

PHT *newsletter*

PENANG HERITAGE TRUST • PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG

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Number 15

May 1995

PHT

Talk and Slide Show

Hanoi

An ancient city
in transition

by PENNY RAMSAY
University of Adelaide

Tuesday 30 May
8.30 pm
E&O Hotel (Straits Room)

HANOI is of special interest to conservation enthusiasts from all over the world because it is still a relatively intact ancient city. Visitors have often described its diversity of architectural styles as 'unique' and 'breathtaking'.

Like many other old cities in Southeast Asia, Hanoi is experiencing tremendous pressure, both from abroad and at home, to transform itself into a modern city.

To bring the world's attention to the plight of Hanoi, Ms Ramsay organised a symposium there in November 1994. She will discuss the *Save Hanoi* plans and strategies the symposium recommended.

Ms Ramsay is the secretary of the Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban conservation (AWPNUC), of which the PHT is a pioneer member. She is also the co-ordinator of the International Design Studio of Adelaide University.

Refreshments will be served

Special Tour

Ms Loh-Lim Lin Lee
will take PHT members
on a tour of the restored

Cheong Fatt Tse

Sunday 28 May
10.00 am

Meet at the mansion
(No. 14 Leith Street)

Only for members who have
not been on this tour before

No cameras please

PHT Antique & Collectors Club Meeting

Tuesday 23 May, 5.30 pm
35 Taman Ayer Rajah
(Residence of
Marie Louise Oh
Tel: 229 0636)

Members are urged to bring along
an unusual item they would like
to show others or one they
have questions about

Letters

Support for Suffolk House project from the new British High Commissioner

Thank you for your letter of 21 March giving details of the launch of your new appeal for funds for Suffolk House. We were delighted to learn of this initiative, since we are keen to see further progress being made on the restoration of Suffolk House following the stabilisation work (roof tarpaulin) undertaken with the High Commission's donation.

We were very impressed with the brochure which you prepared and think the target of completing the work by the year of the Commonwealth Games is a good one. I hope that Malaysia's leading companies will respond positively.

I am conscious that we have not yet managed to hold a formal ceremony to mark the "hand-over" of our donation. We are still keen to arrange this, since it should offer you a further opportunity to achieve publicity for the fund raising appeal for Suffolk House. I have therefore asked the Deputy High Commissioner, Mr Terry Byrne, who expects to visit Penang later this year, to make contact with you when his visit plans are firmer. We should be grateful if you would continue to keep us informed of progress on this restoration project.

D. J. Moss CMG
British High Commissioner

The jolly good buildings of British India

Thank you for your letter and the return of the cheque for the annual subscription I thought I had to pay. I had quite forgotten. I am a Life Member of the PHT. I must be going goofy in my old age.

I think you could enlarge your audience. In the 1930's the Rockefellers spent an awful lot of money restoring Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia which was essentially a 17th and early 18th century creation. Send them your brochure. They might have some advice how to set about things in Penang. At least Rockefeller answered and offered assistance when I tried, without success, to save Raffles Institution here! So did Carnegie Royal Society.

Is there any Heritage Trust yet in India? They have got lots of palaces which the British only built to "impress". The British didn't really have that much power. In 1805, answering a parliamentary question about expenses on big houses in India, Lord Valentia replied that "it was far better to expend moneys on the semblance of power than on the exercise thereof"! Which I always think was a jolly good answer and we got some jolly good buildings as a result.

I am sorry about Ken Yeang's "orthopaedic boot" along old Northam Road. I had studied the drawings and plans and thought of buying a unit there myself and clearing out of Singapore, if Penang would have me! I revert to my original proposal that to save this great avenue one might have to entice the developer away from it by giving him opportunities on a reclaimed shore. The new sewer, the new highway to Batu Ferringhi, and the highrises, well-separated, could be set well away in parkland near to the new coastline. The Komtar block did after all deflect the aim of earlier developers, otherwise most of the government buildings on the Esplanade would have been destroyed.

Is it not possible to get some legislation out of the Federal Government regarding heritage preservation? Vote for the NF to get federal funds and more attention. Formulate a national policy. If each state tries to go it alone, I'm afraid the developers will win. What about much heavier penalties for knocking down listed buildings? I think you need some de-worming (ubat cacing) in your City Council. Or do you want Mr Lee Kuan Yew?

Dr George Yuille Caldwell
Gleneagles Medical Centre, Singapore

DEAR DR CALDWELL, Your interesting story about Lord Valentia and the palaces the British built in India reminds me of Lord Minto and his description of Suffolk House as 'nearly the best and handsomest house' he had seen in that part of the world, 'a mansion not quite proportioned to the island and looks like the great lady in the little parlour'. There can be no doubt Suffolk is one jolly good building the PHT must try to save.

Some months ago the Ministry of Housing and Local Government gave us the good news that the Cabinet had agreed to support a bill called Conservation and Preservation of Heritage Buildings. This bill, when it becomes law, will give protection to some 37,000 pre-war buildings in the country, including 12,000 in Penang. A National Council for the Protection of Old Buildings will also be set up to monitor the preservation efforts of each State.

Dr Koh Tsu Koon, our Chief Minister, is also doing his part. He has been quite eloquent on several occasions about his wish for the island to have a 'balanced development'. Recently *The Star* quoted him as having said, 'I think we are developing fast enough. We do not have to push it any faster at the expense of history, heritage and the human condition.' Needless to say, here at the PHT we can't agree with him more.

New Members

We welcome the following as members of the PHT. They can nominate, vote, stand for elections, and take part in any of the PHT's activities.

Life members: Eddy Koh Lian Huay

Ordinary members: Chip Spears	Mylene Ong
Goh Boon Leong	P. Ganason
Charles H. Mixon	Y. H. Soo
Ke Chuan Eng	C. H. Lim
	Rose Gasper
	Alain L. Tan

The Great PHT Debate

Who really built Suffolk House

Here's one version

Reproduced here, Khoo Salma Nasution's letter (*The Star*, 28 March)

I cannot agree with Datuk Lim Chong Keat's assertion that Suffolk House was built by W.E. Phillips in 1809 (*The Star*, March 8).

It was F.G. Stevens who first made this claim in his 1929 article and Stevens, it appears, has become a convenient source of reference for a whole generation of interpreters of our early history. New original research strongly indicates he has misled especially those looking for a readymade theory about the origins of the great house.

The single most obvious piece of evidence that Light did build and own a "Garden house" in his enormous estate is his famous will of 1794 in which he wrote:

"I give and bequeath (to) Martina Rozells, the pepper Gardens with my Garden house plantations and all the Land by me cleared in that part of this Island called Suffolk....."

A recent study by Frank Campbell, an expert in Anglo-Indian architecture, shows that Light's "Garden house" was probably the same as the "Suffolk House" Wathen saw and painted in 1811, and described as "a very splendid mansion, built in a mixed style of English and Indian architecture".

According to Campbell "Garden house" was a term used in British-influenced parts of India in the 17th and 18th centuries to denote "a detached mansion in a garden estate". "These suburban dwellings – as they were known – were palatial, being the fullest expression of Anglo-Indian merchant wealth and status".

Besides Suffolk House (built when Penang was part of British India), other examples of such structures are Brodie's Castle (1796), Bentinck's Buildings (Madras, 1790), and those in "the most famous suburb of all India – Garden House Reach on the Hoogly River".

Light also left Martina – the mother of their five children – his "Bungalow in George Town", a large brick building marked on the 1798 Popham map (see *Penang Views* by Lim Chong Keat) as the Superintendent's house. This is the Government House (It still stands today in the

grounds of the Light Street Convent as part of the school) which F.G. Stevens mistakenly thought was built in 1805 by Farquhar. Apparently, Stevens did not know about the Popham map when he wrote his account.

That Light had the means to build two major brick structures is supported not only by the record that he had imported convict labour in 1789 for making bricks and building roads (We know that the massive Fort Cornwallis was rebuilt in brick in 1793) but also by the "account of the Brick Buildings upon Prince of Wales Island belonging to different persons with an estimate of their value" dated "28th June 1793" (This account is reproduced in *Penang Past and Present 1786-1963* published by the City Council of George Town, Penang in 1966), in which Light was mentioned as owning "two dwelling houses & offices" worth "16,000 Spanish dollars".

This 1793 inventory of brick buildings alone seems evidence enough that the "Garden house" Martina inherited was something much grander than the "affair of wood and attap" F.G. Stevens and his followers have made it out to be. It must be pointed out that Stevens must have been unaware of the existence of this all-important piece of documentary evidence: he made no mention of it in his article.

Khoo Salma Nasution

Hon. Secretary, Penang Heritage Trust

And here's another.....

Reproduced here, Datuk Lim Chong Keat's letter (*The Star*, 4 April)

The letter "Who really built Suffolk House" from the Secretary of the Penang Heritage Trust (*The Star*, March 28) repeats certain conjectures which have misled those who wish to "prove" that Light built the brick mansion now in ruins.

It would be a mistake to assume that the term "garden house" equates Light's weekend bungalow with the mansions in India. Frank Campbell merely suggested a probability which is not substantiated by the economic conditions in Penang up to 1794.

A more careful reading of Light's will would be revelatory. If the 1793 inventory of brick buildings in George Town mentioned two owned by Light, it did not include the timber structure in the estate.

Martina's house in town was not the building within the convent which was shared by Light and Scott; she had a house next door, now demolished.

There are other historical sources before Steven's 1929 article. The Suffolk House of Phillips has been clearly documented. It is a pity that the current activists in the PHT have chosen to omit his name in their haste to press their assertions.

Proposals to restore Suffolk House were made by a committee of the state government, the PHT (in 1988), and others.

The state and the MPPP are aware of the recommendations. As the building is owned by the Methodist Trust, it would be relevant for the state to decide on appropriate action. The PHT should not be hasty in trying to save properties without the express consent of the actual owners.

Datuk Lim Chong Keat

Founder Chairman, Penang Heritage Trust

What "the current activists in the PHT" have done

I am concerned that Datuk Lim Chong Keat's letter (*The Star*, April 4) does not lead the public to think that the Penang Heritage Trust is trying to save Suffolk House against the wishes of other parties involved in the project, viz the State government, the Penang Municipal Council (MPPP), and the Methodist Church. There has obviously been some miscommunication, which I hope this letter will clear up.

Datuk Lim is quite right to say that "the State and the MPPP are aware of the recommendations". Indeed, the State has been aware of the recommendations ever since the MPPP first proposed to save Suffolk House way back in 1961. The project, however, has not moved beyond a protective tent over the building in 34 years, a tent erected last year by the PHT.

Datuk Lim is also right to say that "as the building is owned by the Methodist Trust, it would be relevant for the State to decide on appropriate action". But I must point out here that the State, and not the PHT, is deciding on the appropriate action to take as regards the land exchange deal between the Church and the MPPP. In July last year, the PHT wrote to both the State and the MPPP to urge them to draw up without further delay the necessary legal documents that would enable them formally to carry out the exchange of land with the Church. And what has in fact happened here is that a State exco member has now been appointed to attend to the matter.

Datuk Lim is right again to say that "the PHT should not be hasty in trying to save properties without the express consent of the actual owners". He may not be aware though that the PHT has in fact obtained the express consent of both the Church and the MPPP. In June 1993, the PHT met with the Church and as a result the Church wrote to the MPPP to reconfirm that it had agreed to the details of the land exchange proposal and was ready to carry out the exchange. The Church gave the MPPP access to Suffolk House so that the preliminary work of getting the building restored could be undertaken immediately. In September, the PHT met with the MPPP and obtained permission to do

whatever is necessary to stabilise the building pending the formal land exchange. On that understanding the PHT conducted a dilapidation survey of the building. Having also stabilised the building, the PHT is now embarking on a campaign to help the State raise the funds needed to complete the restoration by appealing to the Ministry of Culture and the corporations based in Malaysia.

I cannot see in what way the present PHT committee has acted as if it owned Suffolk House or the MPPP land. It has not done anything without first meeting with the actual owners and getting their consent. Neither has it assumed what is properly the role of the State.

Ahmad Chik

Suffolk House Project Co-ordinator

It is just as well the great house is still shrouded in mystery

The question as to whether Light or Phillips built Suffolk House has been much debated in these pages, the papers, and elsewhere. Whatever the eventual outcome it has focused our attention on a bit of the early history of Penang and raised an issue that can only intrigue one's mind and imagination. For that Datuk Lim, Ms Khoo Salma and all deserve our thanks.

The problem, such as it is, will undoubtedly continue to engage the attention of the historians, foreign and local alike, as they dig into dusty archives to look for lost documents. "What a coup, what a feather in the cap" if someone can come up with, say, the building contract signed by Phillips, the diary of Light or a letter from the building department of the MPPP of that time relating to the controversy.

Fortunately, whether it was Light or Phillips who paid so many dollars and cents to have Suffolk House built is not central to the restoration project. Suffolk is Penang's first great house. That is reason enough to save it.

Though each side has come tantalizingly close to clinching the issue, perhaps it is just as well that there is yet no direct or conclusive evidence one way or the other. The amateur historian will have a field day and the novelist, playwright and forger too. And then of course there is the ordinary Penangite and, one must not forget, the tourist, for whom the place is fascinating largely because of the mystery and romance surrounding it. After all what is a great house like Suffolk without its scandals and secrets and stories. And its ghosts: the nyonya Martina likes to sing her sad songs about her Captain in the pale moonlight, it seems.

Cheng Hin, PHT member