage in Singapore. All this has been accomplished thanks to the splendid work of my fellow Exco members and in particular the work of our indefatigable Executive Secretary, Dinesh Naidu. Thank you all.

Our work is never-ending. So many things that require our attention and energies and unless we widen the base of members who can help with these projects, we will always find ourselves being pushed from pillar to post in our effort to do all that is needful. In other words, we need more members, and we need more active members. We also need to find more ingenious ways to raise funds in an increasingly competitive environment; otherwise our projects will remain pipe-dreams. I hope more members will come forth with ideas and energies and share with us all on how to make the Society better and how we can further our three-pronged mission of Research, Education and Advocacy.

This month, we launch our Heritage Book Club in collaboration with APD Singapore. It is yet another effort to bring value to our members and to offer them high quality history and heritage book selections at great prices. Taking a peek at the coming year, the Society is planning a block-buster retrospective exhibition of the late master photographer Yip Cheong Fun at the National Library from March to May 2006. Yip, a Cultural Medallion winner, was hailed by the New York Photographic Society as "The Outstanding Photographer of the Century". We are also starting planning on our next heritage trip so do come forward to offer your help here. A whole slew of talks and seminars have been planned and if funds are forthcoming, we may well launch three new books. In the meantime, Season's Greetings and may 2006 be all you hope for.

Dr. Kevin Y.L. Tan

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Singapore Heritage Society promotes the nation's history and cultural heritage through its research, education and advocacy projects. ROOTS is the Society's quarterly newsletter, delivered free to members. To contact us, write to Dinesh Naidu C/o 2A Simon Lane #03-04, Singapore 546018 or email dinesh@singaporeheritage.com

advocacy

On 8 Nov, the *Straits Times* published an edited letter from Society President Dr Kevin Tan. We reproduce here the original letter.



Short St Flats Worth Saving

I refer to the article 'HDB flats in the city for SMU students' (ST 25 Oct) and the recent decision by the Urban Redevelopment Authority to conserve post-war Modern buildings. The Singapore Heritage Society applauds these initiatives. Just as the conservation of pre-war shophouses in the late 1980s was an act of foresight, it is commendable that we recognise the heritage value of, and potential practical uses for, buildings from our more recent past.

Given the decisions for conservation mentioned, I would like to draw urgent attention to apartment blocks No. 11 and 12 at Short Street, which appear to be slated for demolition. They were some of the earliest inner city flats produced by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT). Built to tackle post-war urban over-congestion, they were among the taller SIT blocks and, as such, were quite distinct from the more common four-storey walk up blocks built in Tiong Bahru and elsewhere. Significantly, these were among the first blocks to use a common corridor, a feature which has since become an indelible part of our public housing landscape - a quintessentially Singaporean public space, colonised and decorated by residents and immortalised in our literature, art and film.

Perhaps most striking are the façades of these blocks, which boast a rich variety of materials, including patterned concrete blocks, mosaic tiles, textured panels and exposed brickwork. This variety reveals an interest in experimenting with new materials for public housing to produce living environments that were affordable, climatically appropriate and aesthetically appealing.

Singapore's public housing programme is a definitive part of our immediate post-independence nation-building period, and these apartment blocks showcase early experiments in this area. Apart from conserving an important part of our heritage, the retention of these buildings may also prove a cost-effective way of providing student housing in the emerging educational enclave in Bugis and Bras Basah, as will be done with the Prinsep Street SIT flats. In light of the compelling social, historical and architectural merits of these buildings, as well as their potential practical value as student housing, we urge the relevant authorities to seriously consider conserving them for posterity. ■

education

Tea with Ivan Polunin

Some 20 members visited Dr Ivan Polunin at his home on 3 December. The event was organised by the 'Hermitage Society' (as Dr Polunin insisted on calling us!) to let members meet this jovial polymath and visit his remarkable home.

Dr Polunin recalled his forays in film making and screened a 12 min clip he made with his own film - the only known colour film archive of 1950s Singapore.

Members also toured his extensive collection of regional ceramics and other artefacts, and marvelled at his stunning garden. Tea concluded with a large cake to mark Dr Polunin's 85th birthday. ■



Ivan Polunin and Geraldene Lowe-Ismael



The Den of Antiquity

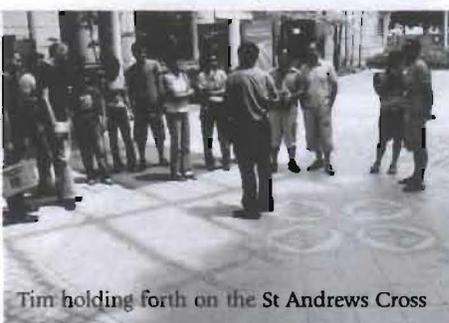
National Library Tour

Society members Timothy Pwee and Bonny Tan gave 40 other members and friends of the Society two tours of their new workplace - the National Library at Victoria Street - on 27 August.

Tim and Bons took us through the impressive building, from its basement lending library right up to new Lee Kong Chian Reference Library.

Even as they explained the bold new technology, facilities and functions of the library, our guides highlighted interesting historic features, like the incorporation of old bricks and St Andrew's cross floor tiles - transplanted from the well loved Stamford Road library before its unfortunate demolition.

The tours ended with a special visit to the rare books collection, which is normally out of bounds to the public. ■



Tim holding forth on the St Andrews Cross



The Rare Books Room

Tang Treasures

By Lim Chen Sian

On 24 June, the Society, Asian Civilizations Museum (ACM) and Asia Research Institute (ARI), organised talks on the Tang era shipwreck cargo acquired by Sentosa. ARI archaeologist / art historian Dr Edwards McKinnon and the wreck's marine archaeologist Dr Michael Flecker spoke to a standing-room-only crowd of more than 200 at ACM Empress Place.

Some 1,200 years ago, a dhow built in the western Indian Ocean or Persian Gulf was ferrying cargo from China in the Java Sea when it sank off Belitung Island. Aside from demolishing the conceit that global exchanges are a modern invention, and apart from being the oldest known wreck in Southeast Asia, what makes this ship of even wider interest is the spectacular cargo it held.

Around 65,000 artefacts have been recovered, the bulk of which are three-

coloured yellow-brown glazed Changsi wares – mainly bowls made for export designed with floral motifs, Buddhist icons, flying birds and monstrous fish.

Also found: beautiful Green-Splash wares, of which the piece de resistance is the meter-high stemmed ewer with dragonhead shaped lid and handle.

Among the ceramics, polished bronze mirrors, gold trays, cups and silver-gold boxes, are several unassuming Blue and White dishes. They may be the most significant items found, as apart from shards found on land sites, no complete Tang period Blue and White pieces were known to exist, until now.

Singapore now has one of the world's most unique shipwreck artefact collections, and a maritime museum will be developed on Sentosa to house it. Or, it hopes the museum goes beyond artefact display to become a leading centre for research, publication and education in maritime and Southeast Asian history from the late 1st millennium AD. ■

Photo courtesy of Sentosa Leisure Group



research



Ong Teng Cheong

By Tisa Ng & Lily Tan

Ong Teng Cheong: Planner, Politician, President is the second book on this major figure, and the first in English. It looks at early influences that shaped his character and some of the most significant contributions in his long and distinguished career.

Oral history played a big part in this book. Over sixty people were interviewed, some very extensively. What emerged was not only information on the subject, but a sense of his impact on people. Memories were vivid; anecdotes, sharply painted. Interviewees illustrated as much as they described – a wonderful gift to any biographer.

In this project, the challenge was not to be overwhelmed. There were unpub-

lished photographs and documents from the family's private collection, boxes of speeches and press releases, endless Hansard columns and shelves full of press clippings. He was a man who kept busy, was highly productive, and completely indefatigable.

To review material covering three decades of his public life was akin to reading Singapore history anew – with special lenses. The major strands were there: infrastructure, developmental and social policies, unions and economy. There were also aspects intensely personal and particular to Mr Ong, which translated into the public domain – like his passion for the arts. If one is allowed to have favourite pages in a book, the double spread of photographs of the late President as conductor, baton in hand, would certainly be at the top of our long list.

There should also be a long list of books on the same subject. Such a rich life deserves more extensive study than possible in this volume. They will be written in due course by others better qualified to do so. Meantime, enjoy this one! ■



in house



Open/Closed Doors

The Society held an Executive Committee meeting in public on 8 November, possibly for the first time. It was part of arts group spell#7's mini-festival to mark Drama Centre's opening at the National Library. Civil society groups were invited to hold an 'Open Closed Door Session', i.e. a normally private meeting held in public for anyone to attend. A few non-exco members came to the Tuesday evening event, which saw 20 people in total, and which was marked by a relaxed mood and tasty tidbits, courtesy of newly co-opted exco members Dahlia Shamsuddin and Chua Ai Lin. ■

Penang Heritage Trip

By Loh Gim Sheng

20 members and friends toured Penang from 11 to 12 June, where they visited historic sights and met key people in the Penang heritage community.

Our two-day tour was packed with activities. We explored restored buildings, saw historical landmarks, and walked the streets of old Penang to smell spices and learn about the traditional trades still practiced there. What I find amazing is all the interesting places are so close to each other you can go from place to place on foot.

At each site, local guides explained the building's history and restoration work. The guides were knowledgeable and enthusiastic, and made the trip an enjoyable learning experience. I could see how proud they are of their heritage and how they love to share with visitors these historical gems they treasure so much.

The meals were included in the tour, and they were absolutely delicious. From the tiffin lunch at the E&O Hotel to the Peranakan dinner at Mama's to the European cuisine at the 32 Mansion, the food was so diverse and inviting it made me forget my fatigue and just dig in. It also helped that my dining companions were such wonderful company.

Yes, it was an exhausting trip but it was well organized and worth the time and money spent. I got to see beautiful building and learn about their restoration as well as meet the people involved. And I am glad that so many historically rich buildings have been beautifully restored and are open to members of the public either as hotels, museums, restaurants or other commercial spaces. ■



education

Of Penang Shophouses and Fort Siloso Guns



Dr Kevin Tan and Dr Tjoa-Bonatz



An audience of gun aficionados

Visiting German academic Dr Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz gave a public lecture for the Society on 7 June at the Singapore History Museum, with support from Friends of the Museums.

About 50 people attended her presentation on the **Architectural History of Penang's Shophouses**, which was especially well-timed, coming just three days before a group of members left for Penang on the Society's heritage trip. ■

Peter Stubbs is a self-described amateur historian with an interest in Singapore military heritage, partly since he served with the British Army in Singapore and Malaysia in the 1960s. The semi-retired resident of Darlington, England, is also the author of 'The Changi Murals: The Story of Stanley Warren's War'. Mr Stubbs delivered a talk on the **Guns of Fort Siloso** for the Society on 17 September at the National Library. ■

advocacy



Circle Station Names

By Kelly Fu

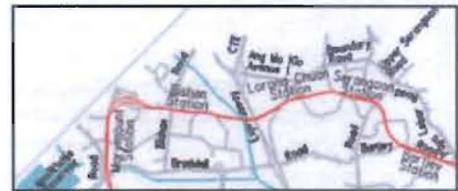
From 26 March to 9 May 2004, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) sought public views on names for 12 Circle Line stations. After consulting its members, the Society proposed a list of names in April 2004 that it felt were in keeping with social memories and local history. On 6 July 2005, LTA announced the final names.



Seven of the final names were on the Society's list: Bras Basah, Esplanade, Mountbatten, Tai Seng, Bartley, Lorong Chuan and Marymount Stations.

The five unadopted names were Sheares, Sultan Gate, Tanjong Rhu, Tanjong Katong and Ubi. These will instead be named Promenade, Nicoll Highway, Stadium, Dakota and MacPherson Stations respectively.

The Promenade and Nicoll Highway names were interesting as they were most



popular among those who gave feedback. LTA chose Promenade, as it is near Marina Promenade. As for Nicoll Highway, Kampong Glam and Sultan Gate had been offered in the consultation exercise to reflect the area's Malay heritage. However, those who gave feedback strongly supported the Nicoll name.

The Society appreciates this consultation exercise and hopes to see more in future as they give the public a stake in creating and maintaining our heritage. ■