



An aerial view of HM Naval Base, Singapore, 1965  
Aerial photographs by the British Royal Air Force between 1940 to 1970s, from a collection held by the National Archives of Singapore. Crown copyright.

The Sembawang Heritage Trail is part of the National Heritage Board's ongoing efforts to document and present the history and social memories of places in Singapore. We hope this trail will bring back fond memories for those who have worked, lived or played in the area, and serve as a useful source of information for visitors and new residents.

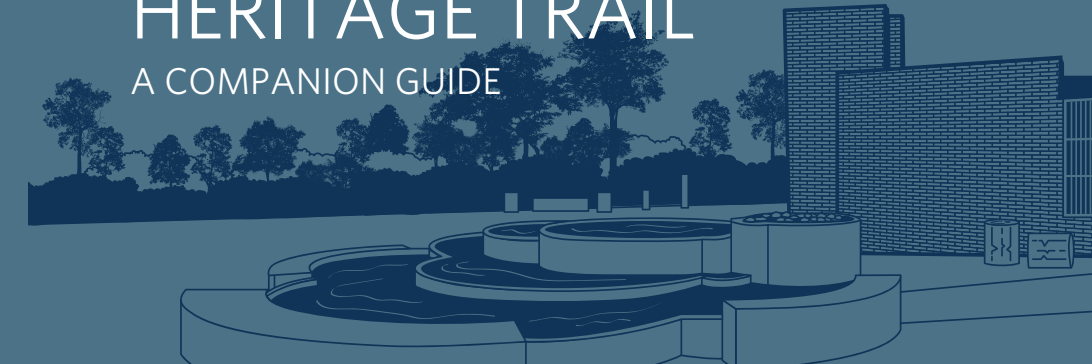


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# SEMBAWANG HERITAGE TRAIL

A COMPANION GUIDE



Naval officers at Beaulieu Jetty saluting the aircraft carrier HMS Albion, 1965  
Courtesy of Clive Menary





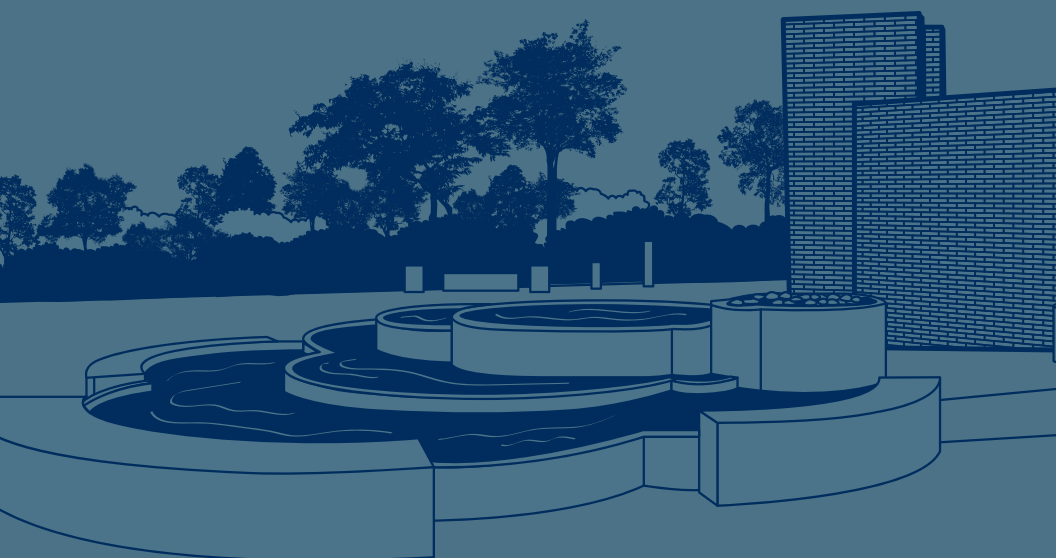
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# INTRODUCTION



A view of the Straits of Johor from Sembawang Park, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Tucked away at the island's northern end, Sembawang may be a less familiar neighbourhood compared to historic districts such as Kampong Gelam, Little India and Telok Ayer. Few realise, however, that Sembawang once occupied a central role not just in Singapore but in the British Empire, as the site of a naval base that repaired Royal Navy warships and housed thousands of sailors from Britain's Far East Fleet.

Before the naval base was built, Sembawang was home to boat-dwelling Orang Seletar as well as coastal villages such as Kampong Wak Hassan and Kampong Tanjong Irau. Further inland, Chinese planters cultivated gambier, which later gave way to pineapple plantations and rubber estates. Sembawang's rural landscape, which includes the only natural hot spring on mainland Singapore, then became dominated by the British naval base, which was active from the 1920s until 1971.

The naval base was not just a military hub. It was also known as "Little Kerala" due to

the many Malayalees who worked and lived there. There were also other communities in the area such as Sembawang Village and Chong Pang Village, which began as satellite villages to the naval base but became thriving socio-economic centres in their own right.

Today, many landmarks of the former naval base still exist. These include the stately black-and-white houses that line Admiralty Road East, the elegant Beaulieu House at Sembawang Park, and the grand Former Admiralty House at Bukit Canberra. Sembawang has also maintained its maritime heritage through Sembawang Shipyard (now Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard), which took over the naval base's dockyard from 1968.

Join us on the Sembawang Heritage Trail to discover the legacies of these communities and learn how they lived, worked and played in this *ulu* ("remote" in Malay) but enchanting corner of northern Singapore.

# EARLY HISTORY

## PLACE NAMES AND EARLY MAPS

The name Sembawang first appeared in 1828 in a map by Captain James Franklin and Lieutenant Philip Jackson titled *Plan of the British Settlement of Singapore*. This map showed a river called Sungei Sembawang along Singapore's northern coast, which was then marked as "R. Tambuwang".

Sungei Sembawang and the land around it, like many local places such as Tampines and Kranji, were named after a tree. The Sembawang tree (*Mesua ferruginea*) grows naturally along forested rivers in Southeast Asia and can be recognised by its long, leathery leaves and small white flowers, which develop into roundish fruit with a brown, leathery skin.

Sembawang trees may have been common around Sungei Sembawang in the 19th century, but vanished when the area was cleared for rubber estates and later, a naval base in the early 20th century. Today, a few Sembawang trees, planted by the National Parks Board, can be seen at Sembawang Park.

Early maps of northern Singapore also indicated other parts of the broader Sembawang area such as Senoko and Simpang. Senoko first appeared in early 19th century maps that showed a small river named "R. Simko" (Sungei Senoko) and a cape named "Tanjong Sinocho". Meanwhile, the Simpang area (which means a "crossing" or "junction" in Malay) was defined by Sungei Simpang, a river that originated from a source near the Sembawang hot spring and flowed into the sea east of Tanjong Irau.



Fruit and leaves of a Sembawang tree, 2012  
Courtesy of National Parks Board



Plan of the British Settlement of Singapore, showing Sungei Sembawang ("R. Tambuwang"), Sungei Senoko ("R. Simko") and Sungei Simpang ("R. Sempang"), 1828  
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board





A Sembawang tree at Sembawang Park, 2012  
Courtesy of National Parks Board



Sungei Sembawang, 1920s  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



A jetty at Sungei Senoko, 1920s  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection

### THE ORIGIN OF SEMBAWANG ROAD

Sembawang Road, which begins at the junction of Thomson Road and Mandai Road, was the first major road to be built in Sembawang. This road was first constructed in the early 1840s, probably by convicts under the supervision of government surveyor John Turnbull Thomson. It was completed by the late 1840s, when the road reached the northern coastline (present-day Sembawang Beach).

During the 19th century, the Sembawang Road of today was first known as Thomson Road, named after the surveyor who led its construction, and later as Seletar Road, as it ran west of the Seletar district. As a result, the Sembawang area was often referred to as "Seletar", after this road, until the mid-20th century.

In 1939, the authorities decided to rename Seletar Road as Sembawang Road. An announcement in the press stated:

*"Hitherto the road to the Naval Base has been known as Thomson Road as far as the 9th mile, where, for no apparent reason, the name changed to Seletar Road. This caused considerable confusion, as both the Naval and Air Bases are known as Seletar. In future, the road is to be called Thomson Road as far as the Yio Chu Kang junction, where it will become Upper Thomson Road, and from the Mandai Road junction to the sea it will be called Sembawang Road. The name Seletar Road will be dropped."*

The confusion mentioned arose because the naval base, which opened in 1938, was located in Sembawang (off Seletar Road), whereas the air base was in the Seletar district (off Jalan Kayu). To prevent confusion between the two military bases, Seletar Road was thus renamed Sembawang Road to indicate that it led to the naval base and not the air base.

Despite this name change, many people still referred to the Sembawang area as Seletar, even after World War II. Retired police officer Sukhdev Singh Gill (b. 1950) recalled:

*"As a child way back in 1963, my uncle had a huge lorry with a canvas on top. He used to bring us to the British naval base to visit our maternal uncle who came in the Indian naval ships INS Bramaputra and INS Vikrant. We sat on the lorry going through the old Sembawang Road. In those days, the naval base was still known as Seletar. Prior to visiting him at the naval base, my mother used to proudly say, 'My brother is here, we shall visit him at Seletar!' The entire stretch of road, Upper Thomson, according to her, was known as Seletar."*



Seletar Road (now Sembawang Road) with a single-storey attap house, 1923-24  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



Detail from a survey titled Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies, showing a district called "Mandai and Sambawang" that was located west of the Seletar district, 1873  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



## SEMBAWANG ROAD: MEMORIES BY THE MILE

In the past, when Sembawang was still a rural area, people usually referred to their homes and other landmarks by the numerical mile. For instance, Chong Pang Village was also known as the 13½ milestone of Sembawang Road, while the 14th milestone of Sembawang Road referred to the Sembawang Village area.

This system emerged during the colonial era, when Fullerton Building (now Fullerton Hotel) was designated as the zero-milestone by which distances were measured along major roads. Along Sembawang Road, the 10th milestone referred to the Mandai Road junction where Sembawang Road began; the 12th milestone covered the Jalan Mata Ayer area; the 13th milestone was the area near Chong Pang Village; and the 15th milestone marked the end of Sembawang Road where it meets the coast.

B. Aravindakshan Pillai (b. 1946), who resided in Lorong Maha, a small lane off Jalan Ulu Sembawang, explained how this system worked in a time when Sembawang Road had many nameless side roads:

*"I was born at 48 Lorong Maha. But at that time, the road had no name and number, so we just used Sembawang 13th mile as our address. Only when it*



B. Aravindakshan Pillai (far right, front) and his siblings with their parents Balakrishnan Pillai and Chellamma Amma, 1952  
Courtesy of Anitha Devi Pillai and B. Aravindakshan Pillai

*was metalled in 1967 did it become Lorong Maha and our house was named 48 Lorong Maha."*

Describing his neighbourhood, Pillai added:

*"The houses had attap roofs and wooden walls. We did not have running water. We depended on well water. We did not have electricity – for my 'O' levels, I studied with a kerosene lamp. The houses were scattered here and there, so most of the time we did our business under the bushes – there were no toilets. Then slowly, more and more houses were built, the bushes disappeared, so we built a hole and blocked it up with walls on four sides. After that a bucket system came. Every day an old Chinese man with a long stick on his shoulder and two big pails would come and clear our night soil for one or two dollars a month."*

## THE ORANG SELETAR

Sembawang's earliest known inhabitants were the Orang Seletar, who were already established in the area when the British arrived in 1819. Their origins are unclear: some believe they descended from seafaring Orang Laut ("Sea People"), while others suspect that the Orang Seletar were forest-dwellers who adapted to life in tidal creeks.

The Orang Seletar themselves believe they originate from Mount Pulai in Johor, where an ancient flood swept their ancestors to this part of the strait. They refer to themselves as Kon

Seletar; "kon" is thought to be derived from "Jakun" (an indigenous people from Johor) or a term of Mon-Khmer origin.

As their name suggests, the Orang Seletar were closely associated with Sungei Seletar, although they also frequented other nearby rivers along the Johor Strait. Travelling in boats with thatched roofs known as *pau kajang*, they foraged for fish, shellfish and edible plants. John Turnbull Thomson, one of the first Europeans to encounter the Orang Seletar, described them in 1847:

*"Huddled up in a small boat hardly measuring 20 feet in length, they find all the domestic comfort that they are in want of; at one end is seen the fire-place, in the middle are the few utensils they may be in possession of, and at the other end beneath a kadjang or mat not exceeding six feet in length, is found the sleeping apartment of a small family often counting five and six, together with a cat and dog, under this they find shelter from the dews and rains of the night, and heat of the day... in them they have provided all their wants; their children sport on the shore in search of shell fish at low water; and during high water they may be seen climbing the mangrove branches, and dashing from thence into the water, with all the life and energy of children of a colder clime."*

In the early 20th century, many Orang Seletar frequented the waters around Pulau Seletar (an island east of Tanjong Irau), where they had a *bente* (temporary village). When the land nearby was acquired in the 1920s for the British naval and air bases, they were forced to move further away.

Some Orang Seletar later moved to Kuala Redan in Johor and abandoned their nomadic lifestyle, but a few families persisted in the Seletar area until the early 1980s, living in houses on stilts near Pulau Seletar. Mohd Amin bin AB Latip (b. 1951), a longtime resident of the former Kampong Tengah, recalled seeing some Orang Seletar anchoring their boats off Tanjong Irau during this period. However, from 1983, the building of Seletar Dam forced the remaining families to move to Johor, bringing an end to centuries of Orang Seletar settlement along Singapore's northern coast.

## GAMBIER PLANTATIONS

Sembawang's interior was largely forested until the early 19th century, when gambier planters began to establish themselves in the area. In 1847, a man named Neo Liang Quan was found to be the owner of several gambier plantations around Sungei Seletar. Neo was believed to be a member of Ngee Heng, a secret society, and owned large boats armed with cannons. Ngee



A gambier and pepper plantation, c. 1900  
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Heng was then involved in disputes with other secret societies and had launched violent raids against rival plantations in Riau. Neo was arrested that year and his fate is unknown.

Following Neo's arrest, his gambier plantations are believed to have evolved into early villages in the Sembawang and Seletar areas. In 1848, John Turnbull Thomson produced a map that showed a village named Nam To Kang at Sungei Sembawang and another settlement named Sempang at Sungei Simpang. The map also noted three unnamed Malay villages and two Chinese settlements named Chan Chu Kang and Eo Chu Kang (Yio Chu Kang) at the upper reaches of Sungei Seletar.

Nam To Kang, Sempang, Chan Chu Kang and Eo Chu Kang were all occupied by gambier planters. These villages were located at rivers ("kang" in Teochew), which provided water and a means of transporting goods. Such settlements were hence known as *kangkar* ("foot of the river" in Teochew) and led by a *kangchu* ("master of the river"), after whom the settlement was often named.

## NAM TO KANG, SEMPANG AND CHAN CHU KANG

Nam To Kang was located near the present Gambas Avenue. This village was probably founded by a man named Nam or Lam, as it was also marked as Lam To Kang in some maps. The village's earliest residents were Teochew gambier planters who later moved to Johor in the mid-1840s after the British



tried to impose rent on them. Other planters then moved in, and by 1851, Nam To Kang was occupied by Chinese-Catholic planters, who dominated the gambier sector from the 1850s.

These planters led a hard and precarious life. Besides tending to their crop, they had to cut firewood, brave tiger attacks and suffer tropical diseases in their isolated settlements. They were also regarded as rivals by Chinese secret societies. In 1851, plantations at Nam To Kang owned by two Chinese-Catholics, Nieh Ah Lim and Tan Ah Toh, were wrecked during anti-Catholic riots, which were triggered by disputes between the secret societies and the Chinese-Catholic community. Nevertheless, Nam To Kang recovered from these attacks and survived until the late 19th century.



Detail from Map of Singapore Island and its Dependencies showing the early villages of Nam To Kang, Sempang, Chan Chu Kang and Eo Chu Kang, 1952. In this map, Pulau Seletar was marked under its old name, Pulau Khatib (Khatib) Bongsu. The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection

Sempang (also known as Sempang Kang or Seng Pang Kang) was located along Sungei Simpang. Apart from growing gambier, some of its residents worked as boatmen, ferrying passengers and goods to other areas.

Chan Chu Kang was located at the southern end of Sembawang Road. The village was named after Chan Ah Lak, a Teochew who obtained a land deed for the area in 1850, although the village was already in existence by 1844. In 1854, the village was badly hit by island-wide Hokkien-Teochew riots, during which many residents died. In the early 20th century, Chan Chu Kang became known as Seletar Village and was eventually renamed Nee Soon Village after Lim Nee Soon (1879-1936), a businessman who owned many rubber estates in the area.

# THE RUBBER INDUSTRY IN SEMBAWANG

## EARLY RUBBER ESTATES

Sembawang has played a role in the introduction of rubber to Singapore and Malaya. Henry Nicholas Ridley (1855-1956), who became Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens in 1888, strongly believed that rubber would become a valuable commodity. In 1889, Ridley planted 1,095 young rubber trees in Sembawang Forest Reserve, which was one of several forest reserves that the British established in 1884 to protect Singapore's remaining forests. These saplings, the first rubber trees to be established in Sembawang, produced rubber that was tapped for sale as well as seeds that Ridley distributed to planters.



A rubber estate along Seletar Road (later Sembawang Road), 1923-1924  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection

The first planter to successfully cultivate rubber was Tan Chay Yan (1871-1916), who established Malaya's first commercial rubber estate in Melaka in 1896 as well as rubber estates at Sembawang and Tampines in Singapore. Tan's success, fuelled by soaring rubber prices, prompted many other planters to switch to rubber. One such planter was Tan Kah Kee (1874-1961), who acquired 180,000 rubber seeds from Tan Chay Yan in 1906 and planted them at Hock San, a pineapple estate he owned off Seletar Road (as Sembawang Road was known then). This venture proved successful and in 1910, Tan Kah Kee sold Hock San to fund new estates in Johor.

Another early rubber estate in Sembawang was Woodfield, which was located at the northern coast (now Senoko Industrial Estate). This estate was established in 1906 by Oscar Olsen (1861-1939), a Swedish municipal inspector who was the ancestor of former Nominated Member of Parliament Eunice Olsen. Woodfield had a seaside bungalow which served as Olsen's retirement home,



Rubber tappers carrying pails of latex on their heads, 1900s  
Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



and rubber was shipped out from the nearby Sungei Senoko. Olsen's estate was later acquired by the British government in 1924 for the building of the naval base.

In the early 20th century, pineapples (then another valuable commodity) were also widely planted alongside rubber in Sembawang and other parts of Singapore. This practice, known as a catch crop system, allowed estate owners and workers to earn income from harvesting and selling pineapples while the rubber trees were too young to be tapped.

### BUKIT SEMBAWANG'S RUBBER ESTATES

The trees that Ridley planted at Sembawang Forest Reserve, which survived until the 1910s, demonstrated that the area was suitable for rubber. This may have been why Sembawang became a major rubber growing area in Singapore during the early 20th century.

In 1905, a large rubber estate with about 1,500 trees was established in Seletar (as Sembawang was known then) by Singapore Planting Company, a firm owned by Tan Chay Yan and Dr Lim Boon Keng, among others. This estate was eventually taken over in 1910 by a London-based syndicate and renamed Bukit Sembawang Rubber Company, with Tan Chay Yan on its advisory board and Lim Nee Soon as its consultant.

Bukit Sembawang rapidly expanded its rubber estates all over Singapore. Apart from Sembawang, the company had rubber estates in Woodlands, Tampines, Punggol, Changi and Jurong. In fact, Bukit Sembawang was Singapore's largest private landowner until the 1920s, when the British began to acquire large swathes of its land to build the naval base and other military facilities.

Meanwhile, the workers who toiled in the rubber estates led an arduous life. Lim Hoo Hong (b. 1908), who started tapping rubber after his father's death, recalled:

*"I was nine years old then, my mother went with me to tap the rubber. She tapped one lot and I*



*T. Kanapathipillai (right) supervising a rubber tapper at the 12th milestone of Sembawang Road, 1960s*  
Courtesy of Shanta Kumari Subramaniam



*B. Aravindakshan Pillai's mother, Chellamma Amma, in their house at Lorong Maha, 1950s*  
Courtesy of Anitha Devi Pillai and B. Aravindakshan Pillai

*tapped another lot. The two of us – mother and son – tapped two lots together, we made 80 cents a day. We woke up at 4am every day. After a simple breakfast, we went to tap rubber.*

*"We were supposed to tap 400 trees every day but the kepala [supervisor] was very sympathetic and so we only tapped about 300-over trees. Around 11 or 12 noon, we would collect the latex and deliver to the collection centre. Each of us was paid 40 cents a day. I earned only ten-over dollars each month."*

On their housing arrangements, Lim explained:

*"We built our home on the land that belonged to the Bukit Sembawang Rubber Company. They just charged us a rent of only 50 cents a month."*

To oversee the tappers, Bukit Sembawang employed *kepala* (supervisors) from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Kerala in India. T.

Kanapathipillai (1918-1976), who came from Ceylon in the 1930s, worked as a supervisor for Bukit Sembawang until his retirement. His daughter Shanta Kumari Subramaniam (b. 1954) recalled that the family originally resided near the present Khatib Camp, but later moved to a single-storey bungalow built by Bukit Sembawang at what is now Sembawang Place:

*"There were eleven bungalows, and we were staying in number 9, which was near the current Swami Home, from 1959 until 1992. My father's work started at 6am and he finished at 2pm every day. He went out to supervise the rubber tappers. When my father retired in 1976, he bought over the house. There was a big compound and my father planted orchids, chikus and jambu trees. It was so huge we could run around the house several times – it was a very simple life but we were very happy. Behind my house was a kampong. It was Jalan Sembawang Kechil, which had small detached houses with attap or zinc roofs."*

During World War II, the Japanese interned Bukit Sembawang's managers and cut down many rubber trees to grow vegetables. People from other areas also sought refuge in the company's rubber estates, where they built houses and planted crops.

After the war ended, the company allowed these squatters to remain but charged them rent. The land around Lorong Maha (off Jalan Ulu Sembawang) was probably one such area, as former resident B. Aravindakshan Pillai (b. 1946) shared:

*"It was a rubber estate. There was a factory but it was no longer working, so a lot of squatters were there. It belonged to Bukit Sembawang. Bukit Sembawang would charge rent, about \$1-2 a month. We were actually only squatters there, we didn't own the land. A man would come to the house every month and collect rent and give a receipt."*

*"Later, in the late 1960s, the government built a metalled road and it was named Lorong Maha. Then electricity came in, tap water came in, and*

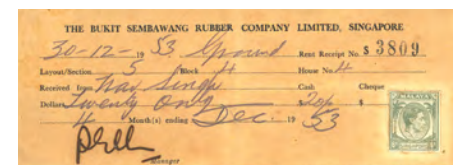
*people started rebuilding their houses and the attap houses started disappearing. In the land surrounding the house, we planted bananas, rambutans, coconuts, starfruit and even durians. Our income came from farming and from my father's work as a subcontractor. We also reared chickens and cows to subsidise our income."*

Sofea Abdul Rahman (b. 1965) stayed in a house at Jalan Sembawang Kechil (now Sembawang Walk), which was built in the 1940s on land that belonged to Bukit Sembawang. Describing her former home and family, she shared:

*"The house was a mix of brick and wood, with a zinc roof. When it rained, it was so noisy! We had many rooms so we rented out some to people working in the shipyard as a side income. We also had chicken coops. Every morning, my father would open these and feed them. In the evening we would chase the chickens back into the coop. This is why I never eat chicken today, because I saw them growing up from egg and chick. Meanwhile, my mother made air batu (ice snacks), using red beans, chocolate and all kinds of flavours, for 30 cents per pack. That was how the housewives earned their own money."*



*Sofea Abdul Rahman's mother, Maimon bte Ahmad (right), at their family home in Jalan Sembawang Kechil, 1960s*  
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman



*A rent receipt from Bukit Sembawang, 1953*  
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman



Sofea's house was later redeveloped into the present Swami Home. Recalling the last days of the house, she said:

*"We had to move out in April 1988 to Yishun. My father continued to stay in the old house for a few months, because he was working at Sembawang Shopping Centre. He would go back to Yishun just to shower and have his dinner, but then go back to Sembawang to stay the night before going to the shopping centre to work."*

Another former resident of Jalan Sembawang Kechil is Gurusamy Selvaraj (b. 1956). He shared:

*"We had a farm with 10 to 15 coconut trees and a very big pond. My grandfather used to rear chickens. My father was a driver at the naval base. Our house had about ten rooms, so we rented out some of the rooms. It was a single-storey house. We didn't have fencing around the compound so we could just walk to our neighbours' houses. Lorong Maha was just behind my house."*

### FROM RUBBER ESTATES TO HOUSING ESTATES

After the war, Bukit Sembawang continued to operate rubber estates in Sembawang. However, due to high demand for housing in post-war Singapore, the company decided to redevelop some of its land into housing estates.



Kampong houses at Jalan Sajak, 1960s  
Courtesy of Tony Dyer and Sofea Abdul Rahman

To reflect this business shift, the company eventually moved its headquarters from London to Singapore and changed its name from Bukit Sembawang Rubber Company to Bukit Sembawang Estates in 1967.

One of the first housing estates developed by Bukit Sembawang was Sembawang Springs Estate in 1956. This housing estate near the 13th milestone of Sembawang Road has some roads named after plants, such as Jalan Sendudok (Singapore rhododendron), Jalan Kemuning (orange jasmine) and Jalan Malu-Malu (sensitive mimosa). Other roads were named after forms of Malay literature, such as Jalan Shaer (narrative poem), Jalan Hikayat (epic) and Jalan Sajak (poem).

In 1966, Bukit Sembawang developed Sembawang Garden Arcade, which was formerly a rubber estate. This residential area, which is located opposite Sembawang Shopping Centre, also has shophouses along Jalan Tampang (a relative of the jackfruit) and Jalan Legundi (a kind of teak) which are popular for their eateries.

Another prominent housing estate developed by Bukit Sembawang is Sembawang Straits Estate, which was built in the 1960s along Sembawang Road and Andrews Avenue. Andrews Avenue was named in 1953 after Thomas Edward Andrews, a Bukit Sembawang manager.



A wayang stage at Jalan Sajak, 1960s  
Courtesy of Tony Dyer and Sofea Abdul Rahman



A temple at Jalan Sajak, 1960s  
Courtesy of Tony Dyer and Sofea Abdul Rahman

### A VILLAGE OFF JALAN KEMUNING

Today, Jalan Kemuning runs through Sembawang Spring Estates, but in the past, it also led to a village that Chan Wai Lim (b. 1974) called home in the 1970s. She shared:

*"My grandparents moved there after the war. My grandfather was a farmer and we had chicken and pigs. We also had four ponds with fish and a toilet on stilts over it. When you used it, you could see the tilapia feeding. We also had durian trees, mangosteens, jackfruit and rambutans. To feed the chicken, we needed to get a lot of earthworms, so I helped my dad to dig. I would use my hand to pick them up. It was near a swampy area linked to the sea."*

To supplement the family's income, Chan's grandmother sold titbits from a pushcart:

*"Outside there was a slope. During certain months, a Chinese opera troupe would come and set up a tent. My grandmother would push a cart. She had a mobile provision pushcart, selling sweets and fruits, so she would push it to the Chinese opera whenever there was a performance. Or else she would have her stall just outside the house. The wayang shows were almost monthly, because last time opera was quite popular. My mom would go there and help my grandma take care of the cart. Sometimes I also helped to sell things."*

Chan's father installed telephones for a living, but he also grew orchids:

*"He had orchids on top of his pond, on wooden planks suspended above the water. After work, he would bring the orchids to Chong Pang Market to sell them. My father would also sell chicks at the market, which was near Sembawang Shopping Centre."*

The village that Chan's family lived in, which was unnamed, was later cleared and the former village site is now the area around Canberra Drive.



Chan Wai Lim's father, Chan Toh Fatt, with his orchids, 1970s  
Courtesy of Chan Wai Lim



A family gathering at Chan Wai Lim's house off Jalan Kemuning, 1970s  
Courtesy of Chan Wai Lim



# SEMBAWANG HOT SPRING

## DISCOVERY AND EARLY USE

Sembawang is home to the only hot spring on mainland Singapore, which is located in Sembawang Hot Spring Park. The public first learnt of this hot spring in 1908, when local newspapers reported on its discovery by William Arthur Bates Goodall, a municipal ranger.

However, Seah Eng Keong, a merchant who owned the land on which the spring was located, was already aware of this natural wonder but had wanted to keep it secret until the water had been analysed. He had sent a sample to a laboratory, which found it to be rich in mineral salts and safe for drinking.

Seah then formed a partnership with Framroz, a local beverage company, to bottle the spring water under the brand Zombun. Unfortunately, this brand name was often corrupted by cheeky waiters who referred to it as “Ayer Jamban” (Malay for “toilet water”).

Seah later sold the business to Singapore Hot Springs, a company that bottled the mineral water under the brands Zom and Salina. In 1921, Singapore Hot Springs was taken over by Fraser & Neave (F&N), which bottled the spring water under brands such as Zom, Vichy Water and Singa Water.

The hot spring was already a popular spot with the public before World War II. People travelled from as far as Katong and Geylang to soak in the mineral-rich water, which was thought to have curative properties, and use the hot water to cook eggs and even to wash clothes or defeather poultry.

## THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE SPRING

The exact source of the Sembawang hot spring is unknown. Water at this source seeps into the earth through faults (cracks) in the rock, travelling as deep as three kilometres. As it approaches the earth’s molten core, the water is heated up to 100-150 degrees Celsius.

High pressure then forces the hot water upwards until it reaches the surface as the hot spring. At this point, the water has fallen to a temperature of about 65-70 degrees Celsius and smells of sulphur due to the presence of this mineral in underground rocks.

Water from natural hot springs is widely believed to help soothe muscle aches or relieve rheumatism, arthritis and acne. However, there is no published medical evidence for this.

## THE HOT SPRING IN THE 1940S AND 1950S

During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore from 1942-1945, the Japanese converted the hot spring area into a sanatorium with tiled thermal baths for their naval forces. The land nearby was also used by the Japanese navy to grow vegetables and fruit.

In 1944, a plane dropped a bomb that landed on the hot spring, dislodging its earth layers and disrupting the spring’s outflow. After the war, a geologist advised F&N to leave the spring undisturbed until the water returned to its original flow rate.

During the 1950s, the hot spring still produced marshy pools which attracted people who cooked eggs or soaked in the water to relieve muscle pains. It also drew punters who



Children at a well at the hot spring grounds, 1947  
Courtesy of Richard Hale



Children playing at the marshy grounds of the Sembawang hot spring area, 1947  
Courtesy of Richard Hale

believed that bathing in its waters during the horseracing season would bring them luck.

Richard Hale (b. 1937) recalled visiting the hot spring in 1947 when his family was living at Rimau Road off Admiralty Road West:

*“Somebody had told my mother that there were some hot springs to be seen, so we got into the car and drove off to find them. We then had to walk quite a way and ask some kampong people where exactly the springs were to be found. They turned out to be in open uncultivated land, in the middle of nowhere.”*

B. Aravindakshan Pillai (b. 1946), who resided at Lorong Maha, described the hot spring in the 1950s:

*“At that time, the hot spring had two wells. In one well, the water was boiling and people used to boil eggs at this well. The other well had just warm water. I can remember my parents bringing me there and bathing me in the water. It was sulphurous water. You needed a pail and rope to collect the water.”*

During the 1960s, Gurusamy Selvaraj (b. 1956) often visited the hot spring, which was near his home at Jalan Sembawang Kechil. He said:

*“A lot of people would take a pail and soak their feet. As a child, we used to go to the hot spring to play hide-and-seek and football. We would kick the ball until it had a dent, then we would throw the ball into the hot water and it would expand again.”*

## SEMANGAT AYER, SELETARIS AND SEMBAWANG HOT SPRING PARK

Sembawang Hot Spring Park:  
Along Gambas Avenue  
(The park is open daily from 7am to 7pm.)

In 1964, the water of the hot spring finally returned to its pre-war flow rate. F&N proceeded to build a new bottling factory near the spring called Semangat Ayer, which was officially opened by then Finance Minister Lim Kim San on 10 March 1967. Semangat Ayer produced Seletaris, an alkaline spring water, and also bottled other beverages such as Coca-Cola, 7-UP, soybean milk and chrysanthemum tea.

A former resident who recalled the factory well is Abdul Rashid Daseran, who shared:

*“I used to stay at 173 Sembawang Road, the present empty space opposite Seletaris condominium. The Coca-Cola bottling plant once stood there. I used to frequently visit the factory during my school days. There were actually two hot spring wells: one in the factory compound and the other one which is now being preserved for the public. There was a field beside the factory which was our playground.”*



The interior of F&N’s Semangat Ayer bottling factory, 1967  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Hamida Majid, who visited the area as a child, shared this memory:

*"The road name was Jalan Mata Ayer and there was a Malay village called Kampong Ayer Panas. There was a stream beside the F&N factory and along the side of the stream you could see the hot water bubbles."*



The Sembawang hot spring area before it was converted into a park, 2010  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

In 1985, the hot spring area was acquired by the government. F&N then closed Semangat Ayer and the site was redeveloped into a condominium called The Seletaris in 1995.

In 1998, the government announced that the hot spring area would become part of Sembawang Air Base. This prompted community leaders to appeal for the hot spring's preservation for its scientific, historical and cultural value. The hot spring was then a popular attraction that drew up to 1,000 people on weekends. The government consented to the appeal and in 2002, installed new standpipes and created a footpath from Gambas Avenue, which allowed people to access the area more easily.

In 2016, the government announced plans to convert the hot spring area into a park. Following a period of renovation, Sembawang Hot Spring Park opened in 2020. This park features a floral walk lined with fruit trees and other crops that were commonly found in nearby villages. At the hot spring area, visitors can soak their feet in a cascading pool or use buckets at water collection points. The park even has Egg Cooking Stations where people can boil eggs for their own consumption.



Sembawang Hot Spring Park, 2020  
Courtesy of National Parks Board

## MEMORIES OF KAMPONG JALAN MATA AYER AND JALAN ULU SEMBAWANG

In the past, there was a village near the hot spring called Kampong Jalan Mata Ayer or Kampong Ayer Panas, which was located at Jalan Mata Ayer off Sembawang Road. *Mata ayer* means "spring" in Malay, while *ayer panas* means "hot water". This village was established in 1958 and many of the villagers worked at the naval base in Sembawang.

At its peak, Kampong Jalan Mata Ayer had about 20 houses and 250 residents. Former resident Ismail bin Hassan (b. 1948) recalled that the villagers used a *gotong-royong* (mutual help) system to build their homes:

*"When we first moved in, we could not afford to erect a house on our own or ask a contractor to do it... so we have teamwork like gotong-royong... I [will] build your house in the first few months. [It] takes two months to build a house. After that, [my neighbours] took turns to build my house. So that's the way we did it. From one house up to 20 houses, we took turns to build everyone's houses."*

In the 1960s and 1970s, Jalan Mata Ayer and nearby roads such as Jalan Ulu Sembawang and Lorong Gambas led to a rural area with many vegetable farms and fish ponds. Lorong Gambas, a former lane that once linked Jalan Ulu Sembawang with Mandai Road, was named after a kind of gourd, which may have been cultivated by the farmers there. Jerome Lim (b. 1965) shared this memory of the area:

*"Up to the 1980s, there were still villages around the Jalan Mata Ayer area. The area around the hot spring was all villages and farmland. We used to see a lot of fishing ponds. And you could drive up behind the Seletaris bottling plant up Jalan Ulu Sembawang. The road runs across a ridge and there's an open rolling landscape where you could see all the way to Marsiling. It was very picturesque. You could see all the vegetable plots, and my father described that road as the most scenic in Singapore."*

Former policeman Sukhdev Singh Gill (b. 1950) recalled patrolling the area when he was posted to Chong Pang in the 1970s:



Farms and fish ponds off Sembawang Road, 1960s  
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman and Tony Dyer



*"Jalan Ulu Sembawang and Lorong Gambas were hilly areas with lots of vegetable farms, chillies – that's why you have road names starting with Lorong Lada, etc. I used to travel from Lorong Gambas, pass the former Seletaris factory, all the way up to Mandai Road. It was a lovely drive in the police patrol car. We used to meet farmers carrying their vegetables, in straw hats, waving at us. Due to the many fruit trees, there were a lot of flying foxes. In the 1970s, the farmers were allowed to have hunting guns to shoot the bats and other animals. They were licensed every year with the consent of the police."*

Loh Koah Fong (b. 1967), who resided at the former Delhi Road in the 1970s, often visited Ulu Sembawang as a boy:

*"When I was young I used to go to my grandmother's place at Jalan Ulu Sembawang. She had a farm and some fish ponds there. They were keeping pigs and chickens. Traders would come and buy the pigs and place them in a pig cage or zhu long. Some of the pigs managed to stick their legs out of the cage and tried to scramble*

*away. It was an amusing sight. Grandmother also bought fish fry and reared them in the ponds. When they grew big, traders would dredge the whole pond with a huge net and transfer the fish into a water tank on a lorry."*

The residents of Kampong Jalan Mata Ayer, Ulu Sembawang and Lorong Gambas were resettled in the early 1980s. Jalan Mata Ayer still exists, but the area where village once stood is now part of Sembawang Air Base.



*A house at Kampong Jalan Mata Ayer, undated*  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Jalan Mata Ayer, 1993*  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.

# COASTAL VILLAGES, COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS AND BUNGALOWS

## EARLY KAMPONGS AND SELETAR PIER

Apart from inland villages at Jalan Mata Ayer and Jalan Kemuning, Sembawang also had kampongs along the northern coast. In the early 20th century, there were two villages named Kampong Sembawang and Kampong Tengah near the mouth of Sungei Sembawang, and another village called Kampong Wak Tuang near Tanjong Irau.

Kampong Sembawang and Kampong Tengah existed until the 1920s, when the surrounding land was acquired by the British for the naval base. Kampong Wak Tuang was established by a Bugis man named Wak Tuang and consisted of just a few houses surrounded by forest. This village did not persist, as its founder later handed the land over to the British and moved away.

As there were few roads in the area then, these villagers likely used boats to get to Sembawang Road, which had a small jetty called Seletar Pier at its northern end that served as a landing point. The original wooden pier was replaced by a sturdier structure in the 1930s. However, before the new pier was built, an unfortunate taxi driver, who may have been unaware of its removal, drove off Sembawang Road and landed on the seabed in 1929, fortunately without injury.

The new Seletar Pier was described as a scenic spot in a 1937 newspaper article:

*"You should picnic here by moonlight choosing one of those incredible lovely nights when it's full moon and high water. Its crudeness by day is masked in an eerie beauty then. The huts are*



*The former Seletar Pier, 1920s*  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection

*there staring out at the Straits, the high coconut palms are etched against the night sky but – it is the water you must look at. Stand at the jetty and see it stretching, pale and dark, like a mirror, away to where lights pick out the Johore coast."*

During World War II, Seletar Pier was damaged by Japanese bombs that targeted the nearby naval base in 1942 and was left unrepaired. Post-war maps marked the pier as derelict and it was eventually removed, with no traces surviving today.

## COASTAL VILLAGES

### Kampong Wak Hassan

The longest surviving coastal village in Sembawang was Kampong Wak Hassan. This village was named after its founder Wak Hassan bin Ali, who obtained the right to farm land near Sungei Sembawang in 1914. He then cleared the land to grow coconuts and fruit trees. In 1921, when the area was acquired for the British naval base, the village's inhabitants relocated east of Sembawang Road.



During World War II, the village was subjected to air-raids and shelling by Japanese forces due to its close proximity to the naval base. Houses were razed to the ground and many residents fled to Kota Tinggi in Johor. The villagers returned after the war ended and rebuilt their homes behind the shoreline.

Yazlyn Ishak (b. 1967), a resident of Kampong Wak Hassan until 1984, shared this memory of the village:

*"My first address was 55B Kampong Wak Hassan. My mother rented a room in a kampong house there. The man who founded Kampong Wak Hassan was from our family. At Kampong Wak Hassan, there were two sides: one we called the laut [seaward] side, the other was the darat [landward] side. Most of my family stayed at the laut side of the village. The darat and the laut children didn't get along with each other, although the adults would scold them for this. But now that we are older, we are friends with each other."*



View from Seletar Pier, showing the shoreline near Kampong Wak Hassan, 1920s  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection

Yazlyn's parents later moved to staff quarters at the nearby Sembawang Primary School (now Boys' Brigade Sembawang Campsite), which opened in 1957 as Sembawang Malay School and closed in 1985. She explained:

*"This was because my father was working there as a night watchman. In the daytime, he sold drinks at Sembawang Park, where there were three stalls: my father's; my grandparents who sold tauhu goreng and nasi lemak, which were very popular; and a Chinese man from the kampong. My father's stall was just beside the beach."*

*"My parents sold drinks from morning until evening. In the weekends we could earn \$800-\$1,000 a day just from selling drinks, making teh tarik, hot drinks, Mirinda bottles. My father's teh tarik was very popular with all the shipyard workers. They would even come over to my place at night to watch television, drink and eat."*

Yazlyn frequently visited her great-grandmother's house at the village:

*"My great-grandmother's house was by the sea. By her house there was a big pond, where they placed fish for sale. And beside the pond was the sea, so sometimes the water would come up to the kitchen during high tides or heavy rains."*

Describing what she did with her friends in the village, Yazlyn said:

*"After school in the morning, we would go and study the Quran. At night we went to the sea to catch crabs. We made a little stove using stones and used a Milo can to boil the crab and eat it without our parents' knowledge. They would scold us for playing with fire! There were also a lot of lala [small clams] which we dug from the sand. Behind my grandmother's house, when the tide goes down, we would take a spoon and bowl and dig. We could get a big basin of lala, which we would boil."*

Near Kampong Wak Hassan there was a small pier called Mihad Jetty, which was named after its owner Mihad Samin, who charged boat-owners a fee to moor there. Yazlyn recalled: "I called him Tok Mihad. He took care of the jetty for many years. He loved the sea and looked after the boats there."

Mihad Jetty and Kampong Wak Hassan were demolished in 2000. A small lane off Sembawang Road, named Kampong Wak Hassan, now leads to the seaside Irau Drive Playground, while the former village area is now occupied by two roads built in 2003, Wak Hassan Drive and Wak Hassan Place.



A house at Kampong Wak Hassan, 1986  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

## Kampong Tanjong Irau

Another seaside village, Kampong Tanjong Irau was located on a headland between the Johor Strait and Sungei Simpang. In Malay, *tanjong* refers to a "headland", while *berpirau* means "to make a sharp turn". The name Tanjong Irau was thought to have arisen as people travelling there from Sungei Seletar had to make a sharp turn to the left to reach the area.

Kampong Tanjong Irau was founded by a man named Encik Dol, who settled in the area between 1918 and 1923. Before World War II, the only way to reach the village was by boat or walking across swamps at low tide. After the war ended, some villagers built a permanent road, later named Jalan Tanjong Irau, that made the village more accessible.

By the 1960s, Kampong Tanjong Irau had about 700 residents, most of whom fished or worked in nearby rubber plantations. The village's beauty also drew filmmakers, who shot scenes for Cathay-Keris Studio's 1962 Malay movie *Singapura Dilanggar Todak* there.

One prominent household in the village was that of footballer Quah Kim Song (b. 1952), whose family had a seaside house at Jalan Tanjong Irau. This house had a large compound where the Quah brothers honed the footballing skills that made them national stars between the 1960s and 1980s.

Richard Kuah (b. 1971), who stayed near Andrews Avenue in the 1980s, often visited Kampong Tanjong Irau to catch fish and crabs:



The bridge that crossed Sungei Simpang into Kampong Tanjong Irau, 1980s  
Courtesy of Richard Kuah



*Kampong Tanjong Irau, 1985*  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.



*A house at Tanjong Irau, 1980s*  
Courtesy of Richard Kuah

"We would go to Sungei Simpang to catch crabs and swim – it was not canalised then. You had to be careful because in the river there was a lot of sand and mud. Beyond the mouth of the river, we could walk across when the tide was low, and there were a lot of flower crabs there."

Kuah added that until the mid-1980s, people used a small bridge that crossed Sungei Simpang to reach Kampong Tanjong Irau:

"Last time, at this bridge, we would drag a net across the river to catch the incoming tide and sink it using weights at both ends. We would

then collect the net when the tide receded. Once a while, we even got fishes like small barracuda."

Junaidah binte Salleh (b. 1970), a former resident of Sembawang's JTC flats, also recalled this bridge:

"Some of my brother-in-law's relatives were living at Tanjong Irau and their houses were built on stilts above the water. You walk in and there's a canal, and after the canal is Tanjong Irau. I remember there was a bridge for us to cross over. We used to walk all the way to the end of the village of Tanjong Irau. And from there, we could see Pulau Seletar."

By 1986, the residents of Kampong Tanjong Irau were resettled and the former village area is now a military training ground and off-limits to the public.

### **Kampong Tengah**

*Tengah* means "middle" in Malay, and Kampong Tengah was aptly located between Kampong Wak Hassan and Kampong Tanjong Irau. It is unknown when the village was

founded, but there were already a few houses when the government designated this area as the Sembawang Malay Settlement (Petempatan Melayu Sembawang) in 1960. This Settlement was established to provide homes for Malays working at the naval base, but other people were also permitted to settle there.

Kampong Tengah had about 200 houses and a community centre, which was opened in 1960 by then Health Minister Ahmad Ibrahim. Reflecting its coastal location, roads in the village were named after fishes: Jalan Ingu (damsel fish), Jalan Mempurong (a kind of anchovy), Jalan Selimang (a kind of carp) and Jalan Ketuka (a kind of stingray). Nazariah Merdali (b. 1971) shared this memory of the area:

"My parents originally rented a small room at a house in Andrews Avenue. Later, we moved to my grandmother's house at No. 2 Jalan Ingu and I had my early education at Sembawang

*Primary School near Sembawang Park. I stayed at Sembawang until I was 15 years old, when we were asked to move to Yishun. Till today, I still go back to my roots on a daily basis for my morning run. I park at the mosque and run at Simpang Kiri Park Connector. I still miss my kampong life, it was such a lovely experience."*

Kampong Tengah was also the home of Kassim Selamat (1934-2019), a singer of Baweanese descent who became a regional pop star during the 1960s. Kassim, an engine fitter at the naval base, led a band named The Swallows and became famous for songs such as *La-A-Obe* and *Angkok-angkok Bilis*, which were written in an upbeat musical style known as "pop yeh-yeh".

Near Kampong Tengah, there was another, smaller village known as Kampong Lobang Bom ("bomb hole" in Malay). This village, which was located off Jalan Basong, got its name as a bomb fell in the area during World War II and created a large crater.



*The coastline off Jalan Selimang, 1946*  
Roland Craske Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



### KEDAI GEMUK AT KAMPONG TENGAH

One house at Kampong Tengah that was frequented by many villagers was 58 Jalan Ketuka. This house was the family home of Richard Ng (b. 1969) from 1964 until 1986, and also a provision shop nicknamed Kedai Gemuk ("Fatty's Shop" in Malay), after Ng's father, who was rather plump. He shared:

*"We were the only Chinese provision shop in the entire Malay kampong at Kampong Tengah. My house used to be about 100 metres from the mosque [Masjid Petempatan]. It was a very carefree lifestyle. We had mango and guava trees in the compound. I would bike around the kampong and play soccer with my Malay friends. I grew up learning Malay and Hokkien – only later did I learn English and Mandarin."*

*"During Hari Raya, the kampong was especially fun. The villagers would bring food to my mom – ketupat, rendang, curries – and my mom would give them some provisions and drinks. And during the fasting month, the mosque would cook porridge and distribute it in the afternoon. My mom would send me there with a container and I was the only Chinese kid standing in line. The porridge was very nice; they cooked it for hours over charcoal in a huge pot."*

Ng, who attended Sembawang Primary School, described how the village's children reached their classes:

*"The way we got to school was crazy. You either save 10-15 minutes by going through a swamp between Jalan Inggū and Kampong Wak Hassan – there's a long plank and you cross it, and when the tide was high we would try to run across – or else you would take the long route through Andrews Avenue. The swamp was a good 30-40 metres wide. Most of us were lazy so we took this short cut."*

He also recalled the village's community centre, which was between Jalan Mempurong and Jalan Selimang:

*"In Kampong Tengah the community centre was quite active. On Saturdays, there was a mobile library van and you used a library card when you check out one book and return the book next week. It was a white-coloured bus. At the CC, they also taught us drawing, and we went there to watch P. Ramlee movies – you sit outside and they screen it on a white canvas at night."*



Richard Ng (boy in front on left), with his family at 58 Jalan Ketuka, 1970s  
Courtesy of Richard Ng



Students queuing up to visit the mobile library at Kampong Tengah Community Centre, 1967  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

### MASJID PETEMPATAN MELAYU SEMBAWANG

27B Jalan Mempurong

Opened in 1963, Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang was built by the residents of Kampong Tengah, and is the only surviving landmark of the former village today. The mosque also served the Muslim community in the nearby villages of Kampong Wak Hassan and Kampong Tanjong Irau.

Mohd Amin bin AB Latip (b. 1951), who was born in Kampong Tengah and now serves as the mosque's chairman, explained that the building of the mosque was a community effort:

*"Before that there was only a surau [prayer house]. So in the 1960s, we decided to have a mosque here. The cost was borne by the kampong people. We did house-to-house collections until we had enough money to build the foundation."*

Lee Foundation, a charity founded by rubber magnate Lee Kong Chian, also donated \$10,000 to the cause. The villagers then

constructed the mosque themselves, serving as carpenters, architects and engineers who prepared the site and erected the building. Mohd Amin recalled: "I was helping to carry the rotan baskets filled with sand – that was my contribution!"

Near the mosque's entrance, there is a *kentong*, a wooden slit-drum made from jackfruit wood. According to Mohd Amin, the *kentong* was used to inform people of prayer times, important news such as a death in the village, and to announce an emergency.

Inside, the prayer hall, which can hold about 300 people, is supported by a central carved wooden column called the *tiang seri*, a feature of traditional Malay mosque architecture. Outside, the mosque's compound has a large rubber tree that is thought to be at least a century old and Singapore's oldest surviving rubber tree. In the book *The Last Kampung Mosque in Singapore*, the mosque's former chairman Haji Mohamed Suppien Mokree recalled that past attempts to fell this tree were unsuccessful; hence, the villagers



Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



decided to leave the tree alone. Its trunk bears bulging scars left by a bulldozer that had tried but failed to topple it.

The mosque was originally slated for redevelopment in the 1990s, but has survived due to efforts by the community, who appealed to the authorities to preserve it as a religious



*The prayer hall in Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang with its central tiang seri, 2021*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



*The famous rubber tree on the grounds of Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang, 2021*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

and social space for Muslims in the area. With the support of then Sembawang Member of Parliament Dr Tony Tan, the mosque was retained. Today, Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang continues to be a popular gathering place for the Muslim community in Sembawang.

#### **FORMER KAMPONG TENGAH HOLIDAY CAMP (now PAssion WaVe @ Sembawang)**

60 Jalan Mempurong

A major community institution at Kampong Tengah, the former Kampong Tengah Holiday Camp (now PAssion WaVe @ Sembawang) opened in 1961 at Jalan Mempurong. Operated by the People's Association (PA), this campsite was popular with youths and community groups, who organised camps and canoeing sessions.

The PA later redeveloped the campsite into Sembawang Sea Sports Club, which was officially opened on 3 September 1995 by then Home Affairs Minister and PA Deputy Chairman Wong Kan Seng. This was the largest sea sports centre set up by the PA then, with sheds for canoes, kayaks and windsurfing equipment.

Between 2004 and 2012, this site was also home to Bottle Tree Village, a kampong-style theme park featuring bottle trees imported from Australia. Meanwhile, the PA revamped the Sea Sports Club in 2008 and reopened it as Water-Venture (Sembawang), which was



*Visitors and campers at Kampong Tengah Holiday Camp, 1966*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Red House, 1923-1924*  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection

later renamed PAssion WaVe @ Sembawang in 2015. Today, the facility offers amenities for various sea sports as well as dormitories and campsites for families and community groups.

#### **SEASIDE BUNGALOWS**

Apart from the villages and campsite, Sembawang's coast also had seaside bungalows built by wealthy individuals. In the early 20th century, such seaside homes were popular as holiday retreats that provided their owners with a quiet and scenic place to get away from the crowded town centre.

#### **Seletar Grange and Red House**

In the early 20th century, a bungalow named Seletar Grange stood near the present site of the current PAssion WaVe @ Sembawang. Originally the residence of Alfred St Alban Smith, manager of Seletar Rubber Estates, Seletar Grange was later converted into a hotel and operated until 1941 when its owner A. Lumsden Milne died. The bungalow was later demolished.

Another seaside bungalow, which survives today, is Red House, which was built in 1919 by tycoon Joseph Aaron Elias (1881-1949). The bungalow was named for its red roof, but it was also known as Cupola House after a small rooftop dome. The Eliases most likely used Red House as a holiday retreat, and the only way to reach it then was by boat from Seletar Pier. Red House was acquired in the early 1920s for the British naval base.

During the Japanese Occupation, the bungalow was said to have been occupied by the Kempeitai. After the war, it was used by the Naval Base Sailing Club until the club closed in 1975. Red House then became part of a Maritime Training School for seamen, which was opened in 1980 by the National Maritime Board (now Maritime and Port Authority). It was also used by the Singapore Armed Forces Yacht Club, but was vacated after the club opened a new clubhouse nearby in 1999.

Red House still stands but is located within Sembawang Camp and not accessible to the public.



### Beaulieu House and Beaulieu Jetty

117 Beaulieu Road, located within Sembawang Park

Another seaside bungalow that has survived until the present day is Beaulieu House. This elegant bungalow was built in the 1910s by businessman Joseph Brooke David (1890-1946). *Beaulieu* means “beautiful place” in French and this name may have originated from the house’s intricate design and scenic location overlooking the Johor Strait. Like Red House, Beaulieu House served as a holiday retreat.

Beaulieu House’s architecture is neoclassical in design. The front porch and verandah are lined by intricate Victorian-style cast-iron railings. Similar railings also line a balcony-like patio on the rooftop. Inside the house, there is a handwrought cast-iron framework with an intricate design of stars and other shapes. Such extensive cast-iron work was not common then and likely a reflection of the owner’s wealth. The floor of the front porch is covered by terrazzo clay tiles containing marble and quartz chips that catch and reflect light. Further in, the floor of the main hall has multi-coloured clay tiles that form beautiful geometric patterns.

In 1923, Beaulieu House was acquired by the British government and became the residence of C.H. Cole, the Superintending Civil Engineer for Sembawang Naval Base. In 1940, Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy’s Eastern Fleet, became the house’s occupant, and after the war in the 1950s, Beaulieu House served as the home of the Captain of the Dockyard.

In the 1960s, the house became the residence of the Chief-of-Staff of the Far East Fleet. During this time, the Chief-of-Staff and his team would greet warships heading to the naval base with a salute from a jetty below the house. This pier, known as Beaulieu Jetty, was begun by the British in the early 1940s, but completed by the Japanese during the Occupation. In the 1970s, it was also known as Mata Jetty, as it stood at the end of a small road called Mata Road. Jerome Lim (b. 1965) was a frequent visitor during that period:

*“My dad was very fond of the sea, so in the 1970s after the base opened up [to the public], we could gain access to the old Beaulieu Jetty. At*

*that time there were no railings. We came to fish and catch crabs. We spent nights at the jetty. We would wade into the water, using a butterfly net to scoop up whatever we could find. The sea was very rich in two things beside crabs: stingrays and catfish. Those days, we could build open fires, so we brought some chicken wire, charcoal, twigs – we catch the crab and it immediately goes onto the grill on the beach.”*

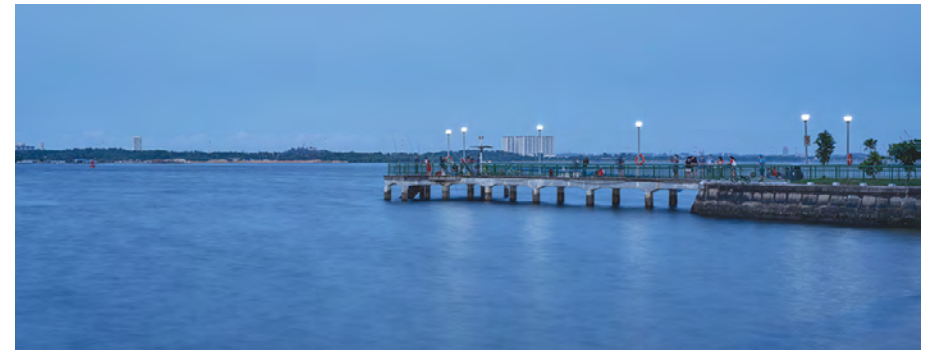
As there were no railings then, a car drove off the jetty in 1975, resulting in the death

of one passenger. Beaulieu Jetty, which was renovated in 1978, remains a popular spot with fishermen, especially for crabs which are abundant in the rocks beneath.

Meanwhile, Beaulieu House was vacated in 1971 when the British withdrew their military forces. The house and its surrounding area were later redeveloped into Sembawang Park, which opened in 1979. Since 1981, Beaulieu House has served as a restaurant and in 2005, the building was accorded conservation status.



Beaulieu House, 1920s  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



Beaulieu Jetty overlooking the Johor Strait, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Beaulieu House, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

# HM NAVAL BASE, SINGAPORE

Sembawang's landscape was dominated by farms and rubber estates until the 1920s, when the British chose Sembawang as the site of their naval base in Singapore. Officially known as HM Naval Base, Singapore (HM is short for His or Her Majesty's), this sprawling facility was also known as the Singapore Naval Base or Sembawang Naval Base.

After World War I, Britain began to make plans to establish a new naval base to protect its territories in the Far East. The British already had a naval base in Hong Kong, but this facility was too close to Japan and thus vulnerable to attack. In 1919, the British decided to locate the naval base in Singapore, and four potential sites were considered: Pasir Ris, Punggol, Woodlands and Sembawang. Sembawang was eventually selected in 1922 and in

the following year, the British government approved plans for a fully equipped naval base in Singapore that could service a naval fleet and accommodate thousands of sailors.

To provide land for the naval base, the colonial government in Singapore acquired rubber estates from Bukit Sembawang as well as seaside properties such as Red House and Beaulieu House. Sir John Jackson Limited, a British firm, then won a contract to build the base in 1928. Construction commenced shortly after, and the first major portion of the naval base to be installed was Admiralty Floating Dock No. IX, which was declared open by the governor Sir Hugh Charles Clifford on 14 August 1929. This was the third largest floating dock in the world then and could raise warships weighing up to 50,000 tonnes above the water for repairs.



Guests at the official opening of the naval base, 1938  
From the Edwin A. Brown Collection. All rights reserved, Celia Mary Ferguson and National Library Board, Singapore 2008.

The centrepiece of the naval base, King George VI Dry Dock, was completed in 1937 and declared opened on 14 February 1938. This day also marked the naval base's official opening by governor Sir Shenton Thomas. Named after the then monarch of Britain, the 305-metre-long King George VI Dry Dock was the world's largest dry dock then and could fit the Royal Navy's largest battleships. After a ship enters the dock, the enclosure is sealed and water is pumped out so that the ship can be repaired while dry.



A dockyard worker and warship at the floating dock, c. 1942  
© IWM (K 811)

## MARITIME CONNECTIONS: THE NAVAL BASE'S ROADS AND GATES

The area within the former Sembawang Naval Base has many roads with naval-themed names. Admiralty Road East and Admiralty Road West, the main roads through the base, were built in 1923. Canberra Road was named in 1937 after a visiting Australian warship. Other roads in the area, such as Canada Road and Wellington Road, were named after countries or cities in the British Commonwealth.

Notable naval commanders were honoured in the naming of Cochrane Crescent (Thomas John Cochrane) and Drake Avenue (Francis Drake). Gibraltar Crescent, Deptford Road and Malta Crescent bear the names of other British naval bases. Finally, King's Avenue and Queen's Avenue were where the residences of senior dockyard officers were located.

Until 1971, the entire naval base was a restricted area and people could enter only via specific gates. Canberra Gate, which led to Canberra Road from Sembawang Road, was the main gateway for most visitors. Further up Sembawang Road was Sembawang Gate, which led to Admiralty Road East.

Although these gates have been demolished, a part of Rotherham Gate still stands at the western end of Admiralty Road West, enveloped by a fig tree. Another surviving

gateway is the former dockyard's main gate, which leads into the former HM Dockyard, Singapore (now Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard, a restricted area).



The former Canberra Gate, 1960s  
Courtesy of Tony Dyer and Sofea Abdul Rahman



The former dockyard's main gate, which now leads into Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



## WORKING IN THE NAVAL BASE

The naval base employed thousands of workers in its dockyard, where ships were repaired. These workers and their families came from Singapore and Malaya as well as India and Hong Kong. Many of these workers resided in quarters within the naval base, where they established community and religious institutions that have survived to this day.

Yee Lai (1904-1998), who worked in the naval base from 1931-1968, described the dockyard before the war:

*"In those days, the dockyard comprised merely a few small zinc-roofed buildings that housed the various trades. There were a lot of local people working in the yard, including Malays, Indians and Chinese. Accommodation for us was provided free-of-charge in the Asian quarters. For myself, with a family, we were given a two-room unit with a little kitchen."*

*"Working hours were quite short, from 7am to about 4.30pm. The Europeans and us work the same hours – officially. Unofficially, the expatriates would always leave early to play football or for some other recreational activities. There were many departments in the dockyard. Each was very specialised. There were a Locomotive Shop, a Coppersmith Shop, a Steel*



Dockyard workers at the naval base, c. 1942  
© IWM (K 785)



Dockyard workers in the blacksmith's workshop, 1941  
Australian War Memorial (00746)

*Shop, a Joinery, a Moulding Shop, a Boiler Shop, the Radio/Radar Maintenance Department, the Electrical Engineering Department, the Chief Engineer's Department, the Chief Constructor's Department, a Gunnery Shop, the Iron Foundry and the Time Keeping Department... I was a boiler maker, I worked on the ship's boilers."*

Another former naval base worker was Mydeen Kutty Mydeen (1919-2007), who attended a school there in the 1930s:

*"The school was named Sir John Jackson's School. Sir John Jackson was the contractor for the naval base, which built the docks. While I studied, my father worked... I studied at Sir John Jackson's School until Standard 5, when the school closed. Sir John Jackson had completed its contract to build the naval base and the British then took over the place. There was a school called Admiralty Asian School, where I studied for just a year."*

Mydeen later worked at the naval base. He shared:

*"I worked there for 25 years as a telephone operator. Then I became a telephone supervisor. At that time, the British controlled the naval base. Ships came in and out for repairs. They were all British warships. I also played football. I was captain of the Naval Base Asian Football Eleven. There was a field where we gathered in the evening after work to play football."*

One dockyard employee who became a prominent figure was Ahmad Ibrahim (1927-1962), who came to Singapore from Penang



Then Health Minister Ahmad Ibrahim at the official opening of Chong Pang Community Centre, 1961  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

after the war and worked in the Naval Base Fire Department. He became a leader in the Naval Base Labour Union and won a seat in Singapore's Legislative Assembly in 1955. In the 1959 elections, he ran again and won as a People's Action Party candidate. He then served as Health Minister until 1961 when he was named Labour Minister. Mydeen recalled Ahmad Ibrahim during the 1950s:

*"Sembawang had an MP whom we nominated, Ahmad Ibrahim. He was a fire brigade telephone exchange operator. Then, I was a main exchange telephone supervisor and also a committee member of the Naval Base Labour Union. Ahmad Ibrahim was Assistant Secretary of the Labour Union... We nominated him as our representative for the election. He was a humble man who spoke well – that was why we nominated him."*

## TOWARDS WAR AND THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

HM Naval Base was declared open in 1938, but it was a base without a fleet. Britain was unable to send a full fleet to Singapore after World War II broke out in Europe in 1939. Instead, to deter the Japanese, the British dispatched Force Z, a small squadron led by two capital ships, HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*.

Force Z reached Singapore on 2 December 1941, but failed to discourage the Japanese, who invaded Malaya on 8 December. Force Z lacked air support and was thus helpless when Japanese planes attacked it off Kuantan on 10 December, sinking both capital ships and killing 840 sailors, including their commander Admiral Sir Tom Phillips.

Meanwhile, Japanese planes attacked the naval base, causing large fires. With the Japanese army amassing just across the Johor Strait, the British damaged the docks and destroyed other equipment to prevent the Japanese from using the base. The base was then evacuated by end-January 1942. After the British surrender, the Japanese occupied and repaired the base, which was renamed Syonan Naval Base and used to repair

Japanese warships. During the invasion, many dockyard workers fled. One of them was Yee Lai, who recalled:

*"The Japanese ill-treated the local workmen who remained in the dockyard. A friend of mine was one of those who was beaten to death by the Japanese in the dockyard. He was working and tried to ask a Japanese something about the watch the guard was wearing. The guard thought my friend was saying that it was time to stop work so he was singled out for punishment and was beaten for several days. My poor friend, he eventually died of his injuries."*

After the war ended in September 1945, the British returned to the naval base and re-employed their former dockyard workers. Yee Lai recalled:

*"After the Japanese surrendered and left, the dockyard put an advertisement in the papers for all ex-dockyard workers to return to work there. I immediately returned and got my old job as a boilermaker back in 1945. The place was a mess when I went back. Everything was very disorganised. There was nobody in charge. We were just told to get to work. And we were not even paid for the first few months... On my retirement when I was 65 in 1968, I received a gratuity of \$8,000 and a certificate of commendation but still no sign of that few months' pay!"*

### **HMS TERROR AND AGGIE WESTON'S ROYAL SAILORS' REST**

Former HMS Terror (now Sembawang Camp):  
32 Admiralty Road West (not open to public)

Former Aggie Weston's: 301 Canberra Road  
(not open to public)

The naval base remained an important military facility in the post-war decades. It housed Britain's Far East Fleet, which was involved in the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) and the Korean War (1950-1953). Ships based at Sembawang Naval Base also patrolled the region during Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* against the Federation of Malaysia from 1963-1966.

For sailors who disembarked at the naval base, "home" was the Royal Naval Barracks or HMS Terror. Naval barracks were traditionally named after a ship assigned to a naval base. Hence, the barracks at Sembawang were named after HMS Terror, a warship stationed at Singapore from 1933-1939. Alan Tait (b. 1936) first visited HMS Terror in 1959. He wrote:

*"I was 23 years old and wide open to new experiences. I arrived there on board the HMS Centaur which was an aircraft carrier... the heat on board was relentless, so when we were told we would be victualled in HMS Terror during the docking period, it was a blessed relief! The ship was taken into King George VI Dry Dock. She was an impressive spectacle high and dry in the glorious sunshine. The accommodation at HMS Terror was on several levels with each level having lovely cool balconies. We spent hours there writing letters home, chatting and playing cards etc. A short walk away was a swimming pool. Tiger Beer flowed like water. After life on board, this was just about paradise."*

After the British forces left Singapore in 1971, HMS Terror was renamed Terror Barracks and housed ANZUK, a defence force involving Australia, New Zealand and the UK. The barracks had a club called Terror Club, where James Seah (b. 1948) briefly worked in the early 1970s:

*"I worked inside the naval base. There was a Terror Club, which was actually for members*



*HMS Terror, the warship after which the naval barracks at Sembawang were named, undated*  
© IWM (FL 3724)

*only. I worked there as a bartender, serving drinks. They had a restaurant and big swimming pool. They were under ANZUK, so most of the ANZUK forces were members of the Terror Club together with their families. They didn't pay with money, they paid using coupons. We had quarters inside the club, but I stayed there only for a few months."*

The Republic of Singapore Navy also occupied part of the former HMS Terror, where it ran a Midshipman School from 1974-1994 to train naval officers. In 1971, Singapore's Navy also took over a former Fleet Diving Centre at the barracks, which became the SAF Diving Centre and was renamed the Naval Diving Unit in 1975. This centre was redeveloped in 1997 into a state-of-the-art facility with a training structure named HMS (Hull Mock-Up System) Terror after the original naval barracks. Today, the former Terror Barracks is known as Sembawang Camp.

Another facility frequented by visiting sailors was Aggie Weston's Royal Sailors' Rest, which

opened in 1963 at Canberra Road. Aggie's (as it was nicknamed) had a swimming pool, sports facilities and food outlets, but did not serve alcohol as its founder Agnes Weston (1840-1918) was a teetotaler. After the British left, Aggie's became Fernleaf Centre, a clubhouse for New Zealand troops based in Singapore from 1971-1989. The building was then occupied by HomeTeamNS Sembawang until 2020.

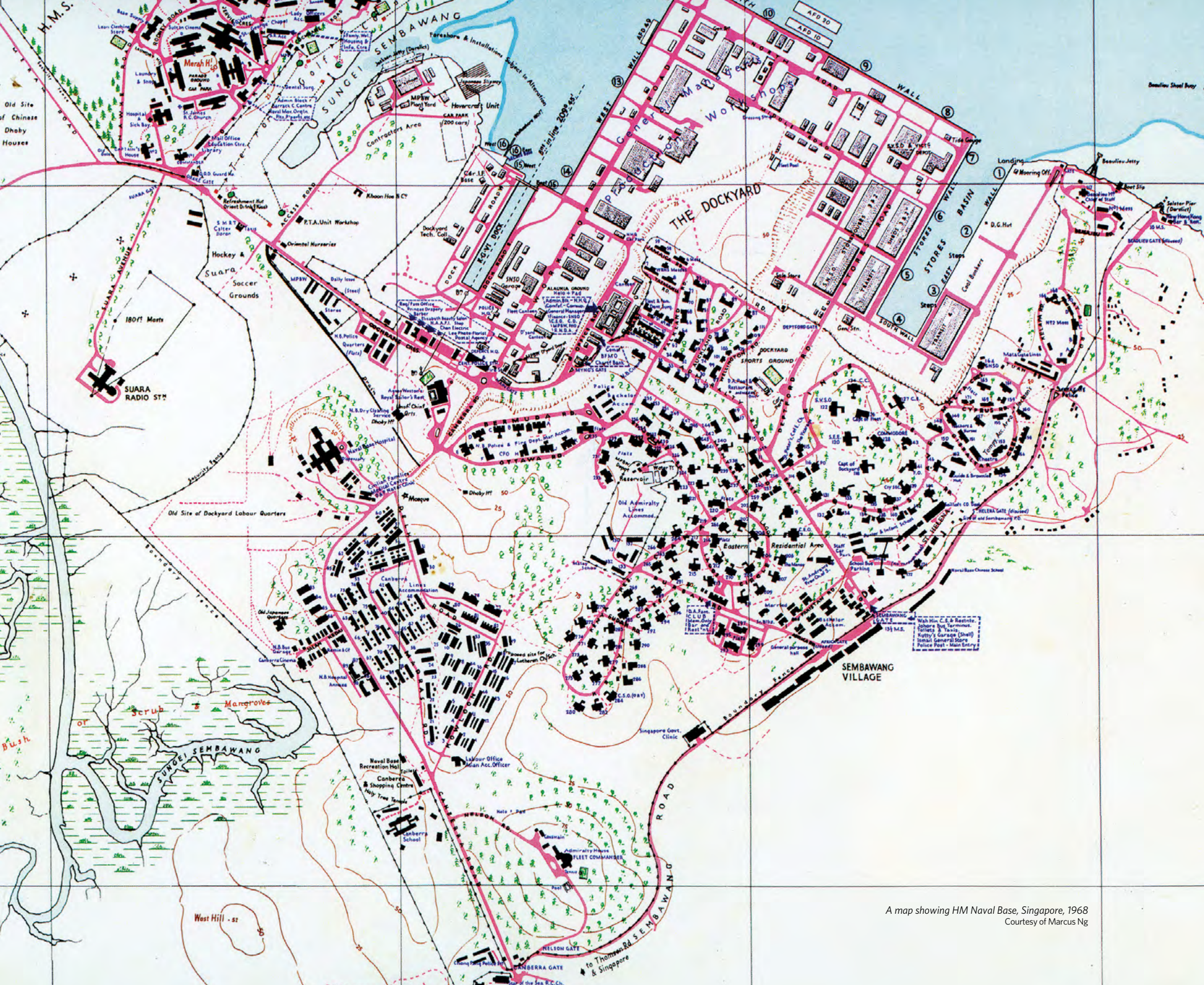


*Accommodation Block E at HMS Terror, 1966*  
Courtesy of David Ayres



*Aggie Weston's Royal Sailors' Rest, 1966*  
Courtesy of David Ayres





A map showing HM Naval Base, Singapore, 1968  
Courtesy of Marcus Ng



## LIVING IN THE NAVAL BASE

Canberra Road was also the home of many Asian dockyard workers, who resided in an area known as the Canberra Asian Quarters or Canberra Lines. Built before the war, these quarters consisted of about 90 blocks located along Canberra Road and three former side roads: Kowloon Road, Madras Road and Delhi Road. Describing these quarters, Dhoraisingam Stephen Samuel (b. 1925), who worked at the naval base in the 1940s, recalled:

*"When you went to 13th milestone [Sembawang Road], you would have Canberra Gate which will lead you into the naval base... and then you will find multistorey blocks of flats where all the people were housed, all the workers. Those with more than two rooms were occupied by Indians with families. But those who were bachelors or had their families in India were all occupying bachelors' quarters. It simply meant that downstairs there was a void deck, and then you climb the staircase and you had a single room with a bathroom attached."*

Leung Yew Kwong (b. 1953), who resided at Block 8, Kowloon Road, shared:

*"I was living in the Asian quarters of the naval base, all of which have by now been demolished for the ubiquitous HDB flats. My father was then working in the naval dockyards and his employers provided him with a flat with modern sanitation and unlimited use of water and power."*

Describing the daily routine in the 1960s, he added:

*"Work in the naval dockyards started at 7am and ended at 4pm. Each morning, the siren in the dockyards would sound to herald the start of the working day. Similarly, the siren would break the silence of the day at 4pm in the afternoon to signal the end of the working day, which would see hordes of workers on bicycles emanating from the gates of the dockyards. The siren would be audible throughout the naval base and even beyond the fence when we were at school. Besides informing the workers that they could leave their workplaces, the sound also warned the children*

*that they should quickly return home as father would be back soon."*

The dockyard was known for its many Malayalee workers from Kerala, but Leung explained that it also had workers from Hong Kong:

*"My father, together with others from the Hong Kong dockyard, were transferred to the Singapore Naval Base in the 1930s. This may be the reason why the main Chinese dialect used in shipyards in Singapore was Cantonese... The naval ships in the dockyard, their cooks are usually Cantonese, so when they docked, he would invite them to our house and play mahjong. In the early 1960s, he had a salary of \$300 a month, a princely sum then when most of his co-workers had \$200."*

Another former resident of the Canberra Lines was Wan Chan Peew (b. 1946), whose father was also originally from the Hong Kong dockyard:

*"Hong Kong had a British dockyard up to before World War II and a lot of workers were willing to move to Singapore. I imagine he came over not long after the outbreak of World War II. We were staying at Block 14, Room 12, Kowloon Road, where I was born. The quarters was a two-room unit with a little verandah."*

Describing his father's work, he said:

*"He was working in the metal foundry. The ship parts often needed replacement and were usually made from metal alloys like brass. Hard metal is*



Residents of Canberra Lines during a visit by Britain's Prince Philip, 1959  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

*melted into liquid, and this molten metal is poured over a mould to form a replacement part like a propellor. They paid peanuts. I remember my father was drawing \$257 a month in the 1960s, which was the maximum for his grade."*

Within the naval base, there were shops and other amenities that catered to the workers. Wan explained:

*"We were self-sufficient. We had all the basic amenities—nearby primary and secondary schools, hospitals, two cinemas, daily needs. There was no reason to go elsewhere, everything was at our doorstep. The furthest we would need to go was Chong Pang, which had two wet markets and a wide range of provision shops. And it was affordable. For 30 cents you could get a bowl of wanton mee, and roti prata was 10-20 cents. The concentration of shops was at Jalan Kedai [formerly off Canberra Road], basically provision shops for Chinese, Indians and Malays, and Canberra Cinema at the bottom of the road."*

Subhas Anandan (1947-2015), who stayed in the quarters in the 1960s, described the place as "a very close-knit community". He added:

*"Even during the riots and all that, we had no curfews, nothing. We could go and see a movie and all. People knew each other, the community was really united, we had no problems, racial problems, nothing. And we had Chinese, Malays, Malayalees, Tamils all living together."*

*"When the big ships come in, they will open up the dry dock. The ship will come in and they will close it back. The water will go off but the fish that come in cannot go out. So the whole dock is full of fish and people are just going down and collecting the fish. People were very good in the sense that not everybody worked in the dry dock, you see. So those who were there would take [fish] and share with all the workers. So when the big ships come, it's like a party, a carnival in the base, everybody having fresh fish."*

To get around the naval base, which stretched from Sembawang Road all the way to Woodlands, residents and visitors could walk, cycle or take an internal bus service. Lawrence Wong (b. 1940) shared that this bus service, which began in 1937, was run by two of his uncles:

*"The company was called HM Naval Base Bus Company. One of my uncles got the contract to*



Quarters for Asian dockyard workers in the naval base, 1940  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



*run this bus service in the naval base and started with five buses. They were all of different shapes: one would be where you could climb up from the back, one was from the side door, some were slightly bigger, the fleet was not uniform."*

Wong would visit his uncles at the base on weekends. He said:

*"To get into the naval base you must have a pass. But last time, security was so poor, I just walked in and out. The bus ride inside would go to the dockyard. If you turn left, you will go to HMS Terror and you could continue until you see the Causeway and get off at Rotherham Gate. People who want to go to Johor will get off there. The bus doesn't go out of the gate, he will turn around as he has no license to operate outside – it was exclusively in the naval base."*



*A bus used by the naval base internal bus service, 1955*  
F W York Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Dockyard workers during their daily commute, 1966*  
Courtesy of David Ayres

## **LITTLE KERALA: MALAYALEES AT THE NAVAL BASE**

Sree Narayana Mission: 12 Yishun Avenue 5

During the 1950s and 1960s, the naval base was also referred to as "Little Kerala" or *Kochu Keralam* in Malayalam (the Keralan language), as the majority of its workers were Malayalees, who originate from Kerala, a state in southwest India. In the mid-20th century, large numbers of Malayalees came to Singapore to seek work. Many were well-educated and spoke English; hence they readily found jobs at the dockyard, which employed about 5,000 Malayalees in 1960.

The naval base had amenities that catered to the Malayalee community, such as a Keralan spice mill at Jalan Kedai, messes (canteens) serving Keralan food and Malayalam classes for children. There was also a Naval Base Kerala Library, which was established in 1954 at Delhi Road and housed thousands of Malayalam as well as Tamil and English books. This library also organised concerts and dramas, including performances for the annual Onam festival.

Onam, which falls on August or September, is a festival celebrated by Malayalees of all faiths. The festival recalls King Mahabali, an ancient ruler of Kerala who brought peace and prosperity to his people. Jealous deities then

banished the king to the netherworld, but he was permitted to visit his people once a year during Onam, which is celebrated over 10 days, with a 26-course vegetarian feast on the 10th day.

After the British left Singapore, the Naval Base Kerala Library moved to Pakistan Road, where it remained until 1993. Its books were then stored in its members' homes. Despite having no physical site, the library continued to be active for many years, with its members organising cultural shows and Onam celebrations.

Poravankara (P. N.) Balji (b. 1948), recalled that his father P. Narayanan Nair served as the library's secretary in the 1950s and 1960s, and also took part in many literary performances:

*"My father came to Singapore when he about 15 or 16 years old. He must have heard that Singapore was a land of plenty. He had no money so he was a stowaway in a ship and ended up in the former naval base. That area was known for a long time as 'Little Kerala'.*

*"My father was very active outside. Work for one, but also trade union activities. He was also a theatre artiste and actor, and he was a poet. He was very involved in such activities. Every Friday, he would come home with an envelope of cash and give it to*

*my mother and she ran the house. But the money was not enough so she often had to borrow."*

Balji's family of seven resided at Block 9, Delhi Road:

*"We had two rooms. I would call it a very Spartan existence, but at that time it was quite luxurious. The girls slept in the living room, and because my house was a corner house, there was a verandah, so we blocked off the outer part and that became my father's bedroom and also the dining room."*

After his father retired in 1969, Balji's family left the naval base, but he still has fond memories of the community there:

*"The naval base was unusual as it was a little island and a secure place. One thing I valued about*



*A dance performance by the Naval Base Kerala Library, 1966*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*A dance class at Sree Narayana Mission, 1950s*  
Courtesy of Anitha Devi Pillai and B. Aravindakshan Pillai

*being in the naval base was that it was a Little Kerala – the Keralan people were very tightly knit. They even organised lessons in Malayalam. Even today I can still read and write Malayalam."*

Another institution established by the Malayalees is Sree Narayana Mission, which was founded in 1948. Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928) was a saint and teacher from Kerala, whose followers included many Malayalees at the naval base who originally gathered at an attap hut. As their numbers grew, the community sought to build a proper mission hall.

Lim Chong Pang, owner of the nearby Chong Pang Village, then donated land at Soon Keat Road, where a Sree Narayana mission Hall was completed in 1956. This building housed a library and an auditorium where cultural and social events were held. The mission also awarded scholarships to deserving pupils of all backgrounds in Sembawang, and also ran counselling services for residents.

In 1979, the mission opened a Home for the Aged Sick, which was later located in the former Sembawang Hospital at Canberra Road from 1983-1994. This hospital was originally built for Asian dockyard workers in 1939-1940, and was later converted into Sembawang Hospital, which operated from 1971-1983. Sree Narayana Mission remained at Canberra Road until 1994, when the mission opened a new headquarters and nursing home at Yishun Avenue 5.



*Sree Narayana Mission's Home for the Aged Sick in the former Sembawang Hospital, 1988*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

## FROM MUDFLATS TO METROPOLIS

"Never Fear" Marker: Block 313 Sembawang Drive

On 12 September 1965, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew visited the Sree Narayana Mission at Soon Keat Road and delivered a landmark speech entitled "From Mudflats to Metropolis":

*"Over 100 years ago, this was a mud-flat, swamp. Today, this is a modern city. Ten years from now, this will be a metropolis! Never fear."*

Lee's speech came at a vital time, as Singapore had recently separated from Malaysia and many people were uncertain about Singapore's future as an independent nation. To commemorate this speech, a "Never Fear" marker was installed at Block 313 Sembawang Drive (the site of the speech) on 16 February 2020 to remind Singaporeans that every generation will continue to build the nation with courage and a "never fear" spirit.



*The "Never Fear" Marker, 2021*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

## SCHOOLS AND SOCCER

Within the naval base, Europeans had their own school at St Helena Road, while local workers sent their children to Admiralty Asian School, which opened in 1932 at Durban Road. P. N. Balji, who spent five years at Admiralty Asian School in the 1950s, recalled:

*"It was a two-storey building and you had to climb up steep steps to get to the classroom. Once I fell climbing down and hit my head, and it was quite a deep wound. I studied there for five years, then we moved to Naval Base School."*

Naval Base School, which opened in 1957 at Bah Tan Road, took in pupils from Admiralty Asian School, which closed in 1958. Its students included children of dockyard employees as well as people from outside the base. Some well-known former students include football coach P. N. Sivaji, footballer Quah Kim Song and jazz singer Claressa Monteiro. Christabelle Alvis (b. 1931) recalled teaching at Naval Base School in the 1950s:

*"There were no fans, no electricity for a whole year. The access road was so muddy and it was*

*only a track. Teachers had to wear different types of shoes. One pair to walk and then change and wash their feet. But it slowly grew and it got better and it became quite a good big school in the end although it started off with difficult beginnings."*

Leung Yew Kwong shared these memories of the school:

*"For those of us living in the naval base, the shortcut to school was via a small unnamed gate in a section of the fence that separated the school from the naval base... the ingenious would find a loose screw in the fence which enabled one to slide the steel bar ajar to allow their slender bodies to slide past."*

*"All these were not without their risks. Members of the Naval Base Police Force in their distinctive khaki uniform and shorts would, from time to time, police the perimeter of the fence to deter trespassers. The constables were themselves the fathers of the children who went to the school. Not that they would pursue us any less if they were to find us gaining access into the naval base in other than the permitted ways. I remembered vividly being pursued along with my friends, by*



*A football game at the Deptford Road grounds, 1966*  
Courtesy of David Ayres



a police inspector (father of a schoolmate) on a motorcycle on one of those non-permitted entries. We were let off with a wagging finger."

Naval Base School was originally a full school, which meant that it had classes from Primary One to Secondary Four. In 1968, its primary pupils were transferred to West Hill School and Canberra School and the school henceforth became Naval Base Secondary School. In 1988, it moved to Yishun Ring Road.

Canberra School was established in 1952 as a primary school for children from the naval base as well as nearby villages. The school closed in 1988 and its pupils were transferred to Huamin Primary School. B. Aravindakshan Pillai, who attended Canberra School in the 1950s, recalled:

*"That time there were no buses, so from my home [in Lorong Maha] we walked all the way to Chong Pang, crossed the Sultan Theatre circus to Bah Tan Road to get to Canberra Primary School. If there was rain, we took off our canvas shoes, put them inside the school bag and walked barelegged. We didn't want the shoes to get wet."*

The third school in the area, West Hill School, opened in 1957 at Bah Tan Road. This primary school closed in 1985 after a freak storm tore off its roof. The building was declared unsafe and its pupils were transferred to Jiemin Primary School and Canberra School.

In the 1970s, Sofea Abdul Rahman attended West Hill School, which shared its playing field with Canberra School and Naval Base School. She recalled:

*"Recess was the best part. The three schools all had recess at the same time. We never visited our own canteen, we always visited the other schools' canteens. It was like a market. They came to buy things and then rushed back to their school."*

The school playing fields, as well as other open areas in the naval base, were also fruitful training grounds for soccer players. Work at the dockyard stopped at 4pm, so there was plenty of daylight left for sports. P. N. Balji recalled:



A football team at the naval base, 1966  
Courtesy of David Ayres

*"We had open-air playgrounds to play football, and we all used to very actively play football. In fact, Sembawang produced some of the better footballers. My brother P. N. Sivaji eventually became a national soccer player and even became a national coach."*

The main arena for soccer matches in the base was a field at Deptford Road, where thousands of spectators would cheer as different dockyard teams played against each other as well as visiting sailors. The most prominent footballers to emerge from the naval base were the Quah brothers: Quah Kim Beng (1933-2012), Quah Kim Swee (1939-2015), Quah Kim Siak (1942-2014), Quah Kim Lye (b. 1943) and Quah Kim Song (b. 1952). Their father Quah Heck Hock (1904-1977) worked in the dockyard and the family resided at Block 80 Delhi Road until 1968.

Probably the most well-known of the brothers, Quah Kim Song was known as "Quicksilver" and "Speed Demon" by fans, who relished his power on the turf during the 1970s, when he played for Singapore in the Malaysia Cup league and the national team.

Another fan favourite from the former dockyard is V. Sundramoorthy (b. 1965), whom fans dubbed the "Dazzler" for his speed and virtuosity. Sundramoorthy's family stayed at Block 75 Madras Road. After classes at Canberra School, he often watched his father S. Varatharaju dazzle the crowds at the Deptford grounds. Sundramoorthy later became a member of Singapore's national team and a national coach.

## COMMUNITIES OF FAITH FROM THE NAVAL BASE

The workers and residents of the former naval base also established religious institutions that served the Christian, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim members of the community. These religious institutions are no longer based in their original locations within the naval base, but continue to serve residents of Sembawang and Yishun to this day.

### St Peter's Dockyard Church (now Yishun Christian Church)

10 Yishun Avenue 5

In 1939, the British built St Peter's Dockyard Church at Admiralty Road East at the junction of King's Avenue. St Peter's was dedicated as an Anglican church. After the British left, the church came under Singapore's Anglican Diocese in 1977.

The church building was acquired by the government in 1984 and later demolished. Its congregation then joined forces with the Lutheran Church to build Yishun Christian Church at Yishun Avenue 5, which opened in 1987. This church building is shared by Anglican and Lutheran congregations.

In the early 1960s, the British also established St Andrew's Chapel at Pakistan Road within the naval base. This church was used for services by non-Anglican Christian denominations. The building has survived but is not open to the public.



St Peter's Dockyard Church, 1966  
Courtesy of David Ayres

### Sembawang Tamil Methodist Church

3 Yishun Street 11

Another church with origins within the naval base is Sembawang Tamil Methodist Church, which was established in 1934 by Tamil dockyard workers. In 1948, the congregation moved to a building at Jalan Sembawang Kechil. In the 1990s, when the area was facing redevelopment, the church moved to Yishun Street 11 in 1999. Its present building is shared with Smyrna Assembly, an independent church that was based at Jalan Kedai in the former Canberra Theatre building from 1985-1995.

### Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea

10 Yishun Street 22

The Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea was established near the former Canberra Gate by the naval base's Catholic community. Completed in 1953, this church was named after *Stella Maris* ("Star of the Sea" in Latin), an ancient title of the Virgin Mary who is regarded by Catholics as the "guiding star" that leads believers to Christ in stormy waters.

After the original church was redeveloped in the 1990s, the congregation moved to Yishun Street 22, where a new building opened in 1992. The present Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea has a design resembling a ship's hull, in a nod to its name and naval heritage.



Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea at its original site near Canberra Gate, 1992  
Courtesy of Henry Cordeiro



Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea at its present site in Yishun, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

### Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple

10 Yishun Industrial Park A

Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple has its origins in 1962, when P. Karupiah, a dockyard worker, dreamt of Lord Murugan and a golden cobra under an *elantha* (jube) tree. He then found the tree of his dream near Canberra Road and set up an altar beneath it. Hindu dockyard workers began to pray at the altar and later built a wooden shed to house the shrine.

In 1964, the shrine was registered as Punithamaram Sree Balasubramaniam Temple. *Punithamaram* means "Holy Tree" in Tamil, while Sree Balasubramaniam is a title of Lord Murugan. Devotees later raised funds to build a proper temple, which was consecrated in March 1971.

The temple was a familiar landmark for Ng Foo Weng, who studied at the nearby Canberra School in the 1970s:

*"It was just outside Canberra School. I can recall a magical evening when there was an electricity*



Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple at its original location at Canberra Road, 1993  
Courtesy of Loh Koah Fong



Participants in a procession during the annual Panguni Uthiram festival organised by the temple, 1990  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

*outage, leaving the classroom dark and shifting our senses to the evening light outside. The prayers from this temple sailed forth from afar, and a goatherd with his flock passed by on the mud track basking in the glow of the setting sun. It was a memory etched into me, and I often bring it to mind whenever I hear about this temple."*

In the 1990s, the temple moved to Yishun Industrial Park A, where a new building was consecrated in 1999. Today, the temple, which was rebuilt in 2018, continues to serve Hindus in Sembawang and Yishun. It is also known for Panguni Uthiram, an annual festival in which thousands of devotees take part in a chariot and street procession through the Canberra area.

### Sembawang Sikh Temple (now Gurdwara Sahib Yishun)

601 Yishun Ring Road

The Sikh community, many of whom were employed in the naval base, also had gurdwaras (Sikh temples) in Sembawang. In 1936, civilian Sikhs established Gurdwara Sahib Guru Khalsa Sabha Sembawang, also

known as Sembawang Sikh Temple, near the 13th milestone of Sembawang Road.

Meanwhile, Sikh policemen in the naval base had their own gurdwara near their barracks, which closed when the Naval Base Police Force was disbanded in 1971. The worshippers then moved to Sembawang Sikh Temple. This temple had to make way for redevelopment in the 1980s. Together with worshippers from another gurdwara at Jalan Kayu, the community moved to Yishun Ring Road, where Gurdwara Sahib Yishun (Yishun Sikh Temple) was completed in 1995. Sukhdev Singh Gill recalled:

*"The former Sikh gurdwara was at Sum Wah Chee Drive, opposite the Church of our Lady Star of the Sea. It was a beautiful temple on a raised area, and there were quarters behind where some Sikh families were staying. Subsequently it was torn down and moved to Yishun. The gurdwara was there because we had a lot of Sikhs staying in the Naval Base. Many were working in the dockyard, but many migrated after 1971."*



**Masjid Assyafaah, the former Masjid Naval Base and former Masjid Jumah Sembawang**  
1 Admiralty Lane

Opened on 9 April 2004, Masjid Assyafaah serves as a place of worship and a community space for Muslims living in Sembawang and surrounding areas in the north. The name “Assyafaah” comes from the Arabic term *Shafa’ah*, which means “intercession”.



The former Masjid Naval Base, which was located at the junction of Canberra Road and the former Delhi Road, 1986  
Courtesy of Loh Koah Fong

Before Masjid Assyafaah was built, Muslims living in the area worshipped at Masjid Jumah Sembawang, which was built before the war near the 14th milestone of Sembawang Road and demolished in 1995. Another mosque in the area was Masjid Naval Base at the former Delhi Road, which opened in 1968. This mosque was the result of efforts by Muslims in the base’s police force, led by Inspector Syed Amran Shah, who raised about \$31,000 to build it. Bibi Sughraa d/o Syed Amran Shah shared:

*“Syed Amran Shah was my father. He was with the Naval Police Force from its formation to the time it was dissolved in 1972. Muslims did not have a proper place of worship in the naval base. This bothered him a lot. He approached Mr Lawson [Frederick C. W. Lawson, Commodore Superintendent of the dockyard] for permission to build a mosque. Permission was granted and Mr Lawson very generously donated the piece of land that was the site for the intended mosque. I*



Masjid Assyafaah, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

*remember clearly how my father worked day and night to have his dream fulfilled.”*

Masjid Naval Base was demolished in the 2000s after the completion of Masjid Assyafaah, which was built to accommodate the growing Muslim community of Sembawang. Designed by Tan Kok Hiang of Forum Architects, Masjid Assyafaah stands out as a mosque that integrates Islamic symbols with contemporary architecture. The four-storey mosque houses separate prayer rooms for men and women, classrooms and a multi-purpose hall which can accommodate up to 4,000 congregants.

Instead of a traditional minaret, the mosque has a 33-metre high steel tower bearing a star and crescent moon. Inside, the prayer rooms are naturally lit by skylights in the roof and framed by screens with rich arabesque patterns (an Islamic art form). These decorative screens also provide natural ventilation for the prayer hall.

**ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF THE NAVAL BASE**

**Former Admiralty House**

345 Old Nelson Road

The former naval base has many colonial buildings that survive today as part of Sembawang’s architectural heritage. The grandest building in the area is the Former Admiralty House, which was built in 1939-40 as Navy House, the residence of the topmost naval officer in Singapore. It was also known as Canberra House, after the nearby Canberra Road.

Navy House’s first residents were Ernest John Spooner (1887-1942), Rear-Admiral, Malaya, and his wife Megan Foster (1898-1987), who arrived in Singapore in 1941. Spooner was captain of HMS *Repulse* from 1938-1940, while Foster was a famous folk-song singer. The house’s spacious and high-ceilinged ground floor was used by the Spooners to host dinner parties, while the upper storey,



Former Admiralty House, 2015  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

which has a curved rear balcony that provided a vista of the northern coast, served as their private quarters.

The house's architecture was influenced by the arts and crafts movement, which originated in Britain during the mid-1800s as a response to the industrial revolution. This movement favoured the use of a variety of natural materials and exposed surfaces such as stone, brick and wood. Thus, the house features an exposed brick facade on the upper floor, which presents a warm contrast to the stucco (plaster) covering the lower level. Asymmetrical designs were another hallmark of this style, and can be seen in the house's unevenly sized wings.

After the war, the building was renamed Nelson House and became the residence of the Flag Officer, Malaya. It was redesignated as Admiralty House when the Rear-Admirals and Vice-Admirals who served as Commander-in-Chief of Britain's Far East Fleet resided there from 1958-1971.

In 1971, Admiralty House was renamed ANZUK House and served as the residence

of the commander of ANZUK forces in Singapore. After ANZUK was disbanded in 1974, the house was transferred to the Singapore government, which leased it out as a hotel and country club until 2011. During this period, a hidden underground bomb shelter was discovered in its grounds in 1990.

In 2002, the Former Admiralty House was gazetted a National Monument. Later, in 2019, the building was renamed Canberra House, as it became part of an integrated community hub for Sembawang called Bukit Canberra.



*The front facade of the Former Admiralty House, showing its asymmetrical design, 1940*  
Courtesy of National Archives, United Kingdom



*The rear of the Former Admiralty House, showing its curved balcony, 1940*  
Courtesy of National Archives, United Kingdom

### Homes in the Naval Base

Sembawang has more than a hundred black-and-white houses that once housed British staff of the naval base. Known for their white-plastered walls and contrasting dark timber frames, these houses were influenced by Anglo-Indian and Malay architecture. They have long verandahs and overhanging eaves for shade, and are raised from the ground to provide additional ventilation. The houses are currently tenanted under the management of the Singapore Land Authority.

The oldest black-and-white houses in Sembawang were built in 1929 at Gibraltar Crescent. These houses were also known as the Jacksons, as they were originally occupied by engineers of Sir John Jackson Limited. During World War II, one of these houses was destroyed and replaced by a single-storey building known as the Dockyard Theatre or Japanese Theatre. After the war, this building served as a multi-purpose hall for badminton games and musical performances. In the 1990s, the Japanese Theatre and nine other bungalows at Gibraltar Crescent were used for corporate bootcamps by Singapore Airlines' Service Quality Centre.



*A black-and-white house at 137 Queen's Avenue, which once housed a mid-ranking dockyard officer, 2021*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



*A principal officer's residence, which was one of the larger houses in the naval base intended for topmost officers, 1930*  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



*A building at Gibraltar Crescent known as the Japanese Theatre or Dockyard Theatre, which was used to host drama performances after World War II, 2021*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Built around the same time as the Jacksons are smaller houses at off Admiralty Road East that once served as residences for chargemen (supervisors). Similar in style to the Former Admiralty House, these houses show the influence of the arts and crafts movement with their partially exposed red brick facades. At Queen's Avenue, there are medium-sized black-and-white houses that were once the residences of mid-ranking dockyard staff, as well as smaller L-shaped houses that were built in 1941 for employees of other ranks.



Smaller residences built for chargemen (supervisors), which show influences of the arts and crafts architectural movement in their design, 1929  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



Walk-up apartments at Cyprus Road, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

After World War II, flats were also built in the naval base to house growing numbers of European staff. These include the present-day walk-up apartments at Cyprus Road, which show the influence of the Art Deco movement with the prominent *brise soleil* (French for "sun breakers") around their windows.

#### Please note!

The houses in King's Avenue, Queen's Avenue, Gibraltar Crescent, Cyprus Road, St Helena Road, Canada Road, Pakistan Road, Durban Road, Ottawa Road, Bermuda Road, Lagos Circle, Kenya Crescent, Montreal Road, St John's Road, Falkland Road, Wellington Road, Auckland Road and Deptford Road are private residences.

We advise trail-goers to keep to the roads and not to enter the houses or compounds. **We would also like to remind trail-goers to refrain from taking photographs and videos of the houses, and to keep the noise level to a minimum.**



The former Sembawang Fire Station, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

#### Former Sembawang Fire Station

Within Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard, Admiralty Road West (not open to public)

Another architecturally significant building in the former naval base is the former Sembawang Fire Station, which was built in 1937-38 and located just after the dockyard's main gate off Admiralty Road West.

This fire station features a simplified Art Deco-Modern architecture, with a prominent hose tower where firehoses were hung to dry. It housed the Naval Base Fire Brigade until 1971, when the station was transferred to the Singapore government. The building then operated as Sembawang Fire Station until 2005, when it was replaced by Yishun Fire Station. The former station was conserved in 2007.

#### FROM DOCKYARD TO SHIPYARD

In 1967, Britain announced that it would withdraw its military forces from Singapore by the mid-1970s. As part of this process, the dockyard at HM Naval Base was transferred

to the Singapore government on 8 December 1968. The government established a new company, Sembawang Shipyard under chairman Hon Sui Sen, to operate the dockyard as a commercial enterprise.

Between 1968 and 1978, Sembawang Shipyard was managed by Swan Hunter, a British firm, which converted the military dockyard into a commercial shipyard. The first commercial vessel to visit Sembawang Shipyard was *South Breeze* in January 1969.

In 1975, Sembawang Shipyard opened Premier Dock, a 400,000-ton dry dock that was the largest in the world outside Europe and Japan at the time. Premier Dock allowed Sembawang Shipyard to repair two large ships simultaneously, and was needed as the pre-war King George VI Dry Dock was too narrow to fit modern oil tankers. The older dock was used for cruise ships and naval ships, which had narrower hulls.

The British withdrawal created much uncertainty for many dockyard workers.



Wan Chan Peew, who began working in the British dockyard in 1964 and continued with Sembawang Shipyard until 1985, recalled:

*"For us who grew up in the naval base, to see that the British were actually pulling out and leaving Singapore alone, our feelings were little bit mixed and uncertain. Also, what we had learned and acquired as skills in the naval dockyard might not be fitting for a commercial yard, because of the type of ships we were going to handle. So there was a lot of retraining. One of my friends went from a clerical position in the dockyard to train as a draughtsman."*

During this period, some former dockyard workers chose to retire or leave Singapore. However, many remained and underwent further training for new roles in the commercial shipyard. Many of these workers continued to reside at the Canberra Lines in the 1970s. But after 1971, they had to pay more for their rent, electricity and water, which had been provided nearly free-of-charge by the British earlier.

Loh Koah Fong (b. 1967) shared that his father started as a dock boy at the dockyard in the 1950s, before he eventually became a



Loh Koah Fong (standing at back) with other children behind Block 25, Delhi Road, 1977  
Courtesy of Loh Koah Fong



Workshops at Sembawang Shipyard, 1986  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009



Sembawang Shipyard, 1971  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Pre-war workshop buildings at Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Rows of keel blocks (used to support a ship) at the bottom of King George VI Dry Dock, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board





The interior of a pre-war workshop building in the shipyard, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

fitter at Sembawang Shipyard who repaired ships' engines. Loh's family originally resided in Chong Pang Village before they moved to the Canberra Lines between 1974 and 1977. Describing his home, Loh said:

*"My home at Block 26 Delhi Road was just a living room and one bedroom, and a balcony at the back. My dad used to sleep outside on the balcony on a canvas bed. My mom and us children used the bedroom. To reach the kitchen and toilet, you had to go down a staircase from the second floor. There were 16 units on each floor. My unit was Room 14. Some other blocks were like kampong houses, with a single row of units and empty below, on stilts.*

*"There were very few playgrounds in the quarters, so sometimes we went to a big longkang [drain] to catch guppies. Some of the older children made their own fighting kites with glass-coated strings. I used to see them making these strings at those blocks with void decks. They looped the strings coated with pounded glass around the pillars to let it dry."*

One of these children may have been Gopal Krishna (b. 1954), who often stayed with his Uncle Suppiah and Auntie Bangarammal at Room 12, Block 21, Madras Road. He shared:

*"When I was young, my parents used to send me to naval base during the school holidays. My uncle was a clerk and meter reader. He would dress well in white long-sleeved shirts and cycled to work daily. When the British left in the 1970s, my uncle was reemployed as a meter reader in the shipyard."*

Describing the naval base area in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Gopal added:

*"There was a certain magic in the air among the greenery and wide open fields with swings, slides and caves to explore. It was in the naval base where I learnt to play soccer with my neighbours and my cousins. I also have memories of kite flying, applying glass coating on the kite strings, and playing hide-and-seek under the dark void deck of the blocks. Other games that we enjoyed were rounders, hantam bola, spider-catching and marbles."*

The Canberra Lines were demolished in the early 1980s and the area was later redeveloped into part of Sembawang Town. Sembawang Shipyard was renamed Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard in 2015. Currently, the shipyard has five dry docks in Sembawang, but is expected to move to Tuas in the mid-2020s.

## SEMBAWANG AIR BASE AND OTHER MILITARY CAMPS

Apart from the naval base, Sembawang is known for other military facilities. Sembawang Air Base, between Mandai Avenue and Gambas Avenue, was originally built as a Royal Navy aerodrome in 1939.

After the war, the aerodrome was named HMS Simbang (Malay for "frigate bird") and housed marines from the Royal Navy's 42 Commando unit in quarters named Kangaw Barracks (after a Burmese battleground). Kangaw Barracks was where a farewell parade and flypast took place on 29 October 1971 to mark the end of British military command in Singapore.



HMS Simbang, 1967  
Courtesy of Tony Darbyshire

The Singapore government took over HMS Simbang in December 1971. Its airfield was then used by the Junior Flying Club (renamed Youth Flying Club in 1988), which was formed in 1971 by then Defence Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee to promote aviation. The club moved to Seletar in 1982. The facility was then renamed Sembawang Air Base in 1983 and now serves as a helicopter base.

Next to Sembawang Air Base is Dieppe Barracks (named after a French battlesite), which was built in 1966 to house marines from the Royal Navy's 40 Commando unit.

In 1967, these commandos built a golf course next to Dieppe Barracks, which later became Sembawang Golf Club. After the British forces left, Dieppe Barracks housed New Zealand troops from 1971 until 1989. It then became the base of HQ Singapore Guards, a specialist unit of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).

Another prominent military facility along Sembawang Road is Khatib Camp, which was established in the 1960s by the Royal Malaysian Navy to train naval recruits. After the Malaysians left in 1980, Khatib Camp was taken over by the SAF and now is home to Singapore Artillery.



Junior Flying Club at Sembawang, 1975  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

# NEIGHBOURS TO THE NAVAL BASE

The naval base, with its thousands of workers and sailors, generated much demand for food as well as service providers such as tailors, cooks and cleaners. These economic opportunities drew people to the area, who established new communities such as Sembawang Village and Chong Pang Village. These villages no longer exist, but part of Sembawang Village survives as the Sembawang Strip shophouses, while the legacy of Chong Pang Village is recalled through the present Chong Pang City in Yishun Town.

## SEMBAWANG VILLAGE

Sembawang Village was established at the 14th milestone of Sembawang Road in the late 1920s and officially named by the former Rural Board in 1929. The village continued to grow before the war, with zinc-roofed shops and eateries that catered to the naval base's inhabitants. During this period, buses also began to operate between Sembawang Village and Beach Road, making the village a hub for people travelling between the naval base and the town centre in Singapore's Civic District area.

## Post-war shops, bars and eateries

Sembawang Village continued to expand after the war. Besides a popular shuttle service operated by Tay Koh Yat Bus Company, the village was also a base for taxis that sailors hired to get to town. By the 1960s, Sembawang Village consisted of about 150 houses with 1,200 residents, who ran shops there or worked in the naval base. Alan Tait, who was based in the naval base in the 1960s, recalled:

*"Sembawang Village was close by with its duty-free shops and bars. Cameras, watches, binoculars and all the usual was on offer at good*

*prices. However, we were more fascinated with the toy shops. There were toys for sale that you couldn't find in the United Kingdom. We would have a good look at them all and soon the floor of the shop would be covered in toys, all battery-operated including aeroplanes, robots, telephones and all sorts of gadgets.*

*"While we made our selections, we would be given a glass of Tiger Beer. The shopkeepers knew how to keep a customer happy. As with all of the local people they were very polite, courteous and friendly. After a bit of bartering, our presents were wrapped up and ready for the kids back home."*

His wife Ellen also enjoyed visiting the shops there:

*"Once through the Naval Gate, we came to Sembawang with its small interesting shops. They would make a dress the same day for \$2.50, about six shillings in English money. They would also make the kids' sandals for school. It was also the cheapest place to have suits made. In the evenings, the outside would change and eating stalls would be set up – nasi goreng was our favourite!"*

One shop from the former Sembawang Village that has survived today is Cheap John's Enterprise, which opened in 1960 as a general store. The original shop burnt down in 1983 and the business then moved to 598B Sembawang Road. The current owner, Suresh Balani, then began repairing and selling bicycles, and the shop eventually specialised in this trade.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Sembawang Village was also popular with sailors for its many bars and eateries, which opened in the evening. Possibly the oldest of these establishments was Seletar Bar at 436



Tay Koh Yat buses at Sembawang Village, which would ferry people from Sembawang to Singapore's town centre, 1955  
F W York Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Rows of shops and bars at Sembawang Village, including Bluelight Café and Bar, 1967  
Courtesy of David Ayres



Sembawang Patio food stalls, 1967  
Courtesy of David Ayres

Sembawang Road, which P. K. Kunjamboo opened in 1934 as a restaurant. In 1950, the restaurant was converted into a bar to cater to the growing number of sailors seeking a drinking hole. Other popular nightspots included Lakki Bar, which was opened in 1961 by V. Gopal, a former dockyard employee, Sembawang Bar and Bluelight Café.

## Sembawang Strip

1018-1036 Sembawang Road

Sembawang Village's most famous stretch of bars was located in a row of shophouses facing the junction of Admiralty Road East. Popularly known as the Sembawang Strip, these shophouses were built around 1965 and housed bars with naval-themed names such as Golden Hind (a famous ship), Ship Inn, Ship Cabin and Navy's Bar. One of the first bars to open there was Melbourne Bar in 1966, which was owned by Chong Boon Seng, a race car driver. Wan Chan Peew recalled of Melbourne Bar:

*"My friends made up the resident band up to the early 70s. They entertained with hit songs of the 60s and 70s such as Tom Jones and the Bee Gees. The band disbanded by the mid-70s. That was part of my journey with the 'Blue Flames'".*



Another nightspot at the Strip, Ocean Bar, was well-known for its band Sweet Charity, which began playing there in 1969. Led by Ramli Sarip (b. 1952), the band wowed patrons with their covers of hard rock classics. In the 1970s and 1980s, the band became a popular rock group in Singapore and Malaysia.

David Ayres (b. 1945), a former Royal Navy sailor, recalls the Strip fondly:

*"When I left Singapore in May 1964 there were about eight bars in Sembawang. Sembawang Bar was nearest to the naval base entrance. When I returned to Singapore in May 1966 there were more like twenty bars in Sembawang. To the left was a block of two-storey shops and bars that had not been there in 1964. The block is still there. But not bars any more, although I believe the Nelson Bar may have survived. But all the rest of the tin-roof shops and bars and the hawker stalls are now gone."*

Nelson Bar, which first opened in the 1950s and later moved to the Sembawang Strip, is probably the area's most famous nightspot. Sailors frequented it for cheap beers as well as games such as darts and Crown and Anchor (a dice game). This bar, which is filled with naval memorabilia, continued to be a popular drinking spot even after the naval base closed, and is the

longest surviving bar at the Sembawang Strip.

Sembawang Village was also popular for an open-air eatery called Sembawang Patio, which was located next to Sembawang Strip. James Seah, who lived nearby in the 1970s, recalled:

*"The Patio was a small lane with several stalls of wooden shacks selling popular food. The stalls were opened in the evening and served popular local dishes such as satay, mee goreng, sup kambing, Roti John and 'chop suey', the favourite Chinese dish which the ANZUK servicemen enjoyed."*

*"The Patio was squeezed between a row of shophouses and another row of bars in Sembawang. The tables and chairs spilled out*



*The Sembawang Strip, 1960s*  
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman and Tony Dyer



*The Sembawang Strip, 2021*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

*from the lane of the Patio and occupied outside the shops. At nightfall, the place was crowded with many servicemen from Australia, New Zealand and UK. They would eat the food there, then go to the bars to drink. Sometimes when they got drunk they would fight in the bar and then the Military Police would come."*

Sembawang Village remained popular in the early 1970s, when the British military in Singapore were replaced by ANZUK forces. In 1973, there were still about 30 bars in the area, and fights between drunken sailors were not uncommon. After ANZUK disbanded in 1974, the number of bars fell as business declined and existing bars found it harder to attract staff. Most of Sembawang Village was demolished in the late 1980s.

The Sembawang Strip is the only surviving part of the former Sembawang Village. Today, these two-storey shophouses facing Admiralty Road East continue to house various eateries, shops and Nelson Bar. One unit, 1022 Sembawang Road, was originally a sailor's bar called Ship Inn. In 1999, this bar was acquired by the late Quah Kim Siak, elder brother of footballer Quah Kim Song, who converted it into a family pub called Q-Pub and ran it until 2010.

## CHONG PANG VILLAGE

### From West Hill to Chong Pang

The other major settlement that emerged in the wake of the naval base was Chong Pang Village, which had its origins in rubber estates that Lim Nee Soon established in the early 1900s.

The name "Chong Pang" was actually given to two different villages in the area. The first Chong Pang Village was named in 1938, when the Rural Board stated that a "village opposite Sembawang Aerodrome at the 12th milestone will be known as Chong Pang Village" after Lim Chong Pang (1904-1956), Nee Soon's second son and a prominent landowner in the area.

Chong Pang assisted his father in the family's businesses and married Lee Poh Neo (1900-

1968), daughter of banker Lee Choon Guan, in 1924. He was well-known for his racehorses, which won over 100 races. Lim was also enthusiastic about cinemas and acquired Garrick Theatre in Geylang in 1939, as well as opened Seletar Talkies (later Nee Soon Cinema) at Nee Soon Village.

After the war, the first Chong Pang Village was renamed Chye Kay Village in 1954. The name "Chong Pang" was then given to a different village in 1957. This second Chong Pang Village was located just outside the naval base on land owned by Lim Chong Pang. The land was originally a rubber plantation known as West Hill Estate, and had few residents as the tappers who worked there resided elsewhere.



*Sign leading towards the first Chong Pang Village (later renamed Chye Kay Village), c. 1942*  
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



*Lim Chong Pang (second from left) with Lim Nee Soon (far right), 1920*  
Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

This changed in the 1930s, when Lim saw an economic opportunity in the naval base, which employed many labourers who needed places to stay. He decided to convert West Hill Estate into a residential area. The land was cleared and divided into small plots which were rented out. Lim also built attap houses that were leased out to tenants.

This gambit paid off, as people started flocking to West Hill. The first residents were Indian labourers involved in building the naval base as well as people working in nearby farms. After the naval base officially opened in 1938, West Hill also attracted people who worked at the dockyard as labourers, clerks, mechanics, cooks, laundrymen and domestic helps. Shops and eateries then opened to cater to residents as well as people from the base. In 1939, Lim opened Sultan Theatre in the village to provide a place of recreation.

During the Japanese Occupation, many residents fled or were chased out of their homes. The Japanese used Sultan Theatre as a warehouse and converted nearby shops into comfort houses where women were forced to have sex with Japanese troops.



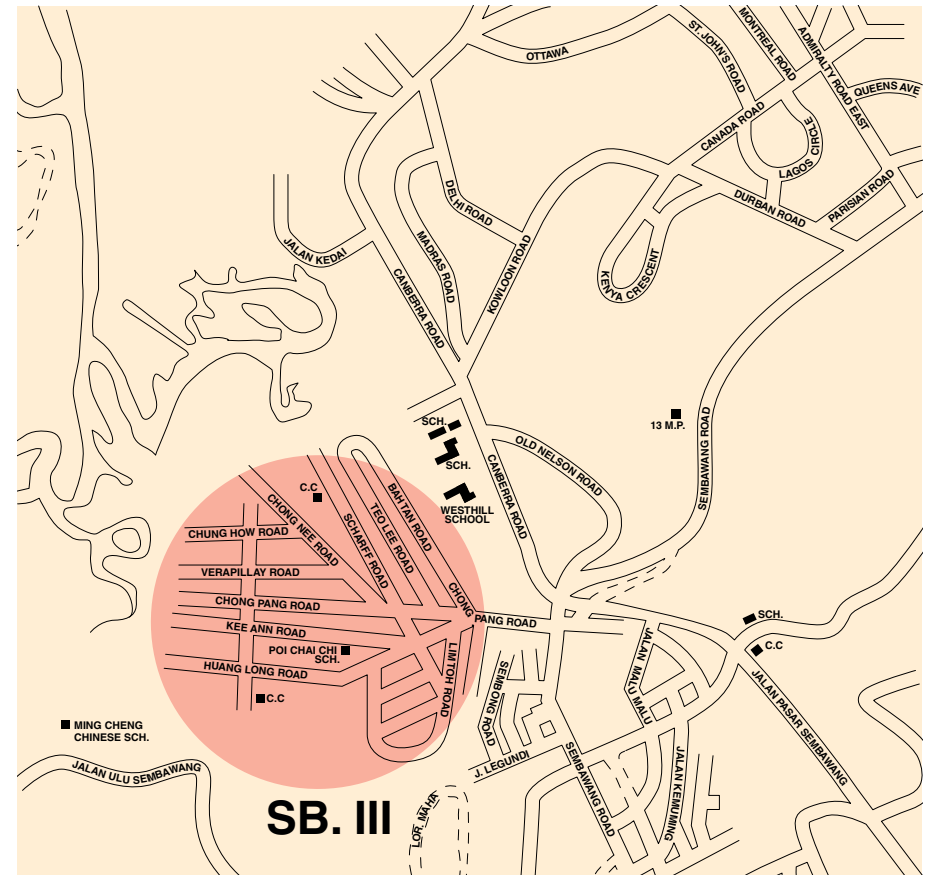
Chong Pang Road, 1960s  
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman and Tony Dyer

After the war, the villagers returned to their homes. In the 1950s, the population increased significantly when squatters from Paya Lebar moved to West Hill to make way for Paya Lebar Airport (opened 1955). By 1957, West Hill had more than 11,000 residents, many of whom worked in the naval base. That year, West Hill Estate was renamed Chong Pang Village in honour of its founder Lim Chong Pang, who had died in 1956.

### Community centres and markets

Chong Pang Village was connected to Sembawang Road via a small road named Chong Pang Road, which led to a roundabout where Sultan Theatre was located. This roundabout, which had many shops and eateries, served as an informal "community centre" where villagers met to socialise. James Seah shared:

*"The Chong Pang town centre was where the villagers gathered in the evening for food, shopping or to meet friends and neighbours at the shops or kopitiam in the vicinity of Sultan Theatre. There were at least three or four coffeeshops with various food stalls in the area. I was a regular at the various stalls for food like chicken rice, laksa, rojak, satay, char kway teow and ice kacang."*



A map of Chong Pang Village (circled) and its surroundings, 1972  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

The village also had a community centre at Bah Tan Road, which was opened in 1961 by then Health Minister Ahmad bin Ibrahim. This community centre was a popular place for activities such as basketball, badminton and table-tennis; and watching television at night. It closed in the 1980s when a new Sembawang Community Centre opened at 2125 Sembawang Road.

During the day, the busiest place was the market, which was located across Sembawang Road at a former lane called Sum Wah Chee Drive. This market served the villagers until 1977, when a new Chong Pang Market and Food Centre opened at the junction of

Sembawang Road and Canberra Road. The older market was then demolished in 1979. Sofea Abdul Rahman shared a childhood memory of the old market:

*"Before the new Chong Pang Market was built, there was the old wet market before Canberra Gate on the right of Sembawang Road. It was a very filthy and wet place and my nightmare! Because whenever I went, I had to avoid the chicken-slaughtering area. I could not take it because they would just slaughter the chicken and throw it into hot water. I was terrified of blood and the sight of the dead chicken, so I had to walk one big round to meet my mother."*





A shop at Chong Pang Village, 1960s  
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman and Tony Dyer



A pasar malam at Chong Pang Village, 1968  
Courtesy of Paul Hockey

During weekends, Chong Pang Village also had a *pasar malam* (itinerant night market) consisting of makeshift stalls selling kitchenware, toys, clothes and food. James Seah recalled:

*"The pasar malam or 'night market' was common in the 1970s and opened in the late afternoon as roadside open-air stalls at Chong Pang. All sorts of stuff were available and the prices of these items were cheaper than those sold in the shops."*

#### Cinemas, police station, post office and clinic

The Chong Pang area had two cinemas, with the first being Sultan Theatre, which opened in 1939. After the war, Sultan Theatre was repaired and

reopened in 1947. During the 1950s and 1960s, Sultan Theatre screened Hindi and Tamil films as well as Chinese and English features. There were also several kopitiam and provision shops around the cinema, which were frequented by both villagers and visitors.

One of these visitors in the 1970s was Jerome Lim, who often visited Chong Pang with his father to pick up fishing supplies:

*"One of the things we used to do was to stop at Chong Pang Village to get food and tackle and other supplies. Chong Pang Village was a huge bustling town. It had a cinema, a huge market and lots of shops. There were a lot of electrical shops – even in the 1980s, there were lot of Vietnamese frequenting these shops. There were a lot of shipyard workers from Kulai and other towns in southern Johor. A lot of them put up at Chong Pang in wooden shacks, in one-room cubicles. On weekends they would go home. Along Chong Pang Road were attap houses all the way to Sultan Cinema."*

The area's other cinema was Kindol Theatre, which opened around 1970 at Jalan Sendudok. This cinema screened mostly Chinese and Malay films. Former resident Yong Nyuk Fok (b. 1954) recalled:



Sultan Theatre, 1985  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.



The former Sembawang Post Office, 1994  
Courtesy of Loh Koah Fong

*"I used to stay at Jalan Sendudok, directly opposite Kindol Theatre, along the stretch of shophouses. I had a friend staying at Sum Wah Chee Drive. I used to go to the coffee shop there during the 1980s. There were three hair salons along the shophouses, Dora Hair Salon, Julie Hair Salon and Chan Mee Hair Salon, my neighbour. There was also a tailor shop and a provision shop called Seng Lee Food Supply, which delivered food and provisions to families staying in the naval base."*

In the 1950s, Chong Pang Village was also known for gangsters, who extorted money and robbed shops. To restore law and order, the authorities opened Chong Pang Police Station in 1965 near the junction of Sembawang Road and Canberra Road. In 1991, this station was renamed Sembawang Neighbourhood Police Post. It was vacated in 1994 and later torn down for redevelopment. Sukhdev Singh Gill, who worked at the station in the 1970s, recalled:

*"I was posted to Chong Pang in 1973. Hawkers used to come into the police station quarters to sell their wares. People used to go through the compound to get to the nearby clinic. There were so many makan [food] places next to the*

*Post Office. There was a chapati stall, there were people selling satays and thosai, and as you go further, there were char kway teow stalls all the way up to Sultan Theatre."*

The post office mentioned by Sukhdev was Sembawang Post Office, which opened at the junction of Sembawang Road and Chong Pang Road in 1954 and operated until the 1990s. The clinic behind the police station was an outpatient dispensary that opened at Bah Tan Road in 1963. James Seah, who worked there as a cashier in the 1960s, recalled:

*"At Chong Pang there was one outpatient clinic. I was working there as a relief cashier. Whenever the guy who worked there went on leave, I would go there [to] relieve him. It was a small government clinic, they had only one or two doctors."*

#### Schools, associations and temples

Sembawang Tian Ho Keng: 24 Admiralty Street  
Chong Pang Combined Temple: 561 Yishun Ring Road

The oldest school in Chong Pang Village was Si San Public School, which was established at Lim Toh Road in 1937 by Chinese businessmen and philanthropists. The government took over this school in 1985 and renamed it Si San Primary School. It then moved to Yishun Street 21 in 1986 and is now known as Xishan Primary School. Weng Weng, who stayed at Canberra Road in the 1960s, shared this memory:

*"My family of five stayed at Canberra Road Block 17. My father, who passed on in 1972, used to work for the Royal Navy as a fitter. My brother went to Naval Base Secondary School whilst my sisters went to Si San School and Upper Thomson Secondary School. I have great memories of going to my classmate's house nearly every other day, which was behind Sultan Theatre. We would climb the rambutan trees and enjoy the fruit from the branches."*

Other schools in the village included Hua Mien Public School, which opened in 1945 at Jalan Ulu Sembawang, Poi Chai Chinese School at

Kee Ann Road, Ming Cheng Public School at Jalan Ulu Sembawang, and Hwa Kwang Public School at Jalan Pasar Sembawang. These schools closed in the 1980s.

Chong Pang's residents also established associations that provided help for the needy. One of these is the Sembawang Tamils' Association, which was founded in 1946. This association served not only the Tamil community but society at large. It ran a school and a nursery, and also organised sports, recreational and cultural activities.

In 1955, a Hainanese association called Kheng Keow Tung Yeoh Hwee was formed at Soon Keat Road, where its building was completed in 1967. Its members included many Hainanese shopkeepers, who contributed financial aid for the less fortunate. Hakkas in the village also formed their own association, called Seng Soon Association, in 1956.

Chong Pang also had several temples. One of these was Sembawang Tian Ho Keng Temple, which has its origins in Sai Ho Koo Kay, a clan association founded at Nee Soon Village in 1947. The shrine moved to Chong Pang in



Si San Primary School, 1985  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Chong Pang Seng Soon Association (Hakka association), 1986  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

1962 and remained there until 1988 when it shifted to Yishun. This temple then moved to Admiralty Street in 2006 and was renamed Sembawang Tian Ho Keng (三巴旺天后宮). The main deity there is Mazu, the Taoist goddess of the sea who protects seafarers.

Another village temple was Hua Poh Siang Tng (華報善堂), which was established by Teochew followers of Song Da Feng, a Song dynasty monk who preached charity. Registered in 1947, this temple provided funeral services for the needy and was a place for villagers to socialise. It later became part of Chong Pang Combined Temple, which opened at Yishun Ring Road in 1995.

Another component temple of Chong Pang Combined Temple that used to be in the village is Chin Kong Religion Fook Poon Tong (真空教復本堂), which was established in 1955. The Chin Kong Religion was founded in 1862 and known for its efforts to treat opium addicts in China and Southeast Asia. This temple was frequented mostly by Hakkas.

#### From Chong Pang Village to Chong Pang City

In the 1980s, the government announced plans to redevelop Chong Pang Village into a new public housing estate. The village and its surrounding area then had about 100,000 residents, who were mostly resettled in Yishun and Woodlands. Chong Pang Village was demolished in March 1989 and Sembawang Town was built in its place in the 1990s.

Although Chong Pang Village no longer exists, the name of the former village survives in Chong Pang City, a part of Yishun Town at the junction of Sembawang Road and Yishun Avenue 5. Chong Pang City was named in 1993, when shopkeepers in the area pooled their resources to attract more visitors. They set up a decorated pedestrian mall with grand entrance archways that led to a town centre with more than 100 shops, a food centre and wet market.

Chong Pang City was officially opened by Senior Minister for Trade and Industry Lim Boon Heng on 29 May 1993.

# SEMBAWANG TOWN



Sembawang Town, with Sun Plaza and Sembawang MRT station on the left, and Bukit Canberra (still in construction) on the far right, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

## SEMBAWANG IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

### The first high-rise flats in Sembawang

Today, Sembawang is a major Housing & Development Board (HDB) town in the north with modern shopping malls, neighbourhood parks and two MRT stations. A lesser known fact, however, is that before HDB developed Sembawang Town in the 1990s, Sembawang already had a cluster of high-rise flats that was built in the 1970s.

The first high-rise flats in Sembawang were built by Jurong Town Corporation (JTC), which was formed in 1968 to develop industrial estates in Singapore. JTC also built housing facilities for people working near these estates.

In the late 1960s, JTC began to develop Senoko into an industrial estate for marine, shipbuilding and other industries. To house people working there as well as workers from Sembawang Shipyard, JTC built a cluster of flats near the 14th milestone of Sembawang Road, which were completed in 1974.

These flats consisted of a large block (Block 1) containing four-room units and four

blocks (Blocks 2-5) housing three-room units. The latter were nicknamed H-blocks as they were linked by walkways at the third, seventh and ninth floors. Near the flats, there was a Maternity and Child Health Clinic, which operated from the late 1950s until 1998.

Junaidah binte Salleh (b. 1970) and her family resided in Block 2 of Sembawang's JTC flats from the 1970s. She shared:

*"My father was working at Sembawang Shipyard, and he bought that flat in 1972 from JTC. He was working as a crane driver there. We were staying at Jalan Keladi in Kampong Geylang*



The JTC flats at Sembawang, 1978  
Donated by Elizabeth Ann Goldsworthy, National Library, Singapore



earlier. At Geylang, it was a kampong, so we could just go to our neighbours' houses and play. The flat was more enclosed, so we would wait for our schoolmates after school to go downstairs and play. At Block 1, there was a space where we could play, and behind my block there was a small community centre with a garden and small playground."

Junaidah's sister, Hamidah (b. 1969), added:

"I had so much fun with the H-shaped blocks because when we were young, we could play catching between the two blocks that are connected by a corridor or so-called bridge. We could also shout out to our neighbours from the opposite block. The two blocks were interlinked on levels 3, 7 and 9. My mother would also make epok-epok [curry puffs] and I would bring them down to the mama shop [sundry shop] on level 1 which was converted from a housing unit. He would sell the epok-epok and I would pick up the money after school."

HDB took over the management of the Sembawang flats from JTC in 1982. In 2000, these flats came under HDB's Selective Enbloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS), which provides residents of older flats with new homes in the same area to keep existing communities intact. The residents of the former JTC flats were allotted new flats at Wellington Circle, which were completed in 2007. The JTC flats were demolished in 2004 and the site was later redeveloped by HDB into Montreal Ville.

### Sembawang Presbyterian Church

10B Jalan Jeruju

Another Sembawang landmark that originated in the 1970s is Sembawang Presbyterian Church, which was established in 1974 by Presbyterians living in villages around Sembawang Road. The church was built on land donated by Ang Oon Hue (1910-1998), a migrant from Nan'an in Fujian, China, who became a community leader and developer in Sembawang and Jalan Kayu. Ang was also an elder (lay leader) at the church.



Sembawang Presbyterian Church, 2010  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Located at Jalan Jeruju, the church was officially registered in 1991. The congregation, led by Elder Lawrence Ang and Elder Patricia Ang, then reorganised the church with English as well as Chinese services. The original building was then redeveloped into the present church, which was completed in 2007. This striking church features a blue-roofed bell tower with bells from France, which are rung every noon.

### Sembawang Shopping Centre

604 Sembawang Road

Ang Oon Hue was also the developer of another well-known building in the area, Sembawang Shopping Centre, which was the



Sembawang Shopping Centre, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

largest shopping centre in the north when it opened in 1986. This four-storey retail mall served residents of the area, including people from the nearby JTC flats and Sembawang Spring Estate.

In the 1990s, after the opening of Northpoint at Yishun in 1992, Sembawang Shopping Centre faced a decline, although it was still well-known for shops such as Sembawang Music Centre (a popular music store which operated there until 2009). The mall was later sold and renovated, before reopening in 2008. Today, Sembawang Shopping Centre continues to be a popular destination for residents of Sembawang.

### SEMBAWANG PARK AND SEMBAWANG BEACH

The largest public park in Sembawang is Sembawang Park, which was one of many parks planned across the island during the 1970s to provide open and green spaces for residents. This park was formerly part of the naval base and contained messes for British officers. After the British left, the government

converted this area into Sembawang Park, which opened in 1979.

Designed with the help of Japanese landscape experts, Sembawang Park features an undulating landscape with winding footpaths. It was renovated in 2011 and now features a maritime-themed playground in the form of a battleship. The park has two Heritage Trees: a longan (*Dimocarpus longan*) near the fitness corner, and a sea teak (*Podocarpus polystachyus*), estimated to be around 100 years old, next to Beaulieu House.

At the northern end of Sembawang Park is Sembawang Beach. This sandy beach has been a popular spot for swimming, picnics and fishing for many decades. Richard Kuah, who has visited Sembawang Beach since the 1980s, shared:

"I used to come here to catch crabs. A lot of people would come here to dig for lala clams and baitworms. Sembawang was famous mainly for crabs, not so much for fish. I used to camp somewhere around the end of Jalan Selimang.



Sembawang Beach, 2021  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board





*Sembawang Beach, 1960s*  
Courtesy of Tony Dyer and Sofea Abdul Rahman

*There were a lot of coconut trees at this curved portion facing the beach. The tide would come all the way up to the grass."*

Junaidah binte Salleh, a former resident of the Sembawang JTC flats, also frequented the beach with her family in the 1970s and 1980s:

*"We would walk up to Sembawang Beach past the colonial houses. We would pass by the Patio, which was open-air, warung-style [small family-owned business]. But the best part was the food stalls at Sembawang Park. One cluster was near the terrace houses, while the other one was right at the beach. The tauhu goreng was very nice!"*

One lesser known fact about Sembawang Beach is that it is used as a ritual site during the annual Nine Emperor Gods festival. This Taoist festival, which lasts for nine days, is celebrated by many Taoist temples in Singapore at sites such as East Coast Park and Sembawang Beach. At Sembawang Beach, the festival begins with a ceremonial "invitation" of the Nine Emperor Gods at Sembawang Beach by devotees of Kew Ong Yah Hong San See Temple (part of Chong Pang Combined Temple) at Yishun

Ring Road. On the final day of the festival, the temple holds a grand procession to "send off" the gods at Sembawang Beach, during which a dragon boat is set alight on the water to mark their departure.

#### **SEMBAWANG TOWN AND BUKIT CANBERRA**

A brand new chapter in Sembawang's history began in the 1990s, when Sembawang underwent a transformation into a new high-rise housing estate in the north of Singapore. HDB began developing Sembawang in 1995, with the first flats here completed in 1998. To better connect Sembawang Town with other parts of the island, Sembawang MRT Station opened in 1996. Next to it is Sun Plaza, a neighbourhood shopping centre that opened in 1999.

The design of Sembawang's earliest HDB flats paid homage to the area's colonial heritage. Inspired by the bungalows in the former naval base, some of these flats feature prominent columns and partially exposed brick facades and arches. Some also have roofs

with "crowns" and arrowhead motifs. The contrasting colours of the black-and-white houses were also mirrored in the flats' original paintwork of dark green and white.

Along Sembawang Drive, there are curved blocks with plazas that act as forecourts; these circular designs recall the roundabout in the former Chong Pang Village. Meanwhile, flats at Canberra Road and Canberra Link have a ship-and-sea theme, with fish and crab motifs, wave-like curves, porthole-like openings and playgrounds with maritime features. At Sembawang Close, an Adventure Playground @ Canberra opened in 2018, which features a treehouse and net-like hammocks, providing a "kelong adventure" that recalls Sembawang's coastal heritage.

Sembawang Town continued to expand in the 2010s with new flats in the Canberra area. To serve the residents of this area, Canberra MRT opened in 2019, followed by Canberra Plaza, a new generation neighbourhood centre with shops and community facilities that opened in 2020. Residents of this area enjoy easy access to Sembawang's natural and historical landmarks via the Simpang Kiri Park Connector, which starts near Canberra Plaza

and leads to the Sembawang Strip shophouses and all the way to the northern coast.

#### **Bukit Canberra**

Sembawang is the only HDB town to have a National Monument within its integrated community hub. Opened in phases from 2021, Bukit Canberra is located on a hilly site occupied by the Former Admiralty House, which was renamed Canberra House in 2019 and will house a public library. Other facilities at Bukit Canberra include swimming pools, gyms, fitness studios, and an indoor sport hall. This community hub will also have a hawker centre, a polyclinic, and a senior care centre.

Around Bukit Canberra are running trails through the hill's lush landscape, which have been enhanced with native trees such as the Sembawang tree. Bukit Canberra will also celebrate Sembawang's natural heritage with a therapeutic garden, butterfly garden and fruit orchard with various edible crops. To complement these gardens, the grounds will have heritage storyboards to help residents rediscover Sembawang's rich history and transformation into a vibrant new town with a unique maritime heritage.



*An artist's rendering of Bukit Canberra*  
Courtesy of SportSG



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# SUGGESTED SHORT TRAIL ROUTES

## Please note!

The houses in this area are private residences. Please respect the residents, keep the noise level to a minimum, and do not enter the houses or compounds. **Please refrain from taking photographs and videos of the houses.**

## HISTORICAL LANDMARKS OF SEMBAWANG

2 hours with public transport (7km)

Sembawang houses many historical landmarks established by the British and local communities, and plays home to the only natural hot spring on mainland Singapore. This trail introduces you to the aforementioned sites that recall the major milestones in Sembawang's past.



Start your journey at the [Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple](#), which is located across the road from Canberra MRT station. Dedicated to the Hindu deity Lord Murugan, the origins of the temple can be traced back to 1962 when Hindu dockyard workers of the former Sembawang Naval Base established a small shrine under a tree near Canberra Road. The temple relocated to its present site in 1996 and is known for its annual Panguni Uthiram street and chariot procession usually held in March or April.



To reach the next stop, you may choose to walk up Canberra Link and turn right at Sembawang Road or take a bus from Canberra MRT station and alight after Durban Road, then cross Sembawang Road and head towards a row of shophouses.

Popularly known as the [Sembawang Strip](#), these shophouses once housed drinking holes such as Ocean Bar and Melbourne Bar, which were frequented by visiting sailors from the naval base. There was also a popular outdoor eatery next to the shops called Sembawang Patio, which was demolished in the 1980s. Today, the Sembawang Strip continues to house shops and popular eateries, where you may wish to cool down with a drink before continuing with the trail.



From the shophouses, head over to Admiralty Road East where you will see many colonial-era houses, which were former [homes in the naval base](#) for British staff, on both sides of the road. The larger, black-and-white houses were built for senior dockyard staff, while staff such as chargemen (supervisors) occupied the smaller houses.

Continue towards the junction of Canberra Road where you will find the main gate to the former dockyard of the naval base (now Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard). This facility, which opened in 1938, was where British warships were repaired until 1968, when it was transferred to the Singapore government and became [Sembawang Shipyard](#).

Next, head up Canberra Road to take a bus towards Sembawang Road. You will pass by [Sembawang Shopping Centre](#), which was built in an area that was formerly populated with rubber estates in the early 20th century. After World War II, the rubber estates were redeveloped into houses and shops. Sembawang Shopping Centre, which opened in 1986, was the first modern retail mall in this area. You may wish to stop here for a break, or alight two stops further down (after Yishun Avenue 7) to stay on the trail.



From the bus stop after Yishun Avenue 7, cross Sembawang Road and head into Gambas Avenue to reach [Sembawang Hot Spring Park](#), the final stop on this trail. Discovered in the early 1900s, this natural hot spring remains a popular attraction for visitors from all over Singapore. The trail ends here, but you can explore the park, soak your feet in the hot spring water and even grab a snack from the park's café.



## COMMUNITIES OF SEMBAWANG

3 hours with public transport (8km)

Since the 19th century, Sembawang has been home to many communities, from coastal villages to British families based in the former naval base. This trail brings you through these former neighbourhoods and highlights buildings that were once part of these northern communities.



Begin your journey at the [Former Admiralty House](#). Built in 1939-40, this house was designed in an elegant arts and crafts architectural style and served as the residence of the most senior officer at the former Sembawang Naval Base. The house's hilltop location provided its residents with a clear view of the surrounding naval base and the nearby coastline.

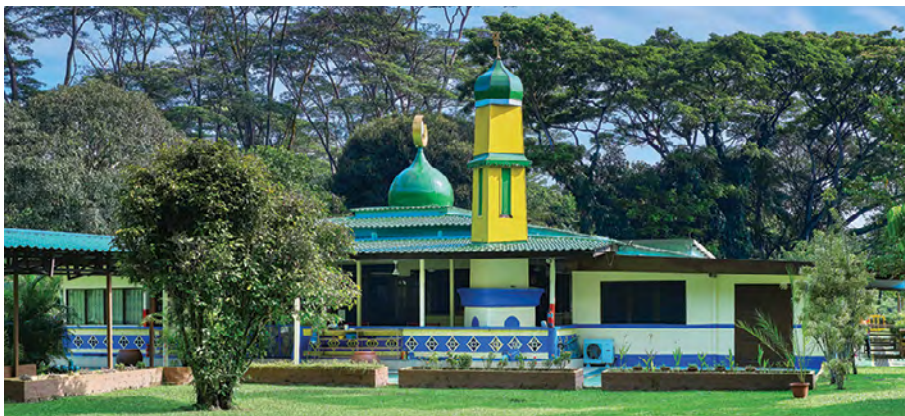
Next, take a bus from Canberra Road (Block 351) and alight at Sembawang Road after Durban Road. Then cross Admiralty Road East and turn into Queen's Avenue, where you will find many black-and-white houses, which were built in the 1930s as [homes in the naval base](#) for British staff. Today, the houses in this area are private residences. You can admire their architecture and grounds, but please remember that entry and photography are strictly prohibited.



From Queen's Avenue, turn into St Helena Road to reach **Gibraltar Crescent**. This road has the oldest black-and-white bungalows in the naval base, which were built around 1929. Unlike the bungalows at Queen's Avenue, the houses here were designed as shared residences for two or three occupants. One unique building here is the Japanese Theatre (318-2 Gibraltar Crescent), which is believed to have been built by prisoners-of-war and served as a location for drama performances by the British.

At the end of Gibraltar Crescent, head toward Sembawang Road (via Tuah Road) and cross over to reach **Andrews Avenue**. This road was named after Thomas Edward Andrews, a manager of Bukit Sembawang Rubber Company, which formerly owned many rubber plantations in the area. After the war, Bukit Sembawang redeveloped its plantations into housing estates such as Sembawang Straits Estate off Andrews Avenue.

Walk down Andrews Avenue until you reach Jalan Mempurong, which leads to **Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang**. The last



surviving kampong mosque at Singapore's northern coast, this mosque was built in 1962-63 by the villagers of the former Kampong Tengah. It also served the Muslim community from other former nearby villages such as Kampong Wak Hassan and Kampong Tanjong Irau.

Continue down Jalan Mempurong until you reach the Simpang Kiri Park Connector. You will see **PAssion WaVe @ Sembawang**, a sea sports facility which originally opened in 1961 as Kampong Tengah Holiday Camp, a campsite that was popular with youths and community groups.



To reach the final stop of the trail, which is a row of shophouses along Sembawang Road, you can choose to walk or take a bus. To walk, continue down the park connector, which is a scenic path between Sungei Simpang Kiri and a lush jungle. When you reach the Canberra-Sembawang Park Connector, turn right and you will find the shophouses. To take a bus, retrace your steps to Sembawang Road, then head to the bus stop near Andrews Avenue and alight after Admiralty Road East.

Built around 1965, these shophouses were popularly known as the **Sembawang Strip** and were part of a former settlement called Sembawang Village, which had many shops and eateries that were popular with sailors from the naval base. The shophouses mark the end of the trail, and you can enjoy some refreshments and even get a bite at the eateries here.

### FROM DOCKYARD TO SHIPYARD

2.5 hours with public transport (5km)

**Sembawang Naval Base**, which opened in 1938 and closed in 1971, occupied much of Sembawang's northern coast. This naval base included HM Dockyard, Singapore, a ship repair facility which was transferred to the Singapore government in 1968 and became Sembawang Shipyard. This trail takes you to various landmarks that were part of the former naval base.



Begin at the **Former Admiralty House**, which served as the residence of the highest ranking naval officer in colonial Singapore. Built in 1939-40 as Navy House, this grand building was first occupied by Ernest John Spooner (Rear-Admiral, Malaya) and his wife Megan Foster in 1941-42. After the war, it was renamed Nelson House, and eventually became known as Admiralty House from 1958. From 1971-74, it was known as ANZUK House. The building was gazetted as a National Monument in 2002.

Next, walk up Canberra Road until you reach **Masjid Assyafaah**. Between the 1930s and early 1970s, Canberra Road was where Asian workers of the naval base had their living quarters. In 1968, Muslim staff of the naval base established a small mosque named

Masjid Naval Base in this area, which closed in 2004. Its replacement, Masjid Assyafaah, is a contemporary mosque with arabesque-patterned screens and a striking steel tower bearing a crescent moon and star, the symbols of Islam.



Continue up Canberra Road and on the left, you will come across the former HomeTeamNS Sembawang clubhouse (closed in 2020). This building was originally opened in 1963 as **Aggie Weston's**, a sports and recreational facility for sailors. After the British left in 1971, it served as a clubhouse called Fernleaf Centre for New Zealand forces in Singapore until 1989.

Next, cross Admiralty Road East and you will reach the main gate of **Sembawang Shipyard**. This ship repair facility boasted the world's largest dry dock, the 305-metre-long King George VI Dry Dock, when it opened in 1938. Today, the gate serves as the entryway to Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard (formerly Sembawang Shipyard). While entry is prohibited, you can catch a glimpse of the former **Sembawang Fire Station** with its hose tower, which was built in 1937-38 and gazetted as a conserved building in 2007.





Continue down Admiralty Road. Along the way, you will see many pre-war colonial houses which were built as homes in the naval base for British staff. The larger, black-and-white bungalows were used by senior officers, while employees of other ranks occupied the smaller red-brick houses.

Next, turn into Queen’s Avenue, where you will find several black-and-white bungalows that housed senior staff of the British dockyard. Today, the houses in this area are private residences. You can admire their architecture and grounds, but please remember that entry and photography are strictly prohibited.

From Queen’s Avenue, enter St Helena Road and then turn left to reach Cyprus Road. Around this junction, you will see **black-and-white houses** of a different design from those at Queen’s Avenue. These were the first black-and-whites built in the area during the late 1920s, and they served as quarters for the British engineers who built the naval base.

Next, turn into **Cyprus Road**. Unlike most other areas of the former naval base, which have bungalows, this road has **low-rise walk-up flats**. These flats were built after the war to house growing numbers of staff as the naval base was heavily involved in conflicts such as the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) and Konfrontasi (1963-66). They feature a simple but elegant Art Deco-influenced architecture

with prominent brise soleil (French for “sun breakers”) around the windows.

At the end of Cyprus Road, turn left to reach **Sembawang Park**. This scenic green space was formerly part of the naval base, but was later converted into Sembawang Park, which opened in 1979. A number of Sembawang trees, after which the area was named, have been planted in this park.



At the northern end of Sembawang Park is **Beaulieu House**, which was built in the 1910s and gazetted as a conserved building in 2005. Originally owned by Jewish businessman Joseph Brooke David, the house was acquired for the naval base in 1923 and used as a residence for senior naval officers. **Beaulieu Jetty**, which stands in front of the house, was built during World War II. After the war, senior naval officers would stand at the jetty to salute newly arrived ships. Today, Beaulieu Jetty is a popular fishing spot and offers a scenic view of the Johor Strait, a fitting last stop to this trail.

