

Batu Gajah, or Elephant Rock, is said to have been named after two large elephant-shaped boulders in the Kinta River, making it impossible for the bigger boats to go further upriver to the village of Ipoh. Consequently, passengers and goods had to be transferred to smaller, 6-ton boats for the journey upriver. However it seems that no one knows exactly where the rocks were or whether it is just a legend.

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# Historic Batu Gajah

by Ian Anderson



**B**efore the British came to Perak (in 1874) there were already three important centres of mining in Kinta with the Malays and Chinese working these mines – Gopeng, Papan and Lahat. However, getting the tin out with no proper roads was more than difficult and therefore the river became the main route fare for the precious tin ore. Consequently, the tiny village of Batu Gajah, primarily a cluster of wooden houses along the bank of the river, rose to prominence in 1881 when it was selected to be the new river port for the Papan tin mines, which would be joined to by a 4-mile cart road. That year, Hugh Low, son of a Scottish horticulturist and the Resident of Perak, recorded that \$849 was paid to the inhabitants of Batu Gajah for the destruction of many fine fruit trees and appropriation

of their land. Batu Gajah soon became busy trading station with Malay huts on both sides of the Kinta River. There was also a large Chinese smelting house.

The oldest part of the village was at River Road in what is now called Old Town. One of the first things the early Chinese immigrants did was to build a temple, the Kuan Tay Miew, which was situated beside the river. Soon, a Chinatown, surrounded by Malay Kampung, sprang up around the temple, with opium and gambling dens, brothels and liquor shops.

Batu Gajah assumed a greater importance in 1884 when it was chosen to be the new centre of the British Administration as the existing site in Kota Bharu



(Perak), founded just five years before, was malarial. Thus Elephant Rock became the capital of Kinta and the second most important town in Perak, after Taiping the State capital. With its landing stage built for the Papan mines three years previously, it was accessible to boats throughout the year. During the wet season, the bigger boats and tongkangs could berth at its huge stone jetty, while during the dry season, smaller boats could still make it. This was important as it ensured that from Batu Gajah, provisions could reach the miners in the interior at all times of the year. The Kinta River and Batu Gajah became the lifeline of the whole Kinta Valley. Coincidentally, that was also the year when the Kinta Tin Rush began in earnest when thousands of immigrants flooded in, all in pursuit of Kinta's tin.

The British chose their headquarters to be on a hill as they always did and selected the area known as Changkat Batu Gajah for their European Officers houses, the hospital, the police station and quarters for all other officers. These were followed by a post office, a prison, an officers' club and the Kinta Gymkhana Club. In 1892, the new Government Offices housing the Land Office, the High Court (replacing the original wooden building) and the Survey Office were built, and they were said to be the finest public buildings in Kinta. Nonetheless, Batu Gajah and Kinta as a whole were still very isolated. There was no overland route from this district to the neighbouring districts of Kuala Kangsar and Larut, except jungle



tracks accessible only to elephants. To get from Taiping to Batu Gajah, for example, one had to go to Port Weld, take the steamer to Penang, then another steamer to Teluk Anson, and finally a boat up the Perak and Kinta rivers, the whole trip taking almost two weeks!

Of course, a British administration would also have a church. In Batu Gajah, they built two, but initially Anglican services were conducted in the magistrates house by the Reverend Pyemont from Taiping, while the Catholics had built a small wooden church (in 1885)



officialiated by Father Allard, a Frenchman who had moved to Batu Gajah. In 1891, a new wooden Catholic church was built, called St Joseph's, rebuilt in brick in 1928, and still conducting services today. The Anglicans followed suit and built their first permanent home, The Holy Trinity Church in 1895, and gained their first full-time chaplain, the Reverend J P Parry, in 1907. The first 'renovation', actually a rebuild in brick, took place in 1989 and since then, further upgrades have taken place to produce a beautiful, Colonial, country church.

For the first ten years, Batu Gajah was the ideal headquarters for the British. Ipoh was only a village in the jungle, and Batu Gajah was an important town, with a landing stage surrounded by Chinese and Malay shops and houses, and administrative machinery at Changkat. The first District Magistrate, as he was then called, was J B M Leech, and he served until 1896. All the important land matters were handled by him and his successors. With the great influx of Chinese immigrants there was a great demand for mining land. The Kinta Land Office in Batu Gajah became the biggest and most important Land Office in the country serving the richest district in the Peninsula, and the District Officer Kinta was next in importance to the British Resident in Perak.

However, the next decade saw the emergence of Ipoh as an important mining centre. While the population of Elephant Rock never exceeded 2,000 even by 1910, the population of Ipoh grew by leaps and bounds as it became the heart of the rich tin mining district. Eventually, as commercial pressures grew, the British administration moved again (but not for some years) – to Ipoh – with its newly erected railway station, town hall, post office and all the businessman's trappings not available in Batu Gajah. But of course the Colonial buildings remained in Changkat Batu Gajah and the churches (each with its own cemetery), hospital, government offices, club (now a golf club) and prison still stand and serve the community today, having survived the atrocities of development, the Japanese invasion and the Malayan Emergency.