



Stories from

THOMSON & NSC

Tracing Memories Along
the Winding Road



Identity Corridor Guide



An aerial photograph of Singapore, overlaid with a network of red lines that trace various urban corridors and roads across the island. The map shows a mix of green spaces, urban buildings, and waterways. The red lines represent the Identity Corridors mentioned in the text.

Stories from Thomson & NSC:

Tracing Memories Along the Winding Road

This series of **Identity Corridor Guides** was commissioned in 2024 to support URA's public engagement and co-creation efforts across the Identity Corridors, which were first introduced at the Long Term Plan Review of 2022.

A city without history and identity is a city without soul. Since the launch of the 2001 Concept Plan, URA has designated Identity Nodes and Corridors islandwide, so that these areas of significance and their unique characters can continue to be enjoyed by future generations.

Identity Corridors are longer stretches of urban fabric and natural spaces in the city that have special significance to Singaporeans. Found along old roads, rail lines, and waterways, they tell the story of the city's evolution.

It is envisioned that the research and stories unearthed through this documentation effort will help inform and inspire the placemaking strategies for each Corridor. It can also serve to guide the community in the co-creation of public realm enhancement projects and other initiatives along the Identity Corridors.

URA would like to thank all current and former residents and stakeholders, as well as historians and academics who have generously contributed their time, research, and insights to this publication.



Bras Basah Bugis precinct



Sembawang Hot Spring Park



Artist's impression of Farrer Park



Toa Payoh Central

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Shophouses along Upper Thomson Road



Sembawang Hills Estate

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Woodlands Waterfront Park

Sembawang Hot Spring Park

Thomson Nature Park

Chestnut Nature Park

Bukit Timah Nature Reserve

Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park

Rochor

West Coast Park

KRANJI

YEW TEE VILLAGE

CHUA CHU KANG

BUKIT BATOK

PIE

CLEMENTI

HOLLAND V

QUEENSTOWN

AYE

BUKIT MERAH

BUKIT TIMAH

Dunearn Road

PIE

NOVENA

Bukit Timah Road

KALLANG

Opfer Road

ECP

SEMBAWANG

WOODLANDS

MARSILING

YISHUN

North-South Corridor

Sembawang Road

Mandai Avenue

Mandai Rd

Seletar Expressway

Lentor Avenue

Upper Thomson Road

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TOA PAYOH

NOVENA

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Rochor

- ① Kampong Glam
- ② Bras Basah.Bugis

Farrer Park

- ③ Little India
- ④ Pek Kio Market & Food Centre

Novena

- ⑤ Novena Church
- ⑥ Mount Rosie
- ⑦ Tan Tock Seng Hospital

Toa Payoh

- ⑧ Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery
- ⑨ Toa Payoh Central

Bishan

- ⑩ Bishan New Town
- ⑪ Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park
- ⑫ Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng

Ang Mo Kio

- ⑬ Ang Mo Kio New Town
- ⑭ Chu Sheng Temple

Upper Thomson

- ⑮ Thomson Nature Park (Former Hainan Village)
- ⑯ Upper Thomson Shophouses

Nee Soon

- ⑰ Springleaf Nature Park
- ⑱ Chong Pang Village

Sembawang

- ⑲ Sembawang Hot Spring Park
- ⑳ Sembawang Air Base
- ㉑ Former Singapore Naval Base

Legend:

-  North-South Corridor
-  Upper Thomson Road

INTRODUCTION

Thomson Road is one of Singapore’s oldest trunk roads, which historically connected the city to settlements and military bases in the north. Winding through hills, jungles, rivers, as well as urban villages dating back to the 1800s, a trip along this corridor is a journey through time, into memories of the rustic “north”.

Much of the historic trunk road remains, well-worn by generations traversing the undulating terrain of Thomson Road, Upper Thomson Road, and Sembawang Road. A modern offshoot formed in the 1970s to support the development of HDB New Towns such as Bishan and Ang Mo Kio. Parts of these parallel corridors are now being repurposed into the North-South Corridor (NSC), a multimodal transport and active mobility corridor that will be completed in phases from 2027 onwards.

Initially planned as Singapore’s 11th expressway, the NSC will incorporate walking and cycling paths, and public spaces that integrate transport with lifestyle. It presents an unprecedented opportunity to transform how communities move and interact in the city. The NSC will also improve connectivity to the neighbourhoods it passes through, encouraging visits to areas that are rich in heritage and culture.

Rochor

Once the rural fringe of the city – where Thomson Road began its winding journey to the north – Rochor used to consist of swampland, vegetable farms, and coastal villages. Today, this area has transformed into a vibrant urban district with diverse neighbourhoods such as Bras Basah, Bugis, Little India, and Kampong Glam. The upcoming NSC surface streets works will further elevate Rochor as a gateway into the city centre, while celebrating its rich and diverse multicultural history.

Farrer Park

North of Rochor lies Farrer Park, the site of former horse races, plane landings, and sporting activities that took place just outside the city. With street names such as Cambridge, Dorset, and Hampshire, this area in Singapore was home to open spaces and lush greenery reminiscent of English countrysides. The area’s green character will be preserved, along with its enduring identity as a hub for sports and recreation.

Novena

Encountering various hills and knolls, each with their own identity, Thomson Road begins to meander and wind as it approaches the Central Catchment Area. A “hospital hill” marked the beginnings of what is today known as the Novena area, which is evolving into a vibrant commercial centre and major hub for healthcare. Named after a popular Catholic church and religious procession, this node continues to draw many people looking for tradition and good food.

Toa Payoh, Bishan, and Ang Mo Kio

While the original landscape in major housing estates such as Toa Payoh, Bishan, and Ang Mo Kio has changed, there are many memories of place names such as Cheng San and Peck San Theng as well as landmarks such as the “Dragon Playground” in Toa Payoh. The corridor’s identity continues to be defined by the lived experiences of residents and stakeholders in the area.



Upper Thomson Road

Upper Thomson

The rustic upper reaches of Thomson serve as a living time capsule, reflecting a bygone landscape once framed by jungle, open fields, plantations, and scattered villages. Nestled beside the Lower and Upper Peirce Reservoirs, neighbourhoods found in Upper Thomson are surrounded by charming parks and scenic trails that enjoy a close connection to nature.



Chong Pang Garden Estate

Nee Soon and Chong Pang

The Thomson segment of the corridor follows the paths of major waterways such as the Rochor River, Whampoa River (formerly Balestier River), and Kallang River. In the far northern areas, Sungei Seletar was the lifeline for early communities such as the Orang Seletar and the settlement of Chan Chu Kang.

At Sungei Seletar, the *kangchu* system gave the Chinese headman official authority to establish plantations along the river. Lim Nee Soon acquired the land and developed rubber and pineapple plantations, collectively known as Nee Soon Estate. This estate supported the growth of nearby Chong Pang Village, where businesses gradually evolved as it became a gateway to the naval base at Sembawang.



Beaulieu House, 2016

Sembawang

Situated at the northernmost part of the corridor, Sembawang has a naval history that dates back to the opening of the Singapore Naval Base in 1929. A key British military facility, it was one of the finest naval bases in the world. Roads in Sembawang bear naval-themed names, and numerous colonial-era buildings still stand, bearing testament to the area's unique history.



Kampong Kerbau

Kampong Kapor

Kampong Boyan

Kampong Bugis

Kampong Gelam

Rochor River

Mangrove Swamp

Mangrove Swamp

Mangrove Swamp

COURSE
GOLF LINKS

KANDANG KERBAU

KAMPONG KAPUR

KAMPONG BOYAN

KAMPONG BUGIS

KAMPONG ROKOK

KAMPONG LAUT

TANJO

Map dated 1913.

ROCHOR: GATEWAY TO THE CITY

RIVER LIFE

Thomson Road was one of the earliest trunk roads in Singapore. It was named after John Turnbull Thomson who was the Government Surveyor of the Straits Settlements from 1841 to 1853, and the Superintendent of Public Works in 1844. He played a key role in building up trunk roads that opened up interior parts of the island.

Leading from the city centre to the north, Thomson Road stretched from the city's edge through outlying residential suburbs, winding around hilly, forested regions near the Central Catchment Nature Reserve. From there, the road continued towards military bases in the north before ending at Sembawang Naval Base.

Rochor once marked the southern end of Thomson Road, around the marshy fringes of the original city limits. Its name is derived from the Malay word *rochoh*, which means "to mark out with a pointed stick".

In the early days, the marshy terrain was home to various settlements with busy activity along the Rochor River. As the city expanded, this area transformed into a lively urban gateway to the city centre.

Early Settlements at Rochor River

The area around Rochor River was home to a settled population long before the arrival of the British. As the river cut inland, fishing villages thrived along its banks. Near the river mouth, the Orang Laut (sea people) made their homes in houseboats.

Seduyong: The Origin of Kampong Gelam

According to Wah Hakim, a historical figure who is said to have witnessed Raffles' arrival, Kampong Gelam (old spelling for Kampong Glam) was once known as Seduyong.

At the time, it was bordered by the Rochor River and the sea. The Orang Gelam tribe named it after the gelam tree, which grew abundantly in the area. Gelam trees were valued for their oil, which was used in traditional Malay medicine. The Orang Laut also sold the oil in the area.

Malay village on Rochor River, 1911.



At the Frontier of Raffles' Town Plan

Sir Stamford Raffles aimed to transform the downtown area, from Telok Ayer to the Kallang River, into a thriving commercial hub. The key features of Raffles' town plan were a grid layout for the road network and segregated residential communities based on ethnicity.

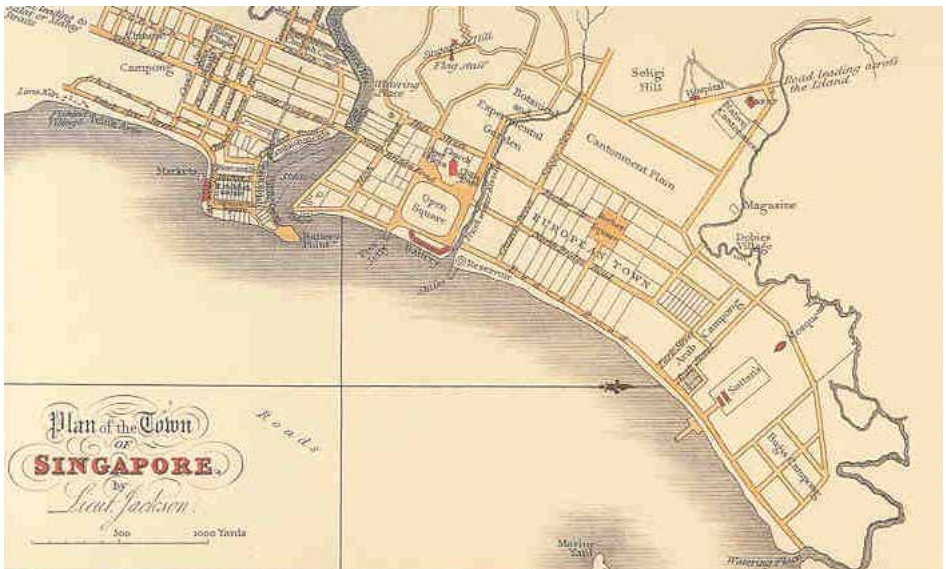
While the west bank of Rochor River had roads and allocated parcels of land, the east bank remained largely rural with kampongs, farms, and sawmills. Over time, the Rochor area became a frontier of the city centre and eventually grew into a bustling district. Shaped by Raffles' Town Plan as well as organic growth, diverse communities with distinct identities emerged along the river.

By 1837, the European Town of the Raffles Town Plan had developed a few roads named after prominent figures in the community. Church Street (later renamed Waterloo Street) was named after Resident

Councillor Thomas Church; Flint Street was named after Captain William Flint, Raffles' brother-in-law and Singapore's Master Attendant; and Queen Street honoured Queen Victoria. Middle Road ran through the centre, while existing roads such as North Bridge Road were expanded.

In 1824, under an agreement with Raffles, Sultan Hussein of Johor and his family were granted land in present-day Kampong Gelam. The Sultan built his *Istana* (Malay for "palace") and a mosque on the site. The surrounding area soon developed into residential quarters for the Bugis, Arabs, and Malays.

Kampong Gelam flourished, serving as a hub of Malay intelligentsia and Islamic culture. In addition to the Sultan Mosque, the area was home to madrasahs, printing presses, and a vibrant mix of communities. Streets such as Bussorah, Muscat, and Kandahar were named after places in the Muslim world.



Plan of the Town of Singapore by Lieutenant Philip Jackson, 1822.



Beach Road reclamation ground, 1910s.

Raffles Reclamation Ground

In the past, Rochor was just marshy terrain. However, the area along Beach Road underwent major reclamation works in the 1840s and 1890s, creating a “beach” or waterfront edge that extended from Stamford Road to Rochor River. Known as Raffles Reclamation Ground, it marked the edge condition of precincts such as Kampong Gelam, which used to front the sea.

This reclaimed area became home to cinemas, the Beach Road Police Station, and the Singapore Volunteer Corps Headquarters. An open field was also used for events such as football matches and circus performances.

Canalisation of Rochor River

Part of the Rochor River was turned into Rochor Canal in 1836. This not only improved drainage and enhanced transportation, it also helped cattle herders to water their animals.

BUSTLING MARKETS AND TRADE

Busy Trading Hub

The Singapore River was the town's main harbour for international trade. However, a secondary trading area also thrived at the estuary of the Rochor River and Kallang River.

In the mid-19th century, the harbour at the mouth of the Rochor River was occupied by all kinds of vessels such as the Malay sampan, Chinese junk, and the Bugis *prahu*. Markets sprung up where colourful sarongs, exotic birds, tortoise shells, opium, iron, and gold thread were traded.

Lively Markets of Rochor

Rochor markets were known for their colourful goods and curios. In the late 19th century, the Municipal Commissions established formal markets including Clyde Terrace Market and Rochor Market.

Initially, Clyde Terrace Market started out as sheds along the beach at Kampong Gelam. It was relocated to an iron-structured building near Clyde Terrace (now Beach Road) in the 1870s and served as a retail and wholesale market until 1983.

Rochor Market was built on the banks of the river. It became a landmark in Sungei Road for more than a century before it was demolished in 1982.

Built in 1915 and originally known as Kandang Kerbau Market, Tekka Market attracted diverse groups of shoppers and gained fame as the "people's market" in the 1930s.

Due to urban renewal, it was relocated to Tekka Centre, which was completed in 1981. The market still houses second- and third-generation hawkers.

Thieves' Market emerged at Sungei Road in the post-World War II era. It sold army surplus goods before expanding to second-hand goods such as clothes, electronics, and motor parts. Infamous for being part of the stolen goods trade, the market was closed for redevelopment in 2017.



Clyde Terrace Market along Beach Road, 1910s.



Sungei Road Thieves Market with Jalan Besar Road in the background.

The Cattle Trade

The beginnings of Singapore's cattle trade was tied to the intersection of Rochor Canal and Serangoon Road. As one of the earliest roads built in Singapore, Serangoon Road was a key thoroughfare for bullock carts transporting goods from Serangoon Harbour to Singapore Town.

Rochor Canal served as a source of water and a bathing point for water buffaloes. Cattle trading grew into a major economic activity, attracting both Indian and European traders. Belilios Street was named after I. R. Belilios, a cattle trader, while Desker Street was named after Andre Desker, owner of the largest slaughterhouse and butchery. The names Buffalo Road and Kerbau Road are reminders of the area's cattle trading history.

Bordered by Selegie Road and Lavender Street, Kampong Kapor and Kampong

Kerbau were home to communities of Indian settlers who contributed to the growth of Little India. The main commercial activity took place along Serangoon Road.

Industrial Activity

Industrial activity grew rapidly around Rochor in the 20th century. Hokkien businessman Tan Kee Peck, the father of Tan Kah Kee, established a pineapple factory at Sungei Road in the mid-1890s.

He also built a factory in 1905 at the delta of the Rochor River, on the former Sumbawa Road. In 1916, Tan Kah Kee converted the factory into a rubber plant, which enjoyed a roaring business due to the rubber boom of the 1920s. At its peak, the factory employed 6,000 workers.



Indian man with his buffaloes at Rochor Canal, 1900.

MULTIETHNIC COMMUNITIES OF ROCHOR

Kampong Glam (or Kampong Gelam) and Little India are home to diverse groups and cultures today, with communities from the wider Malay Archipelago and beyond.

Kampong Bugis

When the Bugis arrived in Singapore, they settled in Kampong Gelam and along Rochor River, forming Bugis Town. In 1823, they relocated to Kampong Rochor. A sizeable Bugis community also settled along the estuaries of the Kallang River and Rochor River in Kampong Bugis – where Kampong Bugis Road is today. Other communities that settled in Kampong Bugis included the Javanese, Baweanese (also known as Boyanese), Banjarese, Melakan Malays, Arabs, and Chinese.



Kampong Bugis, 1889.

Jewish Community

In 1873, the Jewish community purchased land on Church Street and built the Maghain Aboth Synagogue. Over time, they moved to North Bridge Road, Sophia Road, and Dhoby Ghaut. Between 1910 to 1941, the population of Jews in Singapore grew from around 500 to 844.

Kampong Dhoby

Kampong Dhoby originated in the 1820s and was home to a North Indian community. It was located at the upper end of Queen Street and a section of the Rochor River where *dhobies* (Hindi for “washermen”) did laundry. Near Short Street, an Indian military cantonment housed Bengal-origin soldiers maintaining law and order in town. Although the cantonment later moved to Outram Road, the Indian community remained in Kampong Dhoby.

Indian launderers working in Stamford Canal at Dhoby Ghaut, Singapore, 1910s.





1914 map showing kampongs around Rochor.

Kampong Gelam

Kampong Gelam was home to many kampongs. Around Pahang Street, near the Sultan Gate, was Kampong Dalam or “Inside Village”. The Malay royal family would often cordon off the area for events and ceremonies.

Until the mid-1970s, Singapore was a major pilgrimage hub in Southeast Asia for those performing Hajj. The stretch of Bussorah Street near Sultan Mosque was known as Kampong Haji or “Pilgrim Village”.

Arab Street was once Kampong Java, home to Javanese settlers, while Kampong Bali, now Bali Lane, was occupied by Javanese migrants from Bali, Lombok, and Sumbawa. It is a little known fact that Bali Lane used to be the site of slave trading activity.

It was also the coolie quarters for the Chinese. Baghdad Street was known as Kampong Intan or “Diamond Village” because Banjarese traders from Kalimantan would trade in diamonds. Meanwhile, Kampong Tembaga or “Copper Village” near Beach Road was where various Chinese businesses flourished.

Kampong Bencoolen

Kampong Bengkulu or “Bencoolen” was located at the site of present-day Albert Street, Prinsep Street, Bencoolen Street, Short Street, Middle Road, and Waterloo Street. Local residents called it *bengkulu*. It was home to Malays from Bencoolen (now known as Bengkulu, Indonesia) who came to Singapore with Raffles. Many Arabs, Tamil Muslims, and property owners also lived there.

Kampong Serani

Kampong Serani near Queen Street and Manila Street was within Kampong Bengkulu. The name comes from the Arabic *Nasrani* (Nazarene) and referred to Christians, particularly Portuguese Eurasians. Residents of Kampong Serani were mainly Eurasian.



Rochor River flowing between Sungei Road and Rochor Canal Road. Buffaloes bathing in the river were kept by the local Indian community living in nearby Kandang Kerbau.

Little India's Beginnings: Kampong Boyan, Kampong Kapor, and Kampong Kerbau

The Baweanese were sea traders from Bawean Island and arrived in Singapore in the early 20th century. At the junction of Rochor Canal and Syed Alwi Road, a Baweanese (Boyanese) community thrived into the 1920s.

Singapore's first race course was built by Baweanese. Many were hired as horse trainers by the Europeans. The Baweanese settled in Kampong Kapor as did Indian Muslims working as port labourers and office workers.

Kampong Kerbau or "Buffalo Village" was near Kandang Kerbau, which is Malay for "buffalo enclosure". It was named after cattle-related industries, which included slaughterhouses, tanneries, and milk peddling.

These kampongs became home to many trades and workers from India, which led to the organic growth of Little India. Although Raffles did not designate the area for the Indian community, Little India emerged as the heart of Singapore's Indian community by the mid-19th century, with diverse businesses, institutions, and places of worship.



Kampong Boyan by the banks of Rochor River, 1900s.

ROCHOR RENEWED



View of circus at Rochor Canal Road, Jalan Besar, Sungei Road, Rochor Road, and Bencoolen Street, 1963.

Former Frontier of a Growing City

Rochor’s transformation from a traditional settlement to a bustling urban centre underscores its role as a northern gateway to the city in pre-independence Singapore.

It facilitated the flow of goods and transportation from Johor and attracted migrants from around the region due to its central location. This enabled trade and industry to flourish, fostering the development of vibrant communities.

Until the 1980s, Rochor was a crucial entry point for Malaysians travelling across the Causeway. The taxi and bus terminals at the intersection of Ban San Street and Queen Street served the Singapore–Johor route.

Nearby, Rochor Centre and Albert Complex became popular shopping destinations for Malaysians, earning the nickname “Little Johor”. Besides Malaysian shoppers,

the shopping centres also attracted Indonesians, Arabs, Sri Lankans, Thais, and Bangladeshis.

Housing a Growing Population

As part of Rochor’s urban renewal in the 1970s and 1980s, the Housing and Development Board initiated major projects to provide modern housing. The area was swept clean of opium and gambling dens. The former Rochor Centre, Bras Basah Complex, and flats along Waterloo Street were some of the key developments built during this time.



Ban San Street.

FUTURE OF ROCHOR



View of Bras Basah, Bugis precinct.

1993 Rochor Development Guide Plan

The Urban Redevelopment Authority introduced The Rochor Development Guide Plan in 1993 to enhance the character and vibrancy of the area, and to contribute to Singapore's vision of becoming a world-class city.

The plan built upon Rochor's lively street life. Buildings such as former schools, cinemas, and shophouses were repurposed into cultural venues as well as commercial spaces. Bras Basah and Bugis transformed into a unified heritage, arts, and learning precinct, now known as Bras Basah, Bugis or (BB.B).

The Rochor Development Guide Plan also focused on improving public spaces, including the pedestrianisation of Waterloo Street to create more vibrant walking streets. BB.B is a cultural gem that embodies a rich blend of historical and modern architecture.

Central Hub

Today, Rochor remains a strategic link connecting various parts of Singapore to the city centre. It marks the intersection of major roads – Thomson Road heading north, Serangoon Road to the northeast, and Bukit Timah Road to the west. Thus, reinforcing it as a frontier that connects the northern, northeastern, and western regions to the heart of the city.

The development of the North-South Corridor, which is designed to link the northern areas to the city, will further strengthen Rochor's importance as a central hub in Singapore's urban landscape. At the same time, this will connect the cultural and heritage of districts Little India and Kampong Glam.



Waterloo Street.

Waterloo Street

Part of the revitalised Bras Basah Bugis, Waterloo Street showcases the rich tapestry of religious landmarks in Singapore.

Built between 1869 and 1870, the Church of Saints Peter and Paul was the first religious landmark in the area. Sri Krishnan Temple was established by the Hindu community in 1870, and the Maghain Aboth Synagogue was founded by the Jewish community in 1878.

Sharing a wall with Sri Krishnan Temple, Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple was established in 1884 by the Chinese community. The temple is particularly notable for its unique cross-worshipping practices. Many devotees of Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple also visit Sri Krishnan Temple, and vice versa. They respect each other's traditions and participate in the events of both religions.



Devotees lighting the first incense sticks at Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple for Chinese New Year.



Sri Krishnan Temple

FORGOTTEN HISTORY OF KAMPONG GELAM

“Kampong Gelam was a multicultural place where different groups had a lot of trust and respect for each other.”



Ms Hidayah Amin, Founder of the Haji Yusoff Memorial Museum and Former resident of Gedung Kuning

When she was living in Gedung Kuning at No. 73 Sultan Gate, Ms Hidayah Amin was sometimes mistaken for a descendent of the Malay royal family. Historically, the building was once the home of a Malay prince. But in 1912, the house was acquired by Ms Hidayah's great-grandfather, Mr Haji Yusoff, a prominent businessman and philanthropist.

“Haji Yusoff was born in Kampong Gelam and lived there all his life. One day, he chanced upon a group of Chettiars in the compound and learnt that they had bought Gedung Kuning. Since the property was on Malay land then, he felt that it should belong to someone from the community. That is why he decided to buy it.”

Haji Yusoff was well-known in the community. Besides owning a business making *songkoks* (traditional headwear worn by Muslim men), he also created the first Haji utility belt for pilgrims going to Mecca. This earned him the moniker “Haji Yusoff Tali Pinggang” where *tali pinggang* means “belt”.

Ms Hidayah says, “He was quite a visionary. Despite only having basic education, he had foresight and really good business acumen.”

More importantly, he gave back to the community in various ways. Besides setting up a school to provide free education to children who lived in Kampong Gelam, he also made significant donations to the mosque.

“I only discovered a few years ago that some money from his estate was allocated for donations to Sultan Mosque for *babur masjid* or mosque porridge to feed the poor during Ramadan. The amount may not be significant but my family has continued the tradition for more than 100 years.”

Ms Hidayah's family still organises an annual *haul* (pronounced “how-wool”), which is the Arabic word for “a year”. Initiated by her great-grandfather, the *haul* used to bring the community at Kampong Gelam together.

She shares, “It is an annual thanksgiving affair, where people can meet to say prayers, have a meal, and talk. When I was a child, the community celebrated this together. My great-grandfather allocated a portion of money from his will for this, so we still continue the tradition.”

Growing up, she remembers that Kampong Gelam was a multicultural place where people had trust and respect for each other. For example, Chinese business owners would not serve beer out of respect for Muslim residents.

“The bond in the area was very strong. In Kampong Gelam, no one had to go hungry because the neighbours looked after each other. If a child needed a meal, he could go to one house and get rice. And from another house, he could get an egg, until eventually his plate would be full.”

“Another thing I remember about this area was the Ramadan bazaar. It was quite different back then because it was like a communal *gotong royong*. People who lived along Bussorah Street would set up stalls selling special food from their own house.”

She adds, “Recently, a visitor asked to share the methodology of how I started the Haji Yusoff Memorial Museum. I was happy that he was inspired to trace his own family history after his visit. I hope that this museum can inspire more stories and more ground-up initiatives like that.”



Thomson Road

Bukit Timah Road

Kampong Java Road

Old Race Course

Map dated 1845.

FARRER PARK: START OF THE “COUNTRYSIDE”

SINGAPORE’S FIRST RACE COURSE



The old race course just off Serangoon Road, Singapore, 1910s. This area is now known as Farrer Park.

North of Rochor lies Farrer Park, where Kampong Java Road meets Thomson Road. This city fringe area gives way to open spaces and tranquil “countryside” estates. As the city expanded in the 19th and 20th centuries, key infrastructure was developed in Farrer Park. Besides an airfield and a hospital, a race course and sporting clubs were also built to meet the population’s growing needs for amenities and recreational spaces.

Where Horse Races Began

The Singapore Sporting Club (later renamed the Singapore Turf Club) was founded by amateur horse racing enthusiasts who requested for land for regular horse racing. They were granted a swampy plot near the junction of Bukit Timah Road and Serangoon Road in the Rochor District.

Singapore Racecourse opened in 1843 and became known as Farrer Park. The first race that was held there was called the

Singapore Cup. It marked the beginning of biannual racing events there.

Initially a social gathering meant exclusively for the European community, the race course soon attracted Malay and Chinese elites. From the 1870s to the 1890s, the venue also served as a polo field and golf course. The name of Race Course Road is a lasting tribute to its equestrian heritage.



Guests at Farrer Park during the races, 1930s.



Captain Ross Smith landed his three-engine Vickers Vimy biplane on the old race course (Farrer Park), Singapore in 1919.

Where Aviation Took Flight

Singapore's first air show was held at the race course in 1911. It was at this event that French aviator Joseph Christiaens took off in a Bristol Box-Kite biplane.

In 1919, the first intercontinental aircraft landed in Singapore on the race course. Captain Ross Smith made a stop here during his historic flight from England to Australia. Spectators had gathered in droves to catch a glimpse of an aeroplane. Before Kallang Airport began operations in the 1930s, the race course was a key stop for a series of pioneering flights between England and Australia.

The Baby Boom Hospital

Kandang Kerbau Hospital was established in 1860. It served as a maternity hospital in 1923 but became an emergency general hospital during the Japanese Occupation. It resumed operations as a maternity hospital after the war and expanded in 1953, with construction carried out by samsui women.¹

In 1966, the hospital set a new Guinness World Record for delivering 39,835 babies – the highest number in a single maternity facility within a year. The hospital relocated to 100 Bukit Timah Road in 1997 and the original buildings are now used by the Land Transport Authority.



Kandang Kerbau Hospital, 1950s.

¹ Samsui women were often employed in the construction industry. They came to Singapore from Guangdong, China in 1920s and 1940s, and became known for their hard work and resilience.

BIRTHPLACE OF SPORTS IN SINGAPORE

Origins of Farrer Park

In 1933, the Singapore Sporting Club sold the race course and moved to a new location at Bukit Timah. The Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) converted the old race course into a sports field to ease the overcrowding of clubs at Balestier Plain. It was renamed Farrer Park after R.J. Farrer, President of the Municipal Commissioners.

Farrer Park quickly grew into a sporting hub. In 1939, the Superintendent of Municipal Parks envisioned it as “one of Malaya’s best sports fields” for football, rugby, hockey, badminton, and tennis matches. Pitch rentals were set at \$2 per evening. A section of the building was leased to local sports clubs for \$20 a month while new facilities were under construction.

A Thriving Sporting Hub

From the 1950s to the 1980s, Farrer Park experienced significant sporting infrastructure developments.

The Farrer Park Athletic Centre and a \$200,000 cinder track stadium were built in 1957. The 440-yard hurdles of the Amateur Athletic Association championships was the first event hosted at the stadium. In that same year, Farrer Park Swimming Complex was built. As it was one of four public pools in Singapore at the time, there were only crowded two-hour slots for the public.

In the 1960s, the stadium served as Singapore’s track and field hub. It was subsequently leased to a soccer club and later used exclusively for hockey. The Sports House opened in 1971, housing the Singapore National Olympic Council, the Tenpin Bowling Association, and 14 sports associations and seven affiliates. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by a fire in 1985.

Sports House at Farrer Park was officially opened on 7 August 1971.



Local Sporting Legends

Many football greats and local athletes flourished at Farrer Park because of its infrastructure and the informal sporting culture that evolved around it.

When Singapore won its first Malaysia Cup in 1977 after a 12-year drought, striker Quah Kim Song attributed the team's success to their training at Farrer Park's humble fields. It was a source of energy and inspiration for leagues that played there from dusk to dawn. Farrer Park was also where Fandi Ahmad played soccer with his father, the national goalkeeper Ahmad Wartam.

In addition, Singapore swimming legend Ang Peng Siong, who once held the World No. 1 ranking in the 50 m freestyle, trained at Farrer Park Swimming Complex. He trained under his father, Ang Teck Bee, who served as the pool supervisor from the 1960s until his retirement.

A boxing gym that opened in 1968 became the Singapore Amateur Boxing Association, which produced the celebrated boxer Rocky Selvarajoo.



People queuing up outside Farrer Park Swimming Complex.

CRADLE OF SPORTING LEGENDS

“There was in that sense, a kind of innocence among the sporting fraternity. They created a vibrancy at Farrer Park that cannot be experienced elsewhere.”



Mr Ang Peng Siong, Former National Swimmer and Founder of APS Swim School

Farrer Park will always be associated with the early golden era in Singapore’s sporting history. It was where local legends such as C Kunalan, Fandi Ahmad, Quah Kim Song, Peter Hill, Zainal Abidin, the Martens family, Chee Swee Li, Rocky Selvarajoo, and more, trained for their sport. And it was also here at Farrer Park Swimming Complex that Ang Teck Bee taught his son, Ang Peng Siong, how to swim.

“Since I was a child, my life has revolved around that place; I would spend hours there. We would always go to the pool as a family because of my dad’s involvement as a coach, lifeguard, and pool supervisor. Look at old photos of the swimming complex and you will see the long queues of people trying to get in. But if anyone got out of line, my dad would put them in their place!” Mr Ang shares.

Nobody dared to challenge the elder Mr Ang because he cut an imposing figure with his athletic build and no-nonsense demeanor. However, the judoka was also known to the community for being generous and kind.

“People would tell me that my dad gave them free swimming lessons when they were kids. He never told us about it but he always made it a point to teach people to swim regardless of whether they could afford to pay for lessons or not. He has always wanted fellow Singaporeans to be water-safe at least. He was a strong advocate for that. My dad was one of the few coaches who believed in incorporating strength-training in his classes, which probably gave me an advantage later,” says Mr Ang.

“Because of my sentimental attachment to the pool, I took over Farrer Park Swimming Pool in

2004 and continued to run it. When Longines and Singapore Sports Council launched the 2007 Farrer Park Heritage Programme, guest-of-honour Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, shared how he used to go to Farrer Park Swimming Complex. One time, his bag was stolen, so he had to take public transport in his swimming trunks! With so few pools back then, I think pretty much every Singaporean has a story about this place.”

Besides being influenced by his father’s dedication to sports, Mr Ang was also inspired by the elite athletes at Farrer Park.

“The opportunity to observe some of the best sporting legends helped me keep that level of interest in sports. At that time, the athletes who got into sports were not motivated by money or medals. Watching them in action, you knew they were giving it their all because of their passion. So, there was in that sense, a kind of innocence among the sporting fraternity. They created a vibrancy at Farrer Park that can’t be experienced elsewhere.”

At the time, there was also this intricacy of being able to immerse in different sports.

Mr Ang says, “We grew up in an environment where sports was a strong part of the community’s day-to-day life. It was not just something for the elite, everyone was able to learn to play different sports without feeling like an outsider.”

He adds, “Sports can be quite lonely to pursue on your own. But in Farrer Park, the sporting environment was truly integrated; we were exposed to sports in a natural way, which is how it should be today.”

New Housing: Farrer Park

When drawing up the redevelopment plans for Farrer Park, the URA, HDB, and SportSG engaged stakeholders such as Friends of Farrer Park; members of the heritage and sports communities; and local residents to explore ways to retain the sporting identity of the area.

The public housing estate will reflect public aspirations and cherished memories of the community. This will be effected through the retention of the former boxing gym, which

will be adaptively reused for sports, and a jogging track that weaves through the estate.

Farrer Park's unique identity as a sports and social node will be further strengthened with facilities such as a refreshed swimming complex, a multipurpose sports playfield, and a neighbourhood park.



Artist's impression of the future public housing estate incorporating sports and recreational facilities, including a new sports centre and jogging track that will weave through various developments. Actual design may differ.

A “LITTLE ENGLAND” COUNTRYSIDE



Singapore Improvement Trust flats at the junction of Owen Road and Dorset Road.

Hub of European Social Life

The old racecourse served as a major sports and recreational hub for Europeans in Singapore, drawing many to settle and build homes in the surrounding areas.

In 1936, eight roads in Farrer Park were named after English counties, earning the area the nickname “Little England”. Roads such as Hampshire, Norfolk, and Rutland were introduced, while nearby streets bore names such as Hertford, Dorset, and Cambridge. Lining these streets were single-storey homes that became a distinctive feature of the neighbourhood.

By the mid-20th century, Little England had become a desirable residential area for affluent Europeans and Chinese, many of whom owned private automobiles and enjoyed easy access to the area. It also developed into a Eurasian enclave, with many residents working in government service and living in rent-controlled municipal housing.

Notably, Little England was also infamous for its frequent flooding, due to its low-lying terrain adjacent to the Kampong Java Canal.

Pek Kio

The Chinese called the vicinity Pek Kio (Hokkien for “white bridge”) after two bridges over the Kampong Java Canal. The Pek Kio Community Centre, originally named Owen Estate Community Centre, opened in 1954 on Cambridge Road and moved near Cambridge Road Market in 1962. Here, many locals enjoyed hobbies such as bodybuilding. It is now integrated with the indoor sports hall of Farrer Park Primary School.

Pek Kio Hawker Centre and Market was built at the junction of Cambridge Road and Owen Road in the 1980s to replace Cambridge Road Market. Even today, locals affectionately refer to it as Cambridge Road Market. It is known for the *chee cheong fun* (Cantonese for rice noodle rolls) featured in the Michelin Guide, big prawn noodles, as well as roast duck and braised duck.



Opening of the new Pek Kio Community Centre in 2013.



Grave Hill

Upper Thomson Road

Mount Pleasant

Mount Rosie

Balestier Hill

Map dated 1966.

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NOVENA: FROM WINDING ROAD TO URBAN GATEWAY

MEANDERING THROUGH THE HILLS

Heading north from Kampong Java Road to Thomson Road, the main northern trunk route begins to encounter hilly terrain, curving and winding past Balestier and the swampy lowlands of Toa Payoh, towards MacRitchie Reservoir.

John Turnbull Thomson

As the Government Surveyor of Singapore, John Turnbull Thomson played a key role in expanding Singapore’s road network into its forested, undeveloped interior, significantly opening up the island’s core. He would explore Singapore’s interior and nearby islands on horseback, often encountering tigers and gunboat crews in the dense jungles.

He oversaw the construction of Thomson Road until its completion in 1849 and planned to extend the road to the Straits of Johor via Sembawang. The road navigated the hilly terrain with sharp curves and bends.

The Road Through the Hills

Thomson Road runs through the heart of Novena, meandering through the area’s hills. Mount Rosie, “Healthcare Hill”, Balestier Hill, Mount Pleasant, Caldecott Hill, and Mount Alvernia each have their own unique story. Even today, Thomson Road maintains its winding character, flanked by lush greenery and rolling landscapes.

The evolution of the hills and the areas around Thomson Road have shaped Novena’s character. Today it is associated with upscale neighbourhoods, the development of a prominent healthcare hub, and its rising significance as a bustling commercial centre.

View of Thomson Road.



TALES AROUND THE HILLS

Bukit Tunggal

Bukit Tunggal (Malay for “single hill”) was transformed into a prestigious neighbourhood by the Alsagoffs, a prominent Arab Singaporean merchant family.

Syed Mohamed bin Ahmed Alsagoff owned a large estate here called Kampong Bukit Tunggal, described by the press as “one of the most beautiful sites in Singapore”. His nephew, Syed Omar Alsagoff, would host lavish parties here, entertaining European guests with dinners served on gold-plated tableware. In 1929, the estate was sold for development into homes for wealthy young couples.

Mount Rosie

In the late 19th century, this hill had a large country estate where Theodore Heinrich Sohst, a German merchant and Acting German Consul to Singapore, once lived. He hosted grand gatherings at his estate, bringing together consular representatives, the German community, and other residents for celebrations such as the German Emperor’s birthday. The road leading to his house was originally named Sohst Road but was later renamed Mount Rosie Road after he married Rosie de Souza in 1868, a member of a prominent family living nearby on Chancery Lane.

After World War I, the British War Office leased Sohst’s house and it became the residence of the British General Officer Commanding (GOC) of Malaya. The GOC’s residence was officially named “Flagstaff House, Mount Rosie” in 1925. It later shifted to Kheam Hock Road.

1914 map of Singapore.





Buildings at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, 1964.

From Burial Hill to Modern Healthcare

Jalan Tan Tock Seng, the current site of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), was once part of Burial Hill. It can be seen on maps as far back as 1911. The area had both a Jewish and Chinese cemetery.

TTSH is the first hospital in Singapore to be built with private funds. It mainly served the immigrant Chinese community in the early days. In 1909, TTSH relocated from Pearl's Hill to its current location, which eventually led to the establishment of other medical institutions in the area. This transformed Novena into a prominent healthcare hub.

Another key healthcare establishment in the area was the former Middleton Hospital at Moulmein Road. The hospital played a major role in treating and controlling infectious diseases in the mid-1900s before being absorbed into TTSH. It was later renamed the Communicable Disease Centre.

TTSH was transferred to the government in 1966. A new complex was completed in 1998, ushering in modern facilities and technology as the hospital entered the new millennium.

The Health City Novena Master Plan launched in 2013 laid out a roadmap for the development of an integrated 17 ha campus that will encompass healthcare services, research, education, as well as commercial, leisure, and public spaces.

Balestier Hill Shopping Centre

Built by the Housing and Development Board in the mid-1970s, this shopping centre sits on land that was once part of Burial Hill. During its construction in 1975, a coffin was discovered, suggesting the presence of old burial grounds.

Today, the shopping centre houses medical services alongside various shops. Jerome Lim, a heritage enthusiast and blogger of *The Long and Winding Road*, fondly recalls his student days in the area. He often visited the Sri Dewa Malay barber shop in Balestier Hill Shopping Centre, which is believed to have sparked the Malay barber trend in the late 1960s and early 1970s, growing to 22 outlets at its peak.



Aerial photo of Bukit Brown Cemetery.

Mount Pleasant and Bukit Brown

George Henry Brown, an English shipowner, arrived in Singapore in the 1840s and purchased a piece of property off Thomson Road. Finding a hill on the estate particularly pleasant, he named it Mount Pleasant. He built a house on the hill, which became known as Brown's Hill or Bukit Brown. After his death in 1882, part of his estate was purchased by municipal authorities and converted into a Chinese cemetery, now called Bukit Brown Cemetery.

From the late 19th to early 20th centuries, the Mount Pleasant estate was owned by the Alsagoff family, who rented out the houses. The colonial government acquired the land in the 1920s to build houses for high-ranking colonial officers, including senior police officers from the nearby Police Depot.

The houses were among the grandest black-and-white bungalows developed by the colonial government before World War II. Mount Pleasant is also home to the Singapore Polo Club, which has been based

there since the 1940s. The site of the Old Police Academy will be redeveloped into a new housing estate from 2025 onwards.

Grave Hill

Next to Bukit Brown Cemetery lies Grave Hill, which is where Seah Eu Chin was buried. Grave Hill was part of his plantation along Thomson Road. He also owned large tracts of land in the modern Toa Payoh area. Seah was a Teochew merchant who amassed his wealth from cultivating pepper and gambier. A prominent figure in early colonial Singapore, he is the founder of Ngee Ann Kongsi, a welfare organisation for the Chinese.

Caldecott Hill

Seah Eu Chin owned land in the Caldecott Hill area, which was named after Sir Andrew Caldecott, the Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlements in the 1930s. The roads in the area – Olive Road, Joan Road, and John Road – were named after Sir Caldecott's wife and children.

Caldecott Hill Estate was developed to meet the growing demand for housing from Singapore's European population in the 1930s. The homes featured modern amenities such as gas cookers, hot and cold water, and advanced sanitation facilities.

Singapore's first permanent radio station – the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation – began operations here in 1937. Caldecott Hill became a key site in Singapore's media development when Radio-Television Singapore – the predecessor of Mediacorp – established its headquarters at the Caldecott Broadcast Centre in 1966. After 63 years, Mediacorp relocated its operations to Mediapolis at One-North in 2015.



New Television Singapura Building at Caldecott Hill.

Mount Alvernia

In 1949, a small group of Franciscan missionaries was invited by the British colonial government to take up nursing roles at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. With the hospital increasingly overcrowded, the sisters decided to establish a private Catholic hospital. After fundraising efforts, Mount Alvernia Hospital opened in 1961. It was named after the mountain in Italy where St Francis of Assisi is said to have received the stigmata.

The hospital was entirely staffed by the sisters, who were professionally trained as nurses, midwives, physiotherapists, radiographers, laboratory technicians, and in other support roles. They received their healthcare qualifications, religious training, and hospital work attachments in England. In addition to their ward duties, the sisters also served as housekeepers, chefs, and meal servers.

The Franciscan sisters continued to run the hospital until 1987. Today, the Franciscan order remains involved in the hospital's operations.

View of the Mount Alvernia Hospital extension, which opened in 1965.



A CHERISHED CATHOLIC TRADITION



Novena Church, 2006.



Novena Church after renovations, 2018.

Novena Church and the Annual Novena Procession

When the first Redemptorists arrived in Singapore in 1935, they resided at 339 Thomson Road. A Catholic order founded in 1732 by St Alphonsus Liguori from Naples, Italy, the Redemptorists focus on missionary work and serving the poor.

“Novena” comes from the Latin word *novem*, which means nine. The Redemptorists introduced the Novena devotions in Singapore in 1949. It comprised a nine-day period of prayer and petition to seek the intercession of Mother Mary. At the time, these devotions drew about 80 people.

The Church of St Alphonsus or Novena Church was built in 1953 and is located along Thomson Road. The Annual Novena Procession is a tradition that began the year the church was open and continues to be held on the first Sunday of September.

Over the decades, the Annual Novena Procession has grown into a significant event, attracting thousands of devotees. In the 1970s, the church saw crowds of 30,000 attendees at the procession. Novena Church underwent redevelopment in 2014, with renovations completed in 2017.

Kampong Chia Heng

Adjacent to Novena Church and near the Jewish cemetery of the former Burial Hill was the location of Kampong Chia Heng. Today, Novena Terrace occupies the site where this kampong once stood. In the 1950s, Kampong Chia Heng was home to about 1,000 residents who dubbed it the “Kampong of Forgotten Souls”. Despite being within the city limits and paying city rates and income tax, they felt neglected by the City Council. The living conditions in the kampong was poor and residents lived with limited water supply, unreliable power supply, clogged drains, and damaged roads.

Naming Novena

The area around Novena Church was better known as Balestier Hill before the 1970s. Influenced by the significance of the church to the community, the neighbourhood adopted the name Novena in different developments – for example, Novena Court (1970), Novena Ville (1980), and Novena Regency (2017).

Early plans also showed the MRT station being named Thomson MRT, before it was eventually renamed Novena. The evolution of place names captures different eras, memories, and meanings for the people who live there, tracing the community’s layered relationship with its surroundings.

A BEACON FOR THE COMMUNITY

“Over time, the chapel grew, becoming a sanctuary for Catholics as well as people of other faiths.”



**Father Antony Prabhu,
Novena Church**

The Church of St Alphonsus or Novena Church entrusted to the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (CSsR – The Redemptorists), has had a long history of serving Catholics and non-Catholics in Singapore. In 1935, Bishop Devals, the bishop of Malacca, invited the Redemptorists from Australia to set up a foundation in his diocese. When the first Redemptorist priests arrived, their mission was to serve the poor and spiritually abandoned.

Father Antony Prabhu CSsR, one of the newly ordained Redemptorist priests at Novena Church, shares, “In the early days, there was only a small chapel. The Redemptorists would preach at parish missions, visit houses, check on people’s faith and wellbeing, and invite them to church. Parish missions aimed to revitalise the faithful and parish community – something that the church continues to do today.

Initially, about 12 people attended the Novena devotion. But over time, the chapel grew, becoming a sanctuary for Catholics as well as people of other faiths.

“Currently, we have several Novena sessions on Saturdays and they are service-friendly to all. For greater inclusivity, we offer Chinese and Tamil Novena to cater to the multicultural community, especially migrant workers,” says Father Antony.

“Through the thanksgiving letters we receive daily, we believe that there are many non-Christians who feel that their prayers have been answered.”

One of the most important traditions of Novena Church is the Annual Novena Procession (ANP) held on the first Sunday of September. This cornerstone event draws crowds of people and is a tradition that brings the community together. Father Antony says, “During our annual procession, the church would be decorated with fresh flowers,

and every year, the community would help.” The Redemptorists have continually adapted their mission to meet contemporary challenges.

Father Antony shares, “Here, the poorest or most abandoned may not be those with financial constraints, but those with spiritual constraints. We have seen many young people, especially those in the education system, feeling depressed, or having suicidal thoughts.”

In collaboration with the Archdiocese of Singapore, Novena Church supports the diocese in its vision and mission for Singapore.

“Every day, the Redemptorists also attend to patients at Tan Tock Seng Hospital as part of our daily pastoral activities. We also conduct school-based retreats at Catholic and non-Catholic schools.”

As the church archivist, Mr Jerome Pang finds it meaningful to uncover the history of the church and its ties to the community through his research,

“I found many interesting documents and old photographs. My mother’s family used to stay across the church, and I was surprised to discover photographs of my grandparents and my mother at a tea party. They were sitting in a lawn that is now the Church’s carpark. That was how I learnt about the Ladies Comp Fraternity, a devotional group that my mother and her sisters were part of.”

Because the charism of the Redemptorists is to reach out to as many people as possible, it is not a parish and does not have a registry. At Novena Church, faith is not measured by registration, but by presence.

“Here, you are free to come and pray at the shrine,” Mr Pang says. Through quiet devotion and an open door, Novena Church continues to live out the Redemptorist mission.



Thomson Road along Novena area.

GROWTH AS A COMMERCIAL HUB

“Golden Triangle” of Malls and Offices

The 1970s marked the rise of shopping mall culture in Singapore. Goldhill Developments saw the potential of the area bounded by Thomson Road, Bukit Timah Road, and Balestier Road. This was the “golden triangle” for retail outside the city centre, so developers began building shopping centres to attract middle-income residents.

Built in the 1960s, Goldhill Shopping Centre was expanded into Goldhill Plaza – a 24-storey office tower in 1972. Later in 1982, Goldhill Square – now United Square – was launched as a mixed-use complex featuring retail and office spaces. The company also developed Novena Ville along Thomson Road, Coronation Shopping Plaza at Bukit Timah, and Balestier Complex on Balestier Road.



Goldhill Plaza, 2006.



Novena is an example of a ribbon development, where shops and houses are built along a main road, often leading out of a town. This approach was favoured by developers as the roads provided easy access to the city, attracted crowds, and served as a transitional zone for people commuting between the city centre and satellite towns.

With these commercial foundations, Novena has evolved into a vibrant hub of newer malls that complement the area's medical services, schools, and residences.

Chicken Rice Haven

Founded in 1987 at Novena Ville, Wee Nam Kee quickly became known for its Hainanese chicken rice. As the business grew, it earned a reputation as the “famous Novena chicken rice” or “the popular chicken rice opposite Novena Church”.

Following its success, other Hainanese chicken rice businesses emerged in the area. Delight's Corner Restaurant & Steak House at Novena Garden served chicken rice balls in the 1990s. Hsiang Hsiang Hainanese Chicken Rice Restaurant set up shop in Novena Garden in the early 2000s.



Ang Mo Kio Town

Bishan-Ang Mo Kio

Bishan New Town

Toa Payoh

Map dated 1993.

OUR HEARTLAND TOWNS

TOA PAYOH: TOWN ON THE GREAT SWAMP

Weaving past Novena, Balestier, and the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, Thomson Road skirts a series of public housing estates. Developed between the 1960s and 1980s, these towns have changed significantly over the years. However, the road still evokes a sense of nostalgia as it winds past old landmarks and verdant greenery.

Behind the Name

“Toa Payoh” is associated with “big swamp” as its name is derived from *toa* (Hokkien and Teochew for “big”) and *payoh* (a loanword from the Malay *paya*, meaning “swamp”). A map of Singapore from 1842 depicts Toa Payoh as a landscape of dense forests and swamps, with only a few cleared plots that were likely used as plantations. Back then, “Toah Pyoh”, was significantly larger than present-day Toa Payoh.

Gambier and Pepper Plantations

In the 19th century, most of the privately owned land in Toa Payoh were gambier and pepper plantations. An 1855 report by the Municipal Committee recorded 15 clearings in the area, where 355,000 gambier trees, 38,800 pepper vines, and 2,190 nutmeg trees were cultivated.



A pepper plantation, 1890s.

The large cleared area with HDB blocks shows the early development of Toa Payoh Town



Kampong Life

The plantations attracted more settlers, who had formed several villages in Toa Payoh by the early 20th century. The kampongs were often organised by dialect groups and centred around a temple that served as a social hub in the community. Kampong Puay Teng Keng, the largest village, was named after the Chee Tian Keng temple. It was once located where Block 34, Lorong 5 now stands.

Initially home to mainly Hokkiens, Toa Payoh later saw more Teochews and Cantonese settlers after the Japanese Occupation. Predominant Teochew village Hup Choon Hng was located near Seu Teck Sean Tong temple and Ann Siang Sua (Ann Siang Hill) was in Kim Keat. A Hainanese kampong, along with Zhao Ying Ci temple, was located in *Or Kio* (Black Bridge), between Ah Hood Road and Jalan Rajah.

Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery

In the early 1900s, Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery emerged as a striking landmark in rural Toa Payoh. Built on land donated by Hokkien leader Low Kim Pong, it was completed in 1908, making it Singapore's oldest Buddhist monastery.

Its architecture blends styles from Fuzhou, Quanzhou, Zhangzhou (Fujian), and Chaozhou (Guangdong), reflecting the diverse origins of Chinese immigrants.

Mr Alan Choe, the Housing and Development Board's (HDB) first town planner, centred the design of Toa Payoh New Town around the temple. Roads were planned so that they radiated from the temple, creating a sense of arrival into the town, which featured a neighbourhood centre, convenience shops, and other essential amenities.

United Temple

Completed in 1974, the United Temple or Wu He Miao housed five temples from Toa Payoh's kampong era. It united Cantonese, Hainanese, Hokkien, Teochew worshippers under one roof, marking a shift from dialect-based religious practices to a more integrated community. Its success inspired 68 similar united temples across Singapore between the 1970s and 2012.

Lian Shan Shuang, 1900s.



Toa Payoh New Town

After World War II, Singapore struggled with a housing shortage due to wartime damage, rapid population growth, and an influx of immigrants, resulting in poor living conditions in the kampongs. To address this, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) launched the Toa Payoh New Settlement scheme in the 1950s to house 65,000 people, starting with 468 units on Kim Keat Road.

In 1961, HDB announced plans to build a modern satellite town on 600 acres of land in Toa Payoh, where there would be about 50,000 flats to house 300,000 people.

All kampongs were cleared by 1963 and the swamps were filled in 1964. The hills were levelled and the earth was used for the reclamation of the Kallang Basin. Construction of flats began in late 1964, with Block 52 being the first to rise and Block 68 housing the town's first market.

Toa Payoh was the second satellite town to be built after Queenstown, but it was the first to be conceived and built solely by HDB. It housed double the population of Queenstown and was Singapore's "most self-contained community" at the time. The town had schools, shopping centres, markets, theatres, health centres, libraries, community centres, a post office, police station, and spaces for diverse places of worship.



A surveyor team taking measurements along an unpaved kampong road in Toa Payoh village that was probably due for urban renewal, 1963.



King of Gambier and Pepper

Often referred to as Singapore's "King of Gambier and Pepper", Seah Eu Chin owned land in Toa Payoh. In one of his estates, named Chin Choon, he cultivated gambier in the 19th century before transitioning to rubber in the early 20th century. At the time, the estate was home to a grand bungalow named "E-Choon".

He also worked closely with the colonial government, serving as a grand juror and mediator in Chinese disputes, including the 1854 Hokkien-Teochew Riots. His son, Seah Liang Seah, was also a prominent member of society.

Seah Eu Chin (1805–1883).



Toa Payoh Dragon Playground, Lorong 6.

Dragon Playground, Lorong 6

A series of creative playgrounds to encourage imaginative play sprung up in the 1970s. Designed by HDB architect Mr Khor Ean Ghee, the Toa Payoh Dragon Playground was inspired by an earlier dragon design at Toa Payoh Town Garden.

It features a large dragon head with terrazzo tiles, slides, and a body of colourful rings for climbing. The design's popularity led to similar dragon playgrounds being built across Singapore, including a "baby dragon" at Lorong 1 and another at Ang Mo Kio, Avenue 3.

"Chicago of the East"

Toa Payoh in the 1960s to 1980s earned the nicknames "Chicago of the East" and "Chicago of Singapore" due to its association with secret societies and gang violence. The *lorongs* were notorious for robberies, housebreakings, and vehicle thefts, while clashes between rival gangs,

including the infamous 18 Gang or *Sah Lak Kau* (Hokkien for "369"), were common. However, as public awareness and vigilance grew, and the area saw more recreational facilities being built, crime rates dropped. And by the 1980s, the stigma had faded.

Block 53, Lorong 5

Completed in 1967, Block 53 is a landmark in Singapore's public housing because of its unique Y-shaped design. Dubbed the "VIP block" due to visits from dignitaries, it was part of a 1960s experiment by HDB architects. Other distinctive designs included the bat-shaped Block 116 and curving Block 157. Block 53 also featured a rooftop viewing gallery (now closed), offering panoramic views of Toa Payoh. Notable visitors were Queen Elizabeth II, Princess Anne and Prince Phillip of the United Kingdom, and second President of Singapore Benjamin Sheares. Despite the newer blocks around it, Block 53 remains an icon of Singapore's public housing history.



Duke of Edinburgh Prince Philip and Princess Anne at the viewing gallery on the rooftop of Block 53, Toa Payoh Lorong 5, during Queen Elizabeth II's visit to the housing estate.

Toa Payoh Town Centre.



BISHAN: TOWN ON THE SHINING HILLS

Behind the Name

The name Bishan comes from the Chinese cemetery Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng (广惠肇碧山亭), which was founded in 1870 on the land that is now Bishan New Town.

Established in 1870 by three pioneers from the Kwong Fu, Wai Chow Fu, and Siew Hing Fu prefectures in Canton, China, the cemetery was managed by a federation of 16 clans from Singapore's Cantonese community.

Peck San Theng

Originally a Cantonese burial ground, the cemetery later included other dialect groups and races. As it grew, it was organised into "hills" and "pavilions", inspiring the name Peck San Theng, which is Cantonese for "pavilions on the jade hills".

The grounds were divided into 10 sections, where there were 12 pavilions offering shelter and serving as landmarks to help families find graves of loved ones during Qing Ming Festival. These pavilions also inspired the pitched roofs on some of Bishan's public housing blocks.



Map of the cemetery prior to its demolition and subsequent exhumation of graves to make way for development.



Seventh Month Hungry Ghosts Festival at Kampong San Teng. Rows of human effigies each representing a deceased person.

Qing Ming Festival

The highlight of the area was the annual Qing Ming Festival, one of the most important festivals for the Chinese. Thousands would make their way to Peck San Theng to honour their ancestors and

clean the graveyards. During this time, traders all the way in Chinatown enjoyed brisk business selling silver paper, joss sticks, candles, and firecrackers.

Special Traffic Measures

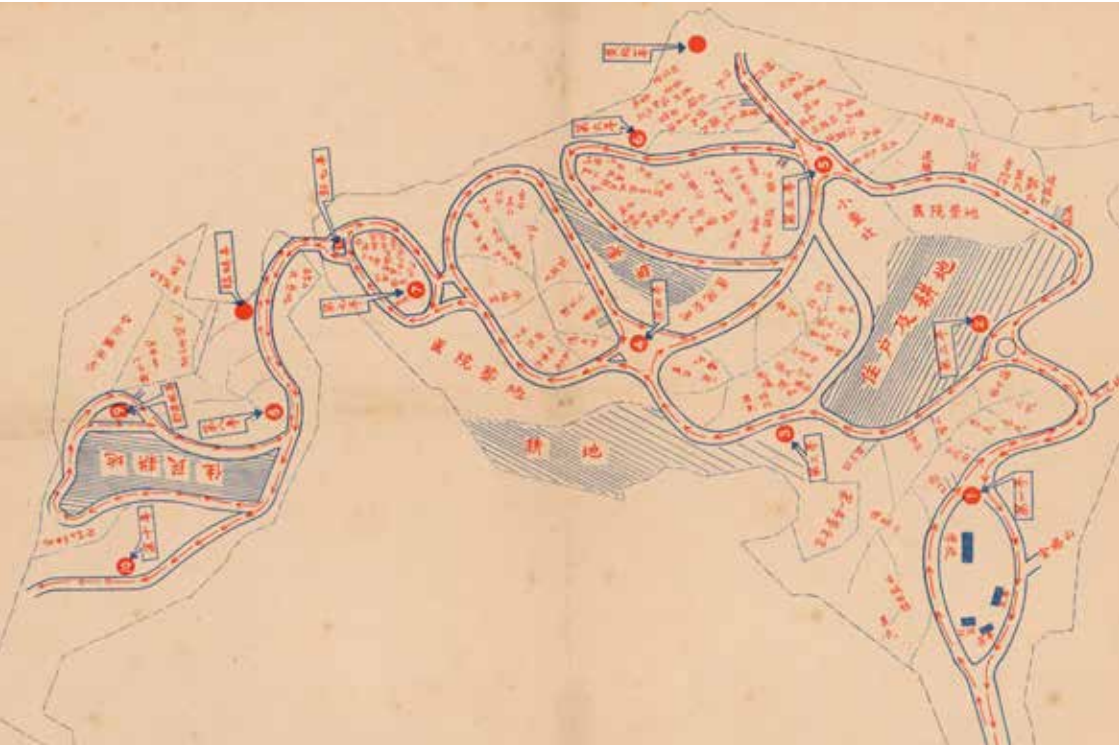
From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Qing Ming Festival caused severe traffic congestion around Peck San Theng, prompting the police to enforce special traffic control measures. Traffic officers were deployed in full force and special bus services were arranged from Tan Qwee Lan Street.

The road along Kampong San Teng from Upper Thomson Road was also designated as a one-way route during the festival – this road was later expunged for the development of Bishan New Town, and since 1989, present-day Peck San Theng is accessed via Bishan Lane.

Exterior view of Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng Columbarium at Kampong San Teng.



VILLAGE LIFE AMONG JADE PAVILIONS



Location plan of burial grounds at Pek San Teng.

Kampong San Teng and Soon Hock Village

Bishan was once home to two villages, Kampong San Teng and Soon Hock Village, each inhabited by different dialect communities. Soon Hock Village, home to the Hokkiens, was renowned for its sesame oil and noodles.

Kampong San Teng was mainly Cantonese, with many working in the funeral trade, such as cemetery caretakers, funeral paraphernalia vendors, tombstone engravers, and members of clan associations. The village was self-sufficient, featuring provision shops, a soy sauce

factory, clinic, school, wayang stage, and a large coffee shop called Peck San Tea Pavilion. Known as Peck San Teahouse, the coffee shop had a distinctive tapered roof, inspired by rural Chinese teahouses, and served as a social hub for the residents.

Lawlessness

In the 1950s and 1960s, Peck San Theng, including Kampong San Teng, was a hotspot for illegal activities. It was a spillover effect from Toa Payoh, then known as the “Chicago of Singapore”. For example, in 1950, two men were caught at Peck San Theng with more than one ton of unpaid-duties tobacco.

The secluded cemetery, rarely patrolled by police and avoided by taxi drivers, also became a favoured spot for secret societies such as Flying Dragon and Harmony Peace. Violent clashes between rival gangs, armed with parangs and guns, were frequent at the cemetery.

Houses in Kampong San Teng.



DISTINCTIVE SKYLINE FOR A NEW TOWN



Aerial view of Bishan New Town.

Bishan New Town

Bishan New Town was planned with four neighbourhoods – Shunfu, Bishan East, Bishan North, and Bishan West (later renamed Sin Ming Garden) – consisting of more than 23,000 flats, ranging from three-bedroom units to executive maisonettes. Construction occurred in stages between 1983 and 1989, starting with Shunfu.

Urban planners and architects worked to give Bishan New Town a unique identity, incorporating features such as pitched roofs, 25-storey point blocks with rounded balconies, and a mix of high-rise and low-rise buildings. It was also the first to have HDB flats with open roof terraces.

Despite initial concerns about its past as cemetery grounds, Bishan has become a prime residential area, thanks to its central location, proximity to major highways, and nearby schools. The town boasts a strong transportation system, with the opening of Bishan MRT station in 1987 and a bus interchange in 1989. It is well-equipped with shopping centres, parks, schools, and sports facilities.

Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park

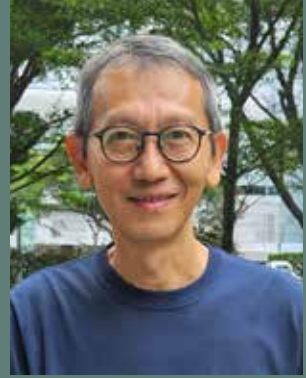
Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park, Bishan Community Club, and Bishan Sports Centre cater to the recreational needs of residents. The 62-hectare Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park, one of Singapore’s largest urban parks, runs along the Kallang River.

The park underwent a \$76-million revamp between 2009 and 2012, which transformed the concrete canal into a naturalised river. Visitors can walk along the riverbanks when the water level is low, while the park doubles as a flood conveyance channel during heavy rain.

The park is home to diverse flora and fauna, including wildflowers, birds, butterflies, and dragonflies. Common birds include the Purple heron and Collared kingfisher. The park’s most famous residents are a family of otters, nicknamed the “Bishan 5”. They were first spotted in 2014 and their numbers grew to 16 members before the father’s death in 2018.

MEDITATION IN MOVEMENT

“From a cyclist’s perspective, by combining cycling with riding the MRT, we can get from anywhere to everywhere in Singapore, without effort.”



Mr Francis Chu,
Cycling Advocate

While he has always loved to cycle, it was a working stint in Holland that inspired Mr Francis Chu to see cycling as a way of life and not just a means to commute. The cycling advocate is the co-founder of “Love Cycling SG”. Started by friends who wanted to explore Singapore on their bicycles, the Facebook group now has more than 40,000 members from the cycling community.

For Mr Chu, cycling has changed the way he experiences the sights and sounds of Singapore and opened his eyes to places he would not have noticed as a car user.

“As a driver, my route is relatively fixed and influenced by considerations such as the availability of parking. But cycling provides me with many choices and even unexpected surprises because there are many beautiful places that are more accessible by bicycle. In Singapore, we are blessed to have so many trees along the roads and PCNs,” says Mr Chu.

Some of his cycling routes include Kallang River, Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park, and Ang Mo Kio Town.

“One of my favourites routes is along the Kallang River. On rainy days, when the black tarmac is wet, the reflection gives the sensation that you are gliding on water. It is very poetic! The route is designed for functionality but provides a kind of aesthetic as well.”

Over the past 20 years, he has noticed clear improvements in the infrastructure for cyclists. Having been part of a group of cyclists invited to share their perspectives on the national cycling plan, he has seen the benefits of

sourcing ideas from the ground-up as well as from the authorities.

“There is an underpass below the CTE near Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park that used to pose a danger to cyclists due to the low headroom. After we gave the authorities our feedback, the entire section was redesigned with improved safety,” shared Mr Chu.

His interest in safety issues prompted Mr Chu to create another group “Safety for Active Mobility Users” that aims to promote safety for various users, especially those who are more vulnerable.

“If our roads are made more conducive for cycling, then more people would choose cycling as a means to commute. It is more resource-efficient and reduces our impact on the environment.”

Mr Chu observes that with more MRT lines, cyclists can benefit more from the multimodal transport system in Singapore.

“From a cyclist’s perspective, by combining cycling with riding the MRT, we can get from anywhere to everywhere in Singapore, without effort. The MRT network is so well connected that if you plot a 2-kilometre circle around all the MRT stations, you will notice that it covers all the places you need to go.”

On choosing to give up driving, Mr Chu says,

“After I started cycling to work, I felt much more relaxed at work. It is like meditation in movement. I enjoy the scenery and the route gives me time in the morning to refresh my mind. Cycling is a life skill that anyone can acquire and benefit them throughout their lifetime.”

ANG MO KIO: TOWN ON THE GREEN HILLS



Aerial view of the former rural landscape that is now part of Ang Mo Kio New Town.

Behind the Name

The earliest mention of Ang Mo Kio dates back to 1844, when Government Surveyor John Turnbull Thomson mapped the island and identified a district called “Amokiah”. By 1855, “Ang Mo Kio” was used alongside “Amokiah”. Some believe Ang Mo Kio comes from the Hokkien word for tomatoes, while others suggest it refers to “Red-haired Bridge” (*angmo* being a colloquial term for Caucasians), linking the name to Thomson. The bridge once stood north of Ang Mo Kio Village.

In earlier times, locals also referred to the area as *Kow Tiow Kio* (Hokkien for “nine bridges”), due to the need to cross nine bridges over tributary streams of the Kallang River to travel from Lorong Chuan to Upper Thomson Road. Former villagers recall *Kow Tiow Kio* as a scenic area with rolling green hills, meandering streams, farms, and ponds filled with water hyacinths and lotuses.

Plantations and Farms

In 1855, surveyors visited Ang Mo Kio and discovered gambier trees, pepper

vines, nutmeg trees, and small patches of indigo being cultivated. These plantations eventually gave way to rubber estates in the late 19th century. By the early 20th century, the area saw vegetable farms, fruit orchards, and villages established by Chinese pioneers.

Vegetable cultivation was mostly concentrated in lower-lying areas near the tributaries of the Kallang River, along present-day Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1, where water was more accessible. Ponds in the valleys were used for fish farming or rainwater collection, and a quarry was also located near what is now Sembawang Hills.



1873 map of Singapore.

Kampongs Among the Hills

In the early 20th century, several Hokkien Chinese villages were established in north-central Singapore, stretching from Thomson Road and Yio Chu Kang to Ang Mo Kio. Many of the residents came from Anxi county in China.

Lelong Pah

At the first of Kow Tiow Kio's nine bridges, near present-day Lorong Chuan, the village was known as Lelong Pah. The land there was cheap because the former rubber and pineapple plantations had failed. The name *Lelong Pah* means "bargain" or "sold for cheap" in Malay and "plantation" in Hokkien. It was later transliterated as "Li Nong Village" in Mandarin.

Kow Tiow Kio

The area now known as Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1 was home to Kow Tiow Kio Village. The bridges were made of metal with wooden planks. Another name for the area was *Chwee Arm Lor*, meaning "water pipe road" in Hokkien. It referred to the path running alongside the large water pipes laid by the colonial government to carry water from Peirce Reservoir (now Lower Peirce Reservoir) to the town.

Cheok Sua

The area now known as Sembawang Hills and Mayflower Gardens was once called *Cheok Sua*, meaning "rock hill" in Hokkien, due to its rocky terrain. A quarry for red rock was located there, and the mined rock was used to pave roads in Singapore.

Lao Pah

The land along Thomson Road, extending to present-day Ang Mo Kio West Garden, was known as *Lao Pah*, meaning "the old plantation" in Hokkien.

Sin Pah

The land from Ang Mo Kio West Garden eastwards was known as *Sin Pah*, meaning "the new plantation" in Hokkien, likely referring to the order in which the land was cleared for cultivation. Part of Sin Pah was also called Cheng San.

Amoy Quee

Amoy Quee was located at Cactus Road, off Yio Chu Kang Road, and was likely named after the nearby Amoy Quee Camp, a former British military camp. The name Amoy Quee comes from the Hokkien term "ang moh kwee", meaning "red-haired devils". This nickname was given by villagers, who were angered by British and Australian soldiers driving recklessly through the kampong on their way to Seletar and Sembawang camps, often killing chickens and livestock along the way.



House in Kampong Amoy Kwee, 1967.

Cheng San

Ang Mo Kio Town Garden East was once part of a larger area known as *Cheng Sua Lai* (Hokkien for “inside the green hills”) or *Cheng San* (Hokkien for “green hills”). A large kampong, Cheng San stretched from Sembawang Hills to Serangoon Gardens. It had developed along Cheng San Road, which ran above present-day Ang Mo Kio Avenue 3, linking Upper Thomson to Serangoon Gardens.

Mostly covered by rubber plantations and farms, Cheng San had houses scattered at intervals. The area was so remote that in the 1960s, political parties used small airplanes to drop campaign pamphlets and canvas for support, as recalled by former villagers.

Gotong Royong

In the early years of Singapore’s independence during the 1960s and 1970s, the government launched *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) projects to unite the community in repairing infrastructure such as bridges and roads.

One key project in the 1970s was the reconstruction of Cheng San Road, which had been badly damaged by floods. Residents and National Servicemen, supported by company and government funding, worked together to rebuild the road. The new section of Cheng San Road served the areas of Serangoon Gardens, Jalan Kayu, Thomson, and Nee Soon, as well as two Chinese schools and two community centres.



Members of Serangoon Gardens Citizens’ Consultative Committee, residents of Cheng San Road and members of vigilante corps, led by Member of Parliament for Serangoon Gardens R A Gonzales, repairing a mile-long stretch of Cheng San Road, off Serangoon Garden Way, damaged by floods, 1967.

NEW TOWN WITH MANY “FIRSTS”



Aerial view of HDB flats in Ang Mo Kio.

Ang Mo Kio New Town

Ang Mo Kio was one of the last rural districts in Singapore to undergo large-scale infrastructural development. As the seventh new town built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), its transformation began later than areas such as Toa Payoh and Queenstown.

The development of Ang Mo Kio New Town started in 1973 and was completed by 1980. The 29-hectare town centre was self-contained, offering commercial offices, cultural, and community facilities to at least 174,770 residents. Within less than a decade, Ang Mo Kio had become a well-planned new town.

Over the years, Ang Mo Kio developed its own distinct identity. It was the first HDB town to be built in metric dimensions and the first to pilot the concept of town

councils. It was also the first to feature “new-generation” flats with larger floor areas and wider corridors in the slab blocks. Five-room flats were introduced in slab blocks, a first for the town, as they had previously been built only in point blocks.

Longtime residents fondly recall places such as the former Oriental Emporium and the town’s cinemas in the 1980s. Kampong memories remain strong among former villagers who were resettled in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Meanwhile, modern developments such as Ang Mo Kio Hub ensure the town continues to evolve for the younger generation.

Block 259, Ang Mo Kio Avenue 2

Completed in 1981, Block 259 is the only circular flat block built by HDB. It was part of a pilot project in the late 1970s to create uniquely designed public housing blocks. The aim was to introduce more architectural variety in public housing estates and foster a stronger sense of identity through such landmarks. Nicknamed the “Clover Block” for its plant-like shape when viewed from above, Block 259 has become an iconic feature of Ang Mo Kio, and its spacious units are still highly sought after.



Clover Blocks at Ang Mo Kio.

Kebun Baru Bird Singing Club

This is Singapore's largest bird singing and display arena, located at the foot of Ang Mo Kio Town Garden West. It began in the 1970s when three enthusiasts gathered with their caged birds at the current site. In 1987, they erected poles to accommodate more participants, and as the club grew, additional poles were added. Today, the venue hosts more than 1,000 cages and regularly holds bird singing competitions.



Kebun Bahru Birdsinging Club in Ang Mo Kio.

Private Housing Estates

Housing shortage, a growing concern in Singapore before the war, worsened in the post-war years. This shortage led to the development of private housing estates across the island, before mass public housing began in the late 1960s and 1970s. In Ang Mo Kio, notable private housing estates include:

- Mayflower Gardens, developed in the 1960s by the Singapore Government Officers' Co-operative Housing Society to address the housing needs of government workers;
- Sembawang Hills Estate, developed in the 1950s by two rubber companies; and
- Teachers' Housing Estate, developed in the 1960s by the Singapore Teachers' Union for teachers seeking suburban housing.

FROM VILLAGE TEMPLES TO JOINT TEMPLES

Village Temples

Temples were the heart of the kampong, serving not only as places of worship but also as centres for social gatherings, celebrations, dispute resolution, and preserving cultural identity within close-knit communities. After the development of Ang Mo Kio New Town, many temples merged to form joint temples to secure land leases. These temples continue to be gathering points for former kampong residents.

Ang Mo Kio Joint Temple

Founded in 1978 and rebuilt in 2011, Ang Mo Kio Joint Temple houses three temples from former villages in the area. They are: Gao Lin Gong, established in 1888 by Gao immigrants from Nan An, Fujian; Kim Eang Tong, originally exclusive to the Hakka community of the Kim Eang religious order; and Leng San Giam, founded by Chew immigrants from Yongchun, Fujian.

Chu Sheng Temple

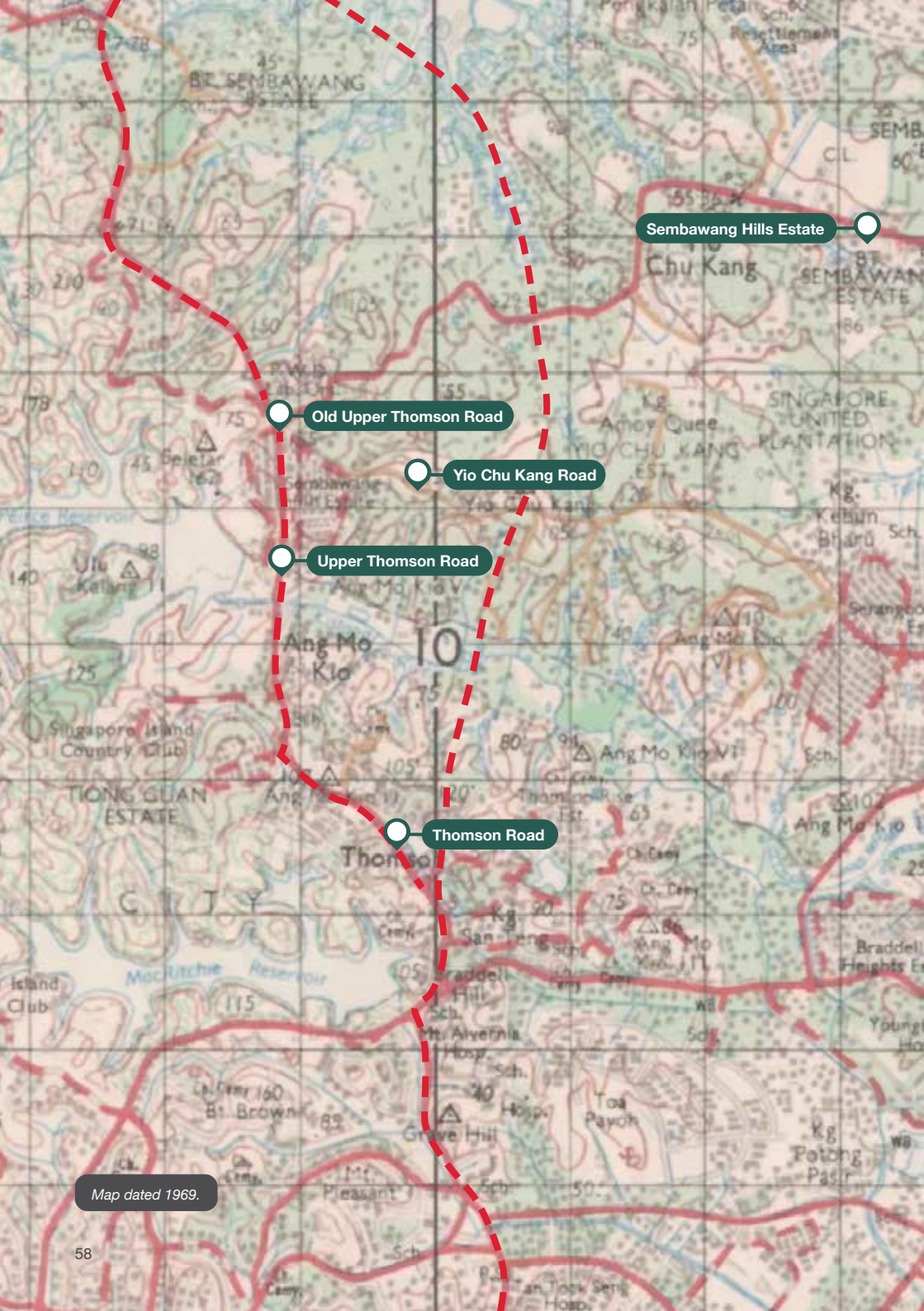
Chu Sheng Temple combines three older temples from villages in Yio Chu Kang that were affected by redevelopment in the late 1970s. The temples merged and built Chu Sheng Temple in 1981. Designed in traditional Hokkien architectural style, it features pronounced curvatures in the roof ridges. The temple is also active in community work in Ang Mo Kio.



Gao Lin Gong Temple, 2022.



Installation ceremony of Kong Lim Kong Temple, the oldest temple in Ang Mo Kio. Established in 1888, it is one of the three temples that form the Ang Mo Kio Joint Temple.



Sembawang Hills Estate

Old Upper Thomson Road

Yio Chu Kang Road

Upper Thomson Road

Thomson Road

Map dated 1969.

UPPER THOMSON

THE RUSTIC UPPER REACHES

Before 1839, the section of Thomson Road from Yio Chu Kang Road to Mandai Road was known as Seletar Road. This led to confusion, especially with the nearby Royal Air Force Seletar off Jalan Kayu, prompting its renaming to Upper Thomson Road. Today, it is known as Old Upper Thomson Road.

Old Upper Thomson Road and Upper Thomson Road

Old Upper Thomson Road – once part of the original Thomson Road completed in 1849 – was intended to connect the city centre to the Straits of Johor. It closely resembles the trunk roads of the 19th century.

The narrow, two-lane single carriageway, is just wide enough for two cars to pass each other. It serves as a time capsule, recalling a past landscape around the road that was once surrounded by jungle, open fields, and plantations, with the occasional village breaking the scenery.

In 1959, the stretch from Braddell Road to Yio Chu Kang Road was renamed Upper Thomson Road, more than doubling its length to 9.6 km.



Old Upper Thomson Road.

Upper Thomson Road.



SCENIC SPOTS CLOSE TO NATURE



Kalang (Kallang) River Reservoir was commissioned in 1912. The reservoir was renamed Peirce Reservoir in 1922 and again renamed as Lower Peirce Reservoir in 1975 after the construction of the new Upper Peirce Reservoir.

Nature in Full Bloom

Upper Thomson borders the Lower and Upper Peirce Reservoirs, which are part of the Central Catchment Nature Reserve – Singapore’s largest. Covering the heart of the island, it spans more than 2,000 hectares of forest. The neighbourhoods of Upper Thomson, nestled beside lush greenery, scenic nature trails, and rustic parks, enjoy a close relationship with nature.

Upper Thomson Road Shophouses

Upper Thomson, known for its array of coffee houses and trendy eateries, has been dubbed by one of its longtime residents as the “Tiong Bahru of the north” but with the added charm of abundant nature nearby. It has also been earmarked as an identity node. Offering a variety of food options, from local *prata* (flat bread) and Thai *mookata* (Thai-style barbeque and hotpot) to Korean cuisine and artisanal ice cream parlours, this vibrant enclave has secured its place as a hip destination in the minds of Singaporeans.

Yew Lian Park Staircase Community Mural

What was once just a shortcut along Upper Thomson Road is now a vibrant community landmark. Yew Lian Park resident Ms Joanne Teh, with support from the Lively Places Fund, led a project to add a handrail and colourful mural to the “#hiddengem Yew Lian Park Staircase” (as marked on Google Maps), making it safer and more inviting, especially for seniors.

Created by artist Muhammad Izdi and local residents, the mural celebrates neighbourhood memories such as the old Imperial Theatre and local wildlife. The Lively Places Fund supports enhancements to public spaces, including heritage preservation.

Thomson Plaza

Thomson Plaza, built by DBS in 1977, was part of a plan to move shopping destinations away from the city centre. The mall was a hit, with 80% of its retail units sold before opening, but there was one retailer that truly made its mark. Yaohan, the famous Japanese department store, became the heart of Thomson Plaza. In fact, people once called it “Thomson Yaohan”. With a supermarket at the ground floor and a department store above, Yaohan opened in 1979 to huge fanfare.

Sembawang Hills Estate

Two companies, Singapore United Rubber Estates and Bukit Sembawang Rubber Company, owned most of the rubber estates in Ang Mo Kio. As the rubber industry declined, they decided to build affordable housing on their plantations, starting with Sembawang Hills Estate in the 1950s. The companies eventually built 1,000 houses in the area and each house sold for between \$10,000 and \$20,000. Encouraged by the high demand, the companies later developed more estates on former rubber land, including Bukit Mugliston and Jalan Kayu.

At Jalan Leban, a small hut has stood for more than 40 years as the centre of Sembawang Hill Estate Taxi Services, where drivers would gather for coffee and chats while waiting for bookings. Originally owned by Sembawang Hill Estates Limited, it is currently cared for by a group of former drivers, now in their sixties or seventies, who still meet occasionally.

Nearby is Plum Village Restaurant, one of Singapore’s few Hakka restaurants. It was founded in 1984 to showcase diverse Hakka cuisine to a wider audience and preserve Hakka heritage.

Casuarina Road

The Casuarina neighbourhood is famous for Casuarina Curry, a popular *prata* restaurant that relocated in 1993 from Jalan Kayu, a hotspot for *prata* lovers. Casuarina Curry helped establish Jalan Kayu’s reputation, and after moving to Casuarina Road, it inspired other *prata* shops to set up nearby.

View of Sembawang Hills Estate.



THE GRAND PRIX AND A REMOTE HAINAN VILLAGE

Hainan Village

Hainan Village once stood where Thomson Nature Park is now, nestled between Old Upper Thomson Road and Upper Thomson Road. It existed from the 1930s, when Hainanese immigrants first settled in the area, until the 1980s. It was accessible only via two minor roads, Lorong Pelita and Jalan Belang. *Pelita*, which means “oil lamp” in Malay, a fitting name as electricity was only available in the area in the late 1960s.

The village homes were built on hilly terrain, with concrete retaining walls to prevent the earth from shifting. This allowed families to settle there safely. Although the village houses are gone today, remnants of these walls still endure. Most residents were farmers, raising poultry and pigs, and growing fruits such as rambutan and bananas. Some of these fruit trees remain in Thomson Nature Park, providing food for wildlife.



Racing in progress at the Singapore Grand Prix at Old Upper Thomson Road.

A small community surrounded by jungle, the Hainan Village housed close to a hundred villagers in the 1960s, including the family of Mr Han Choon Fook who co-founded the popular Han’s Café chain (remnants of the family house are still standing). It may come as a surprise that this remote village in the woods was close to the site of Singapore’s first Grand Prix.

Rambutans on the Hill: The Orchard of Han Wai Toon

Thomson Nature Park was once occupied by 愚趣园 (Yu Qu Yuan or the “Garden of Foolish Indulgences”). This two-and-a-half-acre rambutan orchard was cultivated in the 1930s by Mr Han Wai Toon, a self-taught chemist, ceramics scholar, and founder of the China South Seas Society.

Driven by his studies in chemistry and his desire to recreate the taste of the lychees from his hometown in Hainan, Han planted and grafted more than 300 rambutan trees using inarch grafting, creating hybrids that combined Sumatran and Batavian strains.

The garden became a cultural haven to poets like Yu Dafu and other Chinese Chinese literati and scholars. Renowned artists Xu Beihong and Liu Kang visited regularly to sketch. During WWII, the orchard hid many of these artworks from the Japanese.

Han left for Beijing, China in 1962. Today, remnants of the orchard remain along Thomson’s Rambutan Trail where art, history, and the sought-after rambutans once thrived.

SAVOURING MEMORIES OF HAINAN VILLAGE

“People were willing to help each other. I think growing up in Hainan Village has had an impact on my management philosophy as an entrepreneur.”



**Mr Han Choon Fook,
Co-founder, Han's Café**

Hidden away in Thomson Nature Park lies the remnants of a former Hainan Village where Mr Han Choon Fook, co-founder of Han's Café and Cake House, and his siblings were born. While there were people from other dialect groups as well as Malay and European families living there, most of the residents were Hainanese.

Mr Han says, “In the old days, some Hainanese who came here before World War II would settle in this area. My parents arrived in Singapore in the 1930s.”

He has fond memories of the close-knit community and remembers the unique kampong spirit among residents.

“People were willing to help each other. I think growing up in Hainan Village has had an impact on my management philosophy as an entrepreneur. Because of my early years in Hainan Village, I look after my workers and treat them as one big family.” Sharing what the area was like in the past, Mr Han says,

“Besides chicken farms, the village was home to many rambutan plantations. In those days, many residents partly depended on growing rambutans for a living. You could say that the rambutan plantations became one of the most important cultural memories of our village. People used to call this place ‘Rambutan Park’, and it was even a visitors’ attraction at one time.”

Few people know that one of the more notable residents from the village was Mr Han Wai Toon.

“Mr Han was a prominent archaeologist who collected ancient Chinese ceramics found in Nanyang. Although he did not have formal education, he was very knowledgeable

and learned through self-study. He was also a famous horticulturist with at least 300 premium quality rambutan trees in his compound. He creatively called the place ‘愚趣园’ (Garden of Foolish Indulgences). Renowned scholars and artists such as Xu Beihong would visit him,” shares Mr Han.

Many Hainanese in the village ended up working in the food industry. Those who worked as cooks on board ships learnt western-style cooking from British chefs.

“The popular chicken curry dish we first served at our café at The Arcade at Collyer Quay was made at our home in Hainan Village. My father experimented with the recipe after our *angmo* (Caucasian) neighbour shared the dish with us,” Mr Han says.

“We didn’t have many rambutan trees but we had a chicken farm and my mother would head to town every day to sell eggs from the village to coffee stall operators along Seah Street and Purvis Street. My father worked at Sembawang Naval Base with our neighbour, Mr Wee. Together, they ran a canteen at the naval base.”

The area near Hainan Village was also well-known because it was close to the circuit of the Singapore Grand Prix held from 1961 to 1973.

Mr Han says, “My friends would come to our house to stay overnight, sleeping on the floor, so they could watch the Grand Prix for free. They were the first to taste and enjoy our chicken curry dish! I was a good runner in school and used to train along the circuit. I have many fond memories of Hainan Village. It would be nice to have a reunion and reconnect with former residents!”



Upper Seletar Reservoir

Nee Soon

Lower Seletar Reservoir

Chong Pang

Map dated 1971.

NEE SOON AND CHONG PANG

RIVER COMMUNITIES OF THE NORTH

By the early 1900s, the historic Thomson Road had extended nearly 20 km northward, cutting across the entire island of Singapore. Passing through hilly terrain and dense jungle, the corridor also traced the paths of major waterways such as the Rochor River, Whampoa River (formerly Balestier River), and Kallang River. In the far northern areas of Singapore, waterways such as Sungei Seletar were the lifelines of early communities such as the Orang Seletar and Chan Chu Kang settlement.

Sungei Seletar

Sungei Seletar stretches from its source at Upper Seletar Reservoir to the Straits of Johor. In the mid-19th century, John Turnbull Thomson documented the lives of the Orang Seletar who settled at the river's mouth. He captured their fishing lifestyle and navigation of the northern mangroves of Singapore in their boats.

Malay pirates who attacked junks and small boats along the Kallang River would evade capture by escaping northwards, walking about a mile through the jungle to Sungei Seletar. There, they would board another boat and flee via the north coast of Singapore.



Coastal river area in Seletar.

Upper Seletar Reservoir and Lower Seletar Reservoir

Seletar Reservoir, built in 1940, was Singapore's third impounding reservoir. It was created to meet the growing demand for water after World War I. As the population expanded in the late 1960s, the government implemented the Seletar Scheme, which led to the construction of a dam and enlargement of Sungei Seletar to collect water from eight streams.

In the 1970s, the Sungei Seletar/Bedok Water Scheme was introduced to provide more fresh water to eastern Singapore. To address the pollution in Sungei Seletar and Seletar Reservoir, pig farming was banned. Many farmers relocated or switched to chicken or vegetable farming.

Construction of the Sungei Seletar/Bedok Water Scheme began in 1983. A dam at Sungei Seletar was built at the mouth of the river and formed the Sungei Seletar Reservoir, which was renamed Lower Seletar Reservoir in 1992. Meanwhile, Seletar Reservoir was renamed Upper Seletar Reservoir.



Vegetable farm at Jalan Kayu/Seletar Area Village. High angle of the attap roof of the house suggests it was likely built before WWII, 1950s.

FROM *KANGKAR* TO SPRINGLEAF NATURE PARK

Chan Chu Kang

Land surrounding the source of Sungei Seletar was once known as Chan Chu Kang, named after Chan Ah Lek. A Teochew settler, he received a permit from the colonial authorities in 1850 to establish a 44-acre pepper and gambier plantation on the river's northern bank.

The forests surrounding Chan Chu Kang were favoured by collectors of botanical and zoological specimens. Henry Nicholas Ridley, the first director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, was a prominent collector who gathered pioneer collections of native plant species from the area in the late 19th century.

The land owned by Chan was put up for sale in 1909 and acquired by rubber magnate Lim Nee Soon in 1919.

Nee Soon Estate

After Lim Nee Soon acquired Chan Chu Kang in 1919, he developed rubber and pineapple plantations on the *kangkar*, which became known as the Nee Soon estate. Since 1905, Lim had purchased land around Sungei Seletar. By the 1920s, he owned much of the land near the river.

The early 20th century marked Singapore's rubber boom. After Ridley introduced an improved rubber-tapping technique, rubber planting expanded rapidly in the region. For more than 50 years, rubber was a major export for Malaya and Singapore.

Lim was a pioneer in Singapore's rubber industry. At the height of his career, he owned several rubber estates in Malaya, the West Hill Plantation in Sembawang (at the former Chong Pang Village), and multiple ones along Sungei Seletar. He was known as the Rubber and Pineapple King.



Group photograph of Lim Nee Soon (right), his son Chong Pang (second from left) with friends.



Lim Nee Soon visiting his rubber estate, 1909.

After World War II, Nee Soon Village grew rapidly. Improved land transport made Nee Soon Village one of Singapore's most densely populated rural areas at the time. Nee Soon Market was built in 1947 and spurred further development. A taxi stand was built in 1951, roads were officially named in 1955, and postal services established.

Traditional trades in Nee Soon Village gradually gave way to motor car and electrical appliance businesses by the mid-1960s. Modern shophouses replaced older structures, and daily life was improved by modern amenities such as piped water, electricity, and household appliances.

Yishun New Town was named after the hanyu pinyin transliteration of "Nee Soon".



Site of Lim Nee Soon's former rubber factory in Nee Soon, 1985.

What was the Kangchu System?

The *kangchu* system was a land ownership structure in the region during the 19th century. In Teochew, *kang* means "river". Loosely translated, *kangchu* means "lord of the river" and refers to the Chinese headman of riverbank settlements.

Kangchus had the official authority to establish plantations along designated rivers, giving them power to collect taxes, oversee governance, ensure the welfare and security of settlers, and regulate cultivation within the granted area.

Each plantation cluster was called *kangkar*, meaning "foot of the stream". In Singapore, these settlements were known as *chu kang* and named after a dominant clan. For example, Chan Chu Kang referred to a river settlement belonging to the Chan clan.



Chinese workers in a pepper and gambier plantation, 1900s.



View of Sungei Seletar from Springfield Nature Park.

Trade and Tourists at Transit Road

Transit Road in Nee Soon Village was once lined with bustling shophouses leading to present-day Nee Soon Camp, which previously served as a British garrison. In the 1950s, these shophouses thrived on British patronage. After the British left, traders shifted their focus, stocking affordable electrical goods to attract the Australian and New Zealand forces stationed at the Singapore Naval Base in nearby Sembawang.

The shops offered household appliances, sportswear, luggage, novelties, and even computer games. Tailors, watch dealers, and tattoo parlours also operated there. If an item was not on display, shopkeepers would source it for customers and even provided home delivery. This personalised service earned Transit Road a reputation that spread by word of mouth, even drawing tourists from the city.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the junction of Transit Road and Sembawang Road was a lively drinking spot for British servicemen and seamen on shore leave. With five bars in the area, residents grew accustomed to drunken soldiers and sailors causing a ruckus. The rowdy scenes faded after the British forces withdrew from Singapore.

Springleaf Nature Park

In the 1980s, residents of Nee Soon Village resettled in Yishun New Town. The former village site is now home to Springleaf Nature Park, which opened in 2014. Besides preserving the area's heritage and rich biodiversity, it also serves as a green buffer, protecting nearby nature reserves from the impact of urbanisation.

South of the park lies Springleaf Estate, which underwent development in the early 1980s with Springleaf Garden, followed by Springleaf Homes in the early 1990s. The estate gained culinary recognition in 2003 with Springleaf Prata Place. It is known for *prata* – a flatbread fried on a griddle until it is crispy on the outside and soft inside – which is served with curry.



Springleaf Prata Place.

Other Villages in the Former Nee Soon Estate



50 Bah Soon Pah Road (Former Horticulture Service Centre).

Heng Leh Pah Village

Located off Upper Thomson Road, Heng Leh Pah village was also known as Phua Village. It was part of the old Nee Soon estate and home to Hwee San Temple. Its name means “temple on a horizontal mountain” in Hokkien and refers to the Phua family’s temple in China, which is built on a mountain plain.

In the early 20th century, landowners here grew coconuts, benefiting local pig farmers who used coconut residue as pig feed. Pig farming thrived here until 1979. The temple was the village’s social hub, where villagers gathered to socialise, resolve disputes, and consult the deity. The Phuas still celebrate their festivals at Hwee San Temple, now at Yishun Industrial Park A, every ninth Lunar month.

Bah Soon Pah

The Bah Soon Pah area in the old Nee Soon estate comprised several villages, including Kampong Telok Soo (also known as Kampong Kitin) and De Lu Shu Village, located around Bah Soon Pah Road off

Sembawang Road. From the 1960s, villagers in Bah Soon Pah thrived by rearing chickens, ducks, and growing vegetables. The swampy, low-lying land was ideal for prawn and fish breeding, leading to the creation of prawn and fish ponds, which were also found in Chye Kay Village and Heng Leh Pah Village.

Chye Kay Village

This village, located within the old Nee Soon estate or present-day Yishun New Town, was where Chen Chia Keng established a pineapple canning factory in 1905. To ensure a steady supply, he bought 500 acres to plant pineapples. In 1907, he also planted rubber between the pineapple crops.

This plantation likely provided jobs for Chye Kay Village residents. The villagers built the Chu Siang Tong Temple, which also served as a charity home for the elderly and destitute. The temple is now located along Yishun Ring Road.

GATEWAY TO THE NAVAL BASE

Chong Pang Village

Originally known as West Hill Village, Chong Pang Village was located north of the present-day Sembawang Air Base. In 1956, the government renamed it Chong Pang Village in honour of Lim Chong Pang, the son of Lim Nee Soon. Lim Chong Pang served on the Rural Board from 1929 to 1938. In the 1930s, he developed the rubber estates in the area into land and rented them out.

The villagers depended on the rubber plantations for their livelihood. When the rubber market collapsed in 1935, the Singapore Naval Base – and later, Sembawang Shipyard – quickly became a key source of employment. Many Indians working at the naval base settled in Chong Pang Village.

The construction of Paya Lebar Airport in 1953 led to an influx of new residents in Chong Pang. The Chinese population increased and changed the multicultural makeup of the village, which was home to Malay fishermen.

The village grew around a row of shophouses that formed its commercial and residential core. From the 1950s to the 1980s, it was a bustling rural market town for the people of Sembawang. It served as the gateway to the Singapore Naval Base, earning it the title of the “heartbeat of the isolated north”.

From the mid-1980s, the villagers resettled in Woodlands and Yishun. Today, Sembawang New Town stands in its place, while the present-day Chong Pang housing estate, known as Chong Pang Garden, is part of Yishun New Town.



Chong Pang Village - coffeeshop and food stalls, 1985.



Officials and students at inauguration ceremony of road repairing programme by University of Singapore Students Union at Chong Pang Village community centre, 1966.

Sultan Theatre

Lim Chong Pang played a key role in Singapore’s film industry, establishing and managing several theatres in the early 20th century including the Sultan Theatre in Chong Pang Village. When it opened in 1939, it was the first roofed theatre in a rural district, providing much-needed entertainment for the villagers. Here, Tamil and Hindustani films were shown on weekdays, while Chinese films were screened on weekends.



View of Sultan Theatre at Chong Pang village, 1983.

Sree Narayana Misson

Chong Pang Village was home to several welfare and social organisations, the most prominent being Sree Narayana Mission. Founded in 1948, it promoted the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru and supported cultural and educational activities.

The mission comprised Malayalees who worked at the Singapore Naval Base, which was nicknamed “Little Kerala”. The mission provided shelter, food, financial aid, scholarships, and free yoga classes. Many of its initiatives continue today in Yishun, Woodlands, and beyond.

In 1965, then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, delivered his famous “From Mudflats to Metropolis” speech at the mission, acknowledging the contributions of Malayalees in building the naval base. He emphasised Singapore’s multiracial identity and reassured Singaporeans that, despite its separation from Malaysia, the city-state would prosper as a thriving metropolis while safeguarding minority rights.



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew delivering a speech at Sree Narayana mission in Chong Pang.

A Viet Refuge

An influx of Vietnamese refugees to Chong Pang Village began in 1978 after the fall of Saigon and the establishment of a refugee camp in Hawkins Road inside the Singapore Naval Base. This changed the shopping crowd in the village from British sailors to Vietnamese refugees, who were drawn to the affordable French-made crockery, household items, and electrical goods. Shopkeepers in Chong Pang learned Vietnamese and even formed friendships with the refugees, later exchanging letters after moving to Europe.

The last refugees left Singapore in 1996. Today, former residents of the Hawkins Road Refugee Camp, now scattered worldwide, stay connected through a Facebook group. They share photos and even visit Singapore to recall memories of their time here.



Compound of the Vietnamese refugee camp, 1986.



Members of Registered Tourist Guides Association of Singapore visiting Vietnamese refugee camp at Hawkins Road, Sembawang, 1986.

Yishun New Town

Construction of Yishun New Town began in 1977, when the Housing and Development Board (HDB) began transforming areas of the former Nee Soon district into what would become Singapore's fifth-largest HDB estate at the time, with a projected population of 200,000.

Prior to this, some villages had already been relocated. Residents of Chye Kay Village were moved to Ang Mo Kio, while those involved in aquarium fish farming were relocated to Tampines. The town was designed for convenience, with schools, markets, religious and community buildings, shopping malls, and recreational facilities easily accessible to residents.



HDB flats in Yishun.



Hand-drawn map of part of old Nee Soon Village by former resident, Mr Pang Siok Guan.

Chong Pang City

When the development of Northpoint Shopping Centre (now Northpoint City) was announced in 1992, the shopkeepers, merchants, and tradesmen of Yishun New Town's first neighbourhood centre took action to remain competitive. They pooled resources to upgrade their commercial units along Yishun Ring Road and renamed it Chong Pang City. Most of the shopkeepers were former residents of nearby villages who had formed the Chong Pang Merchants' Association to support one another.

Some of the upgrading work included metal awnings, concrete pavements, beautified shop fronts, and two Chinese-style gateways. These improvements made the shopping area more attractive and boosted business at Chong Pang City by nearly 30%. Today, Chong Pang City and Northpoint City offer complementary F&B, shopping, and amenity offerings, showing how local businesses can co-exist.



GROWING UP IN NEE SOON VILLAGE

“We all lived together – Chinese, Malays, and Indians. There was no conflict in our village.”



Mr Pang Siok Guan and Mdm Evelyn Yeo, former residents of Nee Soon Village

When they were growing up in Nee Soon Village, neighbours Mr Pang Siok Guan and Mdm Evelyn Yeo spent much of their idyllic childhoods playing at the nearby Nee Soon Camp. From the 1930s, the Camp was occupied by the British military until they withdrew from Singapore in 1971.

“The British treated us very well. They organised parties for us over Christmas and the school holidays. We were also allowed to go inside the camp, which was right next to Transit Road. Every evening, the kampong kids would play in the army field and twice a week, we could also use the pool there. Playing in the field was the only thing we really had at the time. After the Singapore Armed Forces took over the facility, we had to find other ways to spend our time,” says Mr Pang.

He remembers that there were many rubber plantations in the surrounding areas; some workers had lodgings in the village. But most of the residents in the village worked at the Sembawang Naval Base. Mr Pang himself worked there for about a year in 1968 after graduating from Raffles Institution.

He says, “Many of the shops and businesses in the village catered to the British army and did good business. There were shops selling electronics and military apparel as well as a tattoo parlour and a laundry shop.”

Mr Pang’s father started a provision shop in 1958, and his mother had a vegetable stall at the nearby market. Meanwhile, Mdm Yeo’s family ran a laundry business from 1960 to 1971.

Mdm Yeo says, “Every day, my father would cycle to the camp to collect the army uniforms. We had workers but I would help to rinse the clothes, using water from the public well behind our house. The water was free, but we had to queue for it!”

Mr Pang remembers when officers from the naval base had days off, they would go to the village near Chong Kuo Road. At night, there were satay and rojak stalls and stores selling gear and other things. Fights would occur all the time between the American, British, and Australians.

“When the army left, things got quite bad. Many people didn’t have jobs and gangsters would harass residents or businesses. They would come to my father’s shop to ask for ‘protection money’ but if they did not come too often, we would just give them. Things got better when Lee Kuan Yew cracked down on gang activities.”

“In comparison, the kampong was quite peaceful when the British were there. We all lived together – Chinese, Malays, and Indians. There was no conflict in our village. During the riots in 1960s, we were out in the streets playing badminton! But we had to stop when the riot police came by and enforced curfew,” says Mr Pang.

Agreeing, Mdm Yeo adds, “In those days, our doors were always open. We could go inside anybody’s house and if anything happened to a neighbour, the whole kampong would know.”



Sembawang Shipyard

Singapore Naval Base

Sembawang Road

Sembawang Air Base

Map dated 1953.

Sungei Seletar

SEMBAWANG

A NAVAL LEGACY

Behind the Name and Early History

The name Sembawang first appeared in 1828 on a map by Captain James Franklin and Lieutenant Philip Jackson. The map showed a river called Sungei Sembawang – then marked as “R. Tambuwang” – along Singapore’s northern coast. The river and surrounding land were likely named after the Sembawang tree (*Mesua ferruginea*), known for its leathery leaves, small white flowers, and round fruit. The area remained largely forested until the early 19th century, when gambier and pepper plantations were established.

Sembawang Road

The trunk road built to connect Singapore town to the north was initially named Seletar Road, before it was renamed Thomson Road after Government Surveyor John Turnbull Thomson.

In 1939, the stretch of Thomson Road from the Mandai Road junction to the north was renamed Sembawang Road. Until the 1980s, Sembawang Road was the main link from this part of Singapore to town, while residents in the 19th and early 20th centuries had to travel by boat along Sungei Seletar and other waterways.

An aerial view of the Singapore Naval Base in June 1953 from RAAF Avro Lincoln bombers.



Singapore Naval Base

H.M. Naval Base, Singapore was a key British military facility also referred to as the Singapore Naval Base or Sembawang Naval Base. After World War I, Britain sought a strategic naval base in Southeast Asia, as its Hong Kong facility was too vulnerable to Japan. By 1923, plans for a fully equipped base in Sembawang were approved.

The colonial government acquired land from the rubber estates of Bukit Sembawang and coastal properties, and construction began in 1928. A few key features made this base the world's finest at the time.

The first was the Admiralty Floating Dock No. IX, opened in 1929. Then the world's third-largest floating dock, it could raise warships weighing up to 50,000 tonnes above the water for repairs. The naval base's centrepiece, the 305 metre-long King George VI Dry Dock, was completed in 1937. Named after Britain's monarch at



A Danae-class cruiser inside the Admiralty IX floating dry dock at Singapore Naval Base in September 1941.

the time, it was the world's largest dry dock, capable of housing the Royal Navy's largest battleships. During World War II, the base fell to the Japanese but was returned to British control in 1945 and continued to be used by the British until their withdrawal in the 1960s.

Singapore Naval Base, view of the Navy Office, which was the Headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief China Station and the Rear Admiral Malaya.





The newly built quarters for the Admiralty Asian staff at Singapore Naval Base, 1950.

Maritime Road Names

Many roads in Sembawang gained naval-themed names. Admiralty Road East and Admiralty Road West, the main roads through the base, were built in 1923 and named after the government department responsible for the Royal Navy.

Canberra Road, named in 1937, was inspired by a visiting Australian warship. Other roads, such as Canada Road and Wellington Road, were named after countries or cities in the British Commonwealth.

Notable naval commanders were honoured with names such as Cochrane Crescent (after Thomas John Cochrane) and Drake Avenue (after Francis Drake). Gibraltar Crescent, Deptford Road, and Malta Crescent reflect the names of British naval bases. King's Avenue and Queen's Avenue were the locations of residences for senior dockyard officers.

Little Kerala

In the early 20th century, many Malayalees from Kerala, India, arrived in Singapore seeking work. Well-educated and fluent in English, they were attracted by the growing employment opportunities in the Sembawang area and quickly found jobs at the naval base, which employed around 5,000 Malayalees by 1960.

The naval base became known as “Little Kerala” or “Kochu Keralam” in Malayalam, as the majority of its workers were Malayalees living in quarters within the base.

There were amenities for the community, such as a Keralan spice mill at Jalan Kedai, messes serving Keralan food, and Malayalam classes for children. The Naval Base Kerala Library, established in 1954 within the naval base, housed thousands of Malayalam, Tamil, and English books, it also hosted events such as concerts, dramas, and the Onam festival.

Sembawang Shipyard

With the British withdrawal in the late 1960s, the naval base was converted into Sembawang Shipyard in 1968, a government-linked commercial facility.

Now part of Sembcorp Marine under Sembcorp Industries, it transitioned from military to commercial operations under the management of British firm Swan Hunter from 1968 to 1978. The first commercial vessel, South Breeze, arrived in 1969.

To accommodate modern vessels, Sembawang Shipyard opened Premier Dock in 1975 – a 400,000-ton dry dock,

the largest outside Europe and Japan at the time. It could service two large ships simultaneously, while the older King George VI Dry Dock remained in use for narrower cruise and naval ships.

The transition from dockyard to shipyard brought uncertainty for workers. While some retired or left Singapore, others stayed and retrained for roles in the commercial shipyard, adapting to the industry's new demands.



Balloons being released at Sembawang Shipyard's new \$50 million 400,000-ton dry dock during its official opening, 1975.

ARCHITECTURAL TREASURES OF THE NAVAL BASE

Former Admiralty House

Many colonial-era buildings from the former naval base still stand today, preserving Sembawang's unique architectural heritage.

The Former Admiralty House, built between 1939 and 1940 by the British Royal Navy, served as the residence for the most senior officer at the Singapore Naval Base. Originally known as Navy House or Canberra House (after nearby Canberra Road), it was later renamed Nelson House after Admiral Horatio Nelson. From 1945 to 1958, it served as the residence of the Flag Officer for Malaya before being renamed Admiralty House.

The house once accommodated the Rear-Admiral of Malaya followed by the Commander-in-Chief of Britain's Far East Fleet. From 1971 to 1974, it became ANZUK House, housing the commander of the joint Australia, New Zealand, and United Kingdom (ANZUK) force, which was formed to defend the Asia-Pacific region following Britain's military withdrawal east of Suez. Today, the historic building is part of Bukit Canberra, an integrated community hub.

Beaulieu House

Built in the 1910s, Beaulieu House was the holiday home of Jewish businessman Joseph Brooke David. *Beaulieu* is French for "beautiful place". It likely reflects its scenic location and intricate design. In the 1920s, when the naval base was under construction, the British colonial government acquired the house. It became the residence for senior engineers during the base's construction and was later occupied by senior naval officers. Today, it houses a seafood restaurant.

Former Sembawang Fire Station

The former Sembawang Fire Station, located along Admiralty Road West within the grounds of the former Sembawang Naval Base, was built in the 1930s to serve the naval base and its surrounding areas. Following the withdrawal of British military forces in 1971, the fire station came under the jurisdiction of the Singapore Fire Brigade. In 2005, the brigade's operations were relocated to a new facility in Yishun. The former Sembawang Fire Station is currently closed to the public.

Beaulieu House, 2016.



Black-and-white Houses

Sembawang is home to more than a hundred black-and-white houses – a distinctive colonial architectural style characterised by dark timber beams and whitewashed walls.

Staff of the naval base lived in these homes, which blend Anglo-Indian and Malay architectural influences. Designed for the tropical climate, the houses feature long verandahs, overhanging eaves for shade, and raised foundations for better ventilation.

The oldest black-and-white houses in Sembawang were built in 1929 at Gibraltar Crescent. Known as the Jacksons, they were originally occupied by engineers from Sir John Jackson Limited. During World War II, one was destroyed and replaced

with the Dockyard Theatre, later renamed “The Japanese Theatre”. In the 1990s, the theatre and nine nearby bungalows were repurposed by Singapore Airlines’ Service Quality Centre.

Other black-and-white houses for dockyard employees can be found along Admiralty Road East and Queen’s Avenue. After World War II, flats were also built in the naval base for staff. These include the present-day walk-up apartments at Cyprus Road.

Sembawang Hot Spring Park

Located near the junction of Sembawang Road and Gambas Avenue, the Sembawang Hot Spring Park is home to the only natural hot spring in mainland Singapore. In the early 20th century, Chinese merchant Seah Eng Keong discovered the hot spring on his pineapple estate and began bottling the water under the brand name Zombun after receiving a favourable report on its quality. The business was eventually sold to F&N in 1921, which continued bottling the water under the brands Singa Water and Seletaris.

The hot spring became popular with locals, who used it for boiling eggs and washing clothes. The village earned the name Kampong Ayer Panas or “Village of Hot Water” in Malay. In 1985, the Ministry of Defence acquired the land for the expansion of Sembawang Air Base. However, after public calls to preserve the spring, the Park continued to have public access and was redeveloped into Sembawang Hot Spring Park, which opened in 2020.



Entrance to the only hot spring park in Singapore.

OTHER MILITARY FACILITIES

Sembawang Air Base

Sembawang is also home to Sembawang Air Base, originally built as a Royal Navy aerodrome in 1939. After the war, it was named H.M.S. Simbang and became home to marines. A farewell parade here in 1971 marked the end of British military command in Singapore. The Singapore government took over the base in 1971, and the Youth Flying Club used its airfield until 1982. Renamed Sembawang Air Base in 1983, it now serves as a helicopter base.



Rehearsal for Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) day celebrations at Sembawang Air Base.



Guardroom and entrance to Royal Naval Air Station Sembawang (R.N. Air Station Sembawang).



Aerial view of Dieppe Barracks

Dieppe Barracks

Next to Sembawang Air Base is Dieppe Barracks. Built in 1966 to house marines from the Royal Navy's 40 Commando unit, it is named after a French battle site. In 1967, the commandos built a golf course next to the barracks, which later became Sembawang Golf Club. After the British left, Dieppe Barracks was occupied by New Zealand troops from 1971 to 1989. Later, it became the base for HQ Singapore Guards, a specialist unit of the Singapore Armed Forces.

Former KD Malaya

KD Malaya was a Royal Malaysian naval base located off Admiralty Road West that was built in the early 1950s. "KD" stands for *Kapal DiRaja*, which is Malay for "Royal Ship". It included naval barracks and a parade ground for Malaysian naval staff.

Nearby is its former jetty, a 400-metre structure that was used for parades and ship commissions. Today, it is known as Woodlands Waterfront Jetty and forms part of Woodlands Waterfront Park, which opened in 2011. The jetty is a popular spot for fishing and recreation, offering stunning views of the Causeway and Johor Strait.



Woodlands Waterfront Jetty.

VILLAGES BY THE NAVAL BASE

Sembawang Village

Sembawang Village, established in the late 1920s along Sembawang Road, grew into a lively hub for naval base residents. Known as the “sailors village”, the shops, eateries, and a shuttle bus service connected it to the city centre. By the 1960s, it had around 150 houses and 1,200 residents, many of whom worked at the naval base.

In the village, the famous Sembawang Strip, located at the junction of Sembawang Road and Admiralty Road East, was once lined with naval-themed bars and served as the centre of nightlife in the area, with Nelson Bar being the most popular spot for sailors. After the war, Sembawang Village continued to thrive. However, by the early 1970s, as the British military was replaced by ANZUK

forces, the bars became less popular. Today, the surviving two-storey shophouses are home to various eateries, maintaining a small connection to the village’s past.

Sembawang Malay Settlement

The Sembawang Malay Settlement or Petempatan Melayu Sembawang was built in 1960 at Jalan Mempurong, along the coast of the present-day Sembawang Park. Masjid Kampong Tengah was built in 1963 and was later renamed Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang. Surrounded by lush greenery, the kampong mosque still stands today, retaining its peaceful and tranquil atmosphere.

Sembawang Malay Settlement Mosque



EYE ON THE FUTURE



Bus-only lanes (along selected NSC stretches)

Lane reclamation for green spaces and public spaces



Artist's impression of the North-South Corridor with bus-only lanes along selected stretches of the Corridor.



Spanning 21.5 km from the city to Woodlands, the North-South Corridor (NSC) is a multimodal transport corridor that will serve towns such as Sembawang, Yishun, Ang Mo Kio, Toa Payoh, Novena, and Rochor.

With more vehicular traffic diverted to the NSC viaduct and tunnel, the surface streets can be used for wider footpaths, cycling paths, bus priority measures to provide greener travel options, as well as more public spaces for local communities to gather. The NSC will change the way people move and live along the corridor.

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) has been conducting public engagement to shape the vision and strategies for the corridor, to create a shared space for all.

Shaping Identity Together

Spaces do not become “places” unless they mean something to the community at large. It is essential that public spaces and amenities are co-created with the community, allowing their needs and stories to shape and enrich the identity of spaces.

It is hoped that this collection of stories and recollections of life in the Thomson & North-South Corridor area will inspire Singaporeans to rediscover, reimagine, and create new memories of the area in the years to come.

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