

The Volunteers
- Voluntarii et Volantes -

**RASHKB/AMO VOLUNTEERS
CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER**
(July 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 or the Antiquities and Monuments Office;
- 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- Due to confidentiality protection legislation personal contact numbers, addresses and other personal information will not be published in the Newsletter;
- The sources from which the material incorporated or reviewed in the text of this non-profit-making newsletter has been obtained are acknowledged where appropriate; copyright and all rights reserved are duly respected and observed as far as possible.

2. AMO Activities

As **Bill Greaves** is away on leave his report on AMO activities is not available for this newsletter.

3. Central Market

As expected, the Antiquities Advisory Board in a closed-door meeting on 18 May voted against preservation of Central Market. The government will put the site up for sale in September and the building will almost certainly be demolished for redevelopment. Two members of the AAB, both architects,

Bernard Lim and **Patrick Lau** voted against the board's recommendation. The decision prompted several angry e-mails to the *SCMP Talkback* forum disagreeing with the board and calling for a formal heritage conservation policy. Let us hope that the old Wanchai Market will not suffer the same fate.

4. New Military Heritage Trail

The *SCMP* on 26 May reported that the Tourism Commission and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department have set up a 4 km military heritage trail that traces the battle for Wong Nai Chung Gap in the defence of Hong Kong in 1941. The trail encompasses the water-catchment area, starting at Tai Tam Reservoir Road, goes across Sir Cecil's Ride and ends at the West Brigade Headquarters (Lawson's Bunker) on Wong Nai Chung Gap Road opposite the cricket club. Information boards have been placed at strategic points to tell the story of the battle. Old wartime pillboxes and bunkers can be seen along the trail.

5. The Peak Lookout

A tender briefing was held on 19 May for prospective bidders for the lease of the Peak Lookout (formerly known as the Peak Café) which expires in mid-July. Bidders were critical of the stringent rules imposed by the Government Property Agency and the Antiquities and Monuments Office. They say that the tough tendering requirements, which are aimed at preserving the historical and architectural character of the building, will make it virtually impossible to operate the café at a profit.

6. Hau Wong Temple

A letter from **P.T. Poon** of Tsing Yi to the *SCMP* on 3 June was rather critical of the Chinese Temples Committee and its new rules controlling burning of joss sticks and its electronic management system reminding worshippers of forthcoming festivals at the newly restored Hau Wong Temple in Kowloon City. Mr. Poon felt that the new rules spoil the essence of folk culture, and that intervention in the way temple visitors worshipped was overdoing it and could be devastating for our heritage and negatively affect cultural tourism.

7. Fung Shui Woods

An article by **Donald Asprey** in the June issue of *Where* magazine described four countryside walks to discover *fung shui* woods. *Fung shui* woods are found around rural villages. They may be remnant forest, bamboo groves, or trees planted by the villagers. The woods formed shelter belts to the villages and provided the villagers with bamboo poles for construction, also incense and camphor and fruit such as lychee, pomelo, guava and papaya. *Fung shui* woods also had a geomantic function protecting the villages in accordance with ancient traditions relating to the interactions of wind and water on the village environment. In landscape terms, the woods have *genius loci* or special features contributing to the landscape character of the site and as such have to be considered in Landscape Impact Assessment Studies conducted under the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance.

8. Central Police Station

A report was prepared for Council based on the questionnaires which were returned. A summary is attached at Appendix A for information. A new heritage group, Heritage Hong Kong, has given the Town Planning Board a counter-proposal to a zoning amendment which would allow fast-food shops and convenience stores in the compound. The group has proposed a mix of cultural and recreational facilities, supported by commercial activities of an appropriate nature and scale, also a height limit of 19 storeys for any new buildings.

9. Government Hill

The Civic Party is pressing for the preservation of Government Hill – the site of the Central Government Offices and Government House – which they say is a site of cultural significance. The history

of the site is quite interesting and a lot can be traced from old maps. A military gun battery called Murray Battery was built on the CGO site in the early 1840s. Battery Path of course still exists today. There is also an extensive tunnel system under the CGO site which is believed to connect up with another tunnel system under Government House. The site is also important because it is almost the last remaining site in the central business district with trees. A fine specimen of a Burmese Rosewood tree can be seen growing in the centre of the compound. So far the government have made no firm commitment on preservation of the area.

10. Kom Tong Hall

Work on conversion of the Kom Tong Hall in Castle Road into the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Museum is progressing but corrosion of the steel-framed structure within the brickwork is causing problems. The steelwork has to receive protective treatment but the antique brickwork also has to be preserved. The Antiquities and Monuments Office is working closely with the Architectural Services Department to come up with a solution to the problem.

11. Heritage Foundation

An article in the June edition of the magazine *Square Foot* by **Margaret Brooke** suggested the formation of a Heritage Foundation, similar to the National Trust in the U.K., to ensure the preservation of heritage buildings. The foundation would be an independent trust, established by ordinance which would solicit funds from both the government and the private sector and make the money available for the protection, conservation and adaptive re-use of heritage buildings and possibly also districts. The trust would be operated and managed by conservation experts and people familiar with the appropriate use and commercialization of old buildings. Ms. Brooke felt that such a foundation is currently the only way out of the present unsatisfactory situation concerning conservation of Hong Kong's historical buildings.

12. Cultural Heritage Protection

In an e-mail to the *SCMP Talkback* forum on 13 June **Ng Yat-fai** of Shatin expressed concern about the impact on the cultural heritage of Yim Tin Tsai Island from cultural and environmental tourism. Mr. Ng suggested that a detailed management plan should be drawn up to control development of the area and to prevent destruction of natural and cultural assets. His idea however to carefully select and control commercial activities on the island seems to be somewhat at odds with Hong Kong's traditional *laissez faire* economic policy.

13. Queen's Pier

The ceremonial gateway to Hong Kong, Queen's Pier, will soon be demolished as part of the Central reclamation project. The history of the pier, which dates back to 1953, was traced in a *SCMP* article on 17 June by reporter **Chloe Lai**. The Conservancy Association hopes that the government can preserve part of the pier's structure, as it is an integral part of Hong Kong's heritage and a place for which many people have fond memories.

14. Lost Landmarks

The *Hong Kong Magazine* recently celebrated 15 years of publication. In the issue of 16 June they listed the following local landmarks closed down or demolished over the last 15 years :-

- Lee Theatre, Causeway Bay (closed 1991)
- Kowloon Walled City (demolished 1993)
- Lai Chi Kok Amusement Arcade (closed 1997)
- Blake Pier (demolished 1993)
- Wan Chai Chinese Methodist Church (demolished 1994)
- Hong Kong Hilton (demolished 1995)
- Red postboxes (replaced 1997)
- Tiger Balm Gardens (demolished 2001)

- Kai Tak Airport (closed 1998)

15. Wedding Card Street

An article in the *SCMP* on 21 June by **Lee Wing-sze** reported how the residents of Lee Tung Street, better known as Wedding Card Street, are helping other neighbourhoods under threat from urban renewal to speak up for their rights. Groups in Shamshuipo, Kwun Tong, Hollywood Road and Nullah Lane are learning from their example. Maintaining community ties, adequate monetary compensation, resettlement, and quality of life are some of the issues that residents in redevelopment areas face. Despite the heavy odds against them, the neighbourhood groups intend to continue the struggle and hope they can influence future urban renewal projects.

16. The Landmark Scheme

An advertisement in the *SCMP* on 21 June traced the history of development of The Landmark Scheme in Central with old photographs of historic buildings which used to be on the site including the Dent & Co. headquarters (c.1870), the Hongkong Hotel (c.1920), St. Francis Hotel, Gloucester Building and Edinburgh House. The latest building on the site is York House due to open in October 2006.

17. Save Our Trees

There seems to be an increasing awareness of tree conservation in Hong Kong judging by reports and letters in the newspapers recently. The Conservancy Association, residents' groups, university students, and concerned individuals are all part of a growing number of people fighting against developers and even government departments to save trees from the axe. Although legislation does exist regarding felling of trees, it is often ignored and of course too late to save a tree once it is cut down.

18. Japanese Tunnel

Workmen recently discovered a wartime Japanese tunnel underneath the old parade ground in the former Lyemun Barracks now the Lei Yue Mun Park. The tunnel was carved out of the soft sandstone sub-strate without any supports or lining to the roof or sides. The entrance was blocked up by rusty iron grilles and barbed wire probably by the British Army when they were in occupation of the barracks to prevent unauthorized entry. An interesting trip-wire alarm bell contraption was recovered from the tunnel. It will be restored by the Museum of History conservators, then sent to the Museum of Coastal Defence for display.

19. Nga Tsin Wai

The old village houses at Nga Tsin Wai continue to be demolished one by one. **Queenie Sin** of Yuen Long e-mailed *Talkback* on 26 June to express her feelings of frustration regarding the government's failure to preserve the village. Under the proposed redevelopment scheme only the Gatehouse and the Tin Hau Temple will be preserved. Restoration of the Gatehouse will involve a certain amount of conjectural reconstruction as there are not many old photographs in existence to show what it originally looked like.

20. Pottinger Battery

Archaeological excavations are currently underway at Pottinger Battery at the foot of Devil's Peak overlooking Lei Yue Mun channel under the direction of **Dr. Lawrence Lai** and **Dr. Daniel Ho** of the University of Hong Kong. Funding has been obtained from the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust for the project which will entail detailed land, structural and architectural surveys of the battery.

The battery was constructed around 1902 and consists of two gun emplacements and associated underground magazines and bunkers. It seems to have been decommissioned in 1939/40 and the guns removed to Bokhara Battery, Cape D'Aguilar. Pottinger Battery was quite severely damaged and was probably blown up by British Army sappers to render it useless to the Japanese.

There is some difference of opinion as to whether the battery was named after the first governor **Sir Henry Pottinger** or his nephew **Major Eldred Pottinger** of the Bombay Artillery who was a hero of the Afghan War of 1839-42. He became known as the 'Hero of Herat'. He came to Hong Kong to visit his uncle but unfortunately became ill and died here. He was buried at the Happy Valley Cemetery in 1843.

21. Pile-dwellings

Architects often borrow ideas from past eras and architectural periods, but it is not often they go as far back as the Prehistoric Age. The *International Herald Tribune* on 23 June reported that on the Gulf of Mexico coast in Texas, a developer is putting up houses on concrete stilts that are claimed will easily survive the worst hurricane flooding. The idea is not new. Neolithic men in the Late Stone Age (c.3,500 B.C.) lived in pile-dwellings erected over water very similar to structures that can be seen at Tai O and fishing villages on outlying islands such as Tap Mun Chau. Who was it who said "There is nothing new under the sun?"

22. Dragon Garden

The privately owned Dragon Garden in Sham Tseng was in the news recently as the owners want to sell the site for redevelopment. Built in 1948 for tycoon **Lee Iu-cheung**, the garden was designed by the renowned architect **Chu Pin** of Kwan, Chu and Yang, Architects. Mr. Chu was regarded as an authority on Chinese architecture and his firm had an extensive practice in China before the civil war with special interest in the restoration of the Imperial Palace buildings in Beijing. The Antiquities and Monuments Office have agreed to conduct a heritage assessment on Dragon Garden which was once open to the public and could be again if it is saved.

23. Future Role of Volunteers

A summary of the questionnaires as presented to Council is attached at Appendix B. No-one wanted to disband the group and a number of suggestions were made on our future role. In addition to your ideas, Council suggested that we record temple carvings, village shrines, Shek Wan pottery and old footbridges, and also visit schools to educate children on built heritage. The latter suggestion is already done by the AMO's Education and Publicity Unit aided by the Friends of Heritage. The first idea needs of course assistance from AMO to arrange site visits and transport. A big problem is that AMO is adopting the new 5-day week arrangements so that Saturday mornings when we used to go out are no longer available. Our best option seems to be to carry on as heritage guardians or watchdogs bringing AMO's attention to historical buildings and sites which appear to be under threat.

24. For Your Diary

A Cartographic Survey of Historic Buildings Exhibition is on at the Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Centre in Kowloon Park until 3 December.

25. Next Newsletter

The next Conservation Newsletter will be out around the end of September. Comments, contributions, letters, etc. should be sent to G.P.O. Box 3864. E-mails can be sent to membership@royalasiaticsociety.org.hk.