

The Volunteers
- Voluntarii et Volantes -

**RASHKB/AMO VOLUNTEERS
CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER**
(March 2006)

1. Introduction

Welcome to the RASHKB/AMO Volunteers Conservation Newsletter. The following explanatory notes are given by way of introduction :-

- The Conservation Newsletter is a roundup and review of the latest built heritage conservation news and current affairs in Hong Kong, including conservation news items of interest from other countries;
- The Conservation Newsletter is published bi-monthly for RASHKB Volunteers and Council Members. It is compiled and edited by Council Member **Bob Horsnell**;
- The views expressed in the Newsletter only reflect the personal views of the Editor and contributors and are not necessarily those of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch;
- Contributions on built heritage conservation and related issues are welcome and should be sent to RASHKB, G.P.O. Box 3864, Central P.O., Hong Kong;
- Due to confidentiality protection legislation personal contact numbers, addresses and other personal information will not be published in the Newsletter.

2. Annual General Meeting

The AGM will take place on 28th April. **Bob Horsnell** has agreed to continue serving on Council as co-ordinator of the Volunteers and editor of the Conservation Newsletter for a further year.

3. Future Newsletters

The aim of future newsletters will be to continue to keep everyone up to date with current affairs and new developments in conservation and to enhance awareness and appreciation of Hong Kong's built heritage. The newsletters will also attempt to look at the problems involved with conservation and preservation works versus recycling, upgrading, adaptive re-use and rehabilitation of old buildings. They will also encourage heritage studies and research by suggesting projects for Volunteers to get involved in.

4. Hollywood Road Police Quarters

An article by **Dr. Gillian Bickley** appeared in *SCMP's* education supplement on 21 Jan 2006 on Queen's College which used to stand on the site of the Hollywood Road Police Quarters. Gillian argued the case for preserving remaining traces of Queen's College in future redevelopment of the site as a tribute to Hong Kong's education system as a whole, rather than of just one school. Queen's College, now located in Causeway Bay, will celebrate its 145th anniversary next year.

5. Pacific Asia Travel Association

Congratulations to *SCMP* writer **Kevin Sinclair** and his team for winning the 2006 PATA Grand Award in the heritage category for the seven-part series *Living Villages* published last October. The project was carried out in conjunction with the Home Affairs Department (HAD) to recognize traditional rural communities where the residents had taken the initiative to make life better for all and to bring the villages described as "hidden treasures" to the attention of visitors as well as Hong Kong residents.

The RASHKB recently submitted suggestions for future heritage projects to PATA that might encourage tourism such as restoration of historic tombstones and monuments in the old Colonial Cemetery, a heritage tour of churches, and also a heritage trail of wartime military sites.

6. Sau Mau Ping Temples

An article in the *SCMP* of 21 Jan 2006 reported that three unauthorized temple structures in Sau Mau Ping built in 1964 without government approval may have to be relocated to make way for a new road serving a planned public housing estate which will have 50,000 residents. The temples are the Tai Sing Temple, the Temple of Guan Yim and the Shing Wong Temple which are famous for annual rituals such as walking on fire with bare feet and other bizarre rites.

7. Save Our Wall Trees

Old stone walls with trees growing on them may be given protected status according to a report in the *SCMP* on 8 Feb 2006. The Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) is to carry out a year-long study of 83 walls with trees growing on them to determine their historical significance. The AMO is working with HKU tree expert **Dr. Jim Chi-yung** and the Geotechnical Engineering Office (GEO) to complete an inventory of trees and walls to be considered for protection orders.

8. Old Explosives Magazine

The old British Army explosives magazine situated in the rump of the former Victoria Barracks near the British Consulate in Justice Drive will be converted into a new cultural and educational centre by an American organization called the Asia Society. The magazine complex consists of two former explosives magazines and a laboratory building separated by earth mounds known as traverses which were built as buffers in case of explosions. The buildings date back to the middle of the 19th century. The \$200 million restoration programme is expected to be completed in 2008.

9. Victoria Prison

Three open days have been scheduled on March 11, 18 and 19 for members of the public to view the old Victoria Prison behind the Central Police Station Compound. The complex dates back to the 1840s and the buildings represent the evolution of architectural styles used for prisons for over a century. Neo-Georgian, Victorian and Utilitarian style buildings forming cell blocks, administration buildings, ablutions and prison laundries and workshops are all crammed on to the site around a central exercise yard. The future of the site is still unknown following public pressure which forced the government to postpone plans for tourism-related restoration and development with only 17 out of the 27 buildings in the complex earmarked for preservation.

10. Laser Surveying

A presentation on laser surveying technology was held recently at St. John's Cathedral by **Dr. Ho Puay-peng** of the Chinese University's Department of Architecture and **Dr. Bruce King** of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. They teamed up to create a perfect 3-D computer drawn image of the cathedral over a ten week period last year. They used the laser imaging technology to recreate the exact dimensions of the cathedral, and also to produce architectural drawings which are almost works of art. The problem is that the equipment is very expensive and specially trained experts are needed to operate it and interpret the data.

11. Conservation News From Singapore

At a recent symposium at the Fringe Club on "Disappearing Heritage : Comparing Singapore with Hong Kong" guest speaker **Professor Chan Yew Lih** of the National University of Singapore's architecture department showcased the city state's achievements in conservation. Singapore chooses buildings to preserve according to their aesthetic quality, historical significance, social values and technological importance. So far 54 monuments have been gazetted in Singapore, as well as thousands of buildings and 71 conservation areas. Singapore heritage buildings have a colourful pedigree of architectural and cross-cultural influences – a true case of East meets West. Typical building types found in Singapore include Chinatown shop-houses, Anglo-Malay plantation houses, Anglo-Indian military bungalows, and colonial style black-and-white houses ranging from Edwardian 'Tudorbethan' Arts and Crafts to Art Deco and Modernist architecture, many of them built by the Public Works Department (PWD).

12. What's In A Name?

The Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre in Hong Kong Park (formerly Victoria Barracks) was originally built as army married quarters in the early 1900s to solve quartering problems following the surrender of North Barracks to the Royal Navy. It was known at first simply as 'C' Block, but later named "Cassells Block" after the Liberation when the British Army returned and named many of their buildings after military heroes. The mystery is – who was Cassells? Does anyone have the answer?

"Cassells Block" was one of two identical blocks – the other one (now destroyed) was called "Birdwood Block" after **Lt.-General Sir William "Birdie" Birdwood**, Commander of the Anzacs at Gallipoli. He later became Lord Birdwood of Anzac and Totnes.

13. Urban Renewal

An editorial in the *SCMP* on 10 March 2006 commented on the government's recent proposal to lower the compulsory sale threshold on old property from the present 90% to 80%. This would mean that if 80% of owners of flats in an old building agreed to sell, the remaining 20% of the flats could be acquired by compulsory purchase to facilitate redevelopment. The *SCMP* suggested that the law should stipulate that the threshold should only be lowered to 80% if a building is in a serious state of disrepair to encourage urban renewal (i.e. bringing old buildings up to standard) rather than urban redevelopment, and to protect private property rights.

14. Capitalizing On Heritage

The *Standard* newspaper recently reported on the Business Environment Council's conference on sustainable tourism. The theme was capitalization on local heritage, not imported concepts, to build up a strong tourism sector. Macau was cited as an example. Hong Kong, it is true, has its own array of unique heritage sites, but as noted elsewhere in this newsletter, tourism-related restoration-cum-development projects for old buildings do not appear to be very popular with the general public. Keynote speaker **Howard Young** blamed poor communication between government departments and an unclear conservation policy which have led to what he called an "unhealthy situation". Perhaps the Former Marine Police Headquarters project in Tsimshatsui now in progress will be a test case and barometer of public opinion.

15. Former Central Police Station

At a recent RASHKB Council meeting it was suggested that the Society should take up a position on the future of the former Central Police Station site. In other words are we in favour of a tourism – driven restoration project similar to the former Marine Police Headquarters project, or should the buildings be restored as museum pieces? Adaptive re-use for the buildings will undoubtedly affect their authenticity as they will have to be brought up to current standards which means compliance with means of escape (MOE) requirements, raising heights of verandah and staircase balustrading, upgrading building services, installation of air-conditioning, strengthening floors and so on. If you have any views on this please send them in to G.P.O. Box 3864.

16. For Your Diary

- Victoria Prison Open Days on March 18th and 19th (see Item 9 of newsletter);
- RASHKB AGM & Dinner on 28th April at the Hong Kong Club (see RAS Newsletter & Website for details).

17. Next Newsletter

The next Conservation Newsletter should be out around the end of May. Contributions are welcome and should be sent in to G.P.O. Box 3864.

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