



Kampung Tanjung Bangkung and the Japanese Carbide Factory

By Ian Anderson

It is well known that apart from a few enthusiasts who do their best to record details of local history, many Malaysians do not hold a burning desire to put pen to paper, record memories or press their camera shutter to document whatever remains of events from yesteryear. Thus as people pass on only snippets of stories or legends, history may well remain a mystery for future generations. Thus it is with Kampung Tanjung Bangkung and the Japanese Carbide Factory.

However, Perak is fortunate as it does have a handful of history buffs who individually or collectively do the best they can to preserve memories of the past. One such enthusiast is Harchand Singh Bedi of Ipoh who kindly took me to Malim Nawar and Kampung Tanjung Bangkung after we had attended the funeral of another famous local historian, the late Chye Kooi Loong. Our mission was to view whatever remains of a forgotten Japanese carbide factory part of a complex that manufactured armaments for the Japanese efforts in Burma.

Finding the Kampung is not easy for the newcomer, but the first sign that you are getting close is a strange looking grey pillar, made of slabs of stone, adjacent to a modified brick and wooden house. This is said to be the original Japanese guardhouse for the factory and the pillar is all that remains of an archway across the narrow road. Next you should find the dragon fruit orchard. You are almost there and you will soon see the most obvious relic, an 18m high red-brick chimney, almost in the centre of the village.

The round chimney, one of what was originally two, is some 6m diameter at the base and about 3m on top with 4 arches, the two at the bottom for the fire and two above that when closed will form the kiln. Sadly like many other remnants of local history, one chimney is said to have been dismantled, only leaving the circular base while the one still standing has some serious damage to the kiln opening. One story related to us was that after the surrender in 1945 some communist supporters had purposely defaced the Japanese artifacts and that others stole building materials for their own use.

But there was more to this factory than a couple of chimneys. There was an office and a double-storey barracks of reinforced concrete with dimensions around 30m x 40m. Some parts of these are still standing, but overgrown and difficult to see among the undergrowth, trees and a multitude of creepers. Nonetheless we braved the mosquitoes and whatever else was lurking there and continued our exploration accompanied by a very helpful local gentleman.



But the most striking thing of all was the story of the tunnels. Although today these are blocked off for safety, we were told that there is a complete web of tunnels that lead from the factory to the guardhouse and other buildings, but most important of all, to the railway line where the products of the factory were loaded on to trucks and whisked away North, allegedly to Burma.

Our local friend also drew our attention to an article by the New Straits Times, published in March 2013, where interesting memories were recorded from some of the villagers. These are summarised here:

Hassan Din 85, was able to confirm that the chimney and other old ruins in the village were erected by the Japanese to produce carbide and mostly women were deployed to work there. He was just 18 when he started working in the factory storehouse. Working hours were from 8am to 4pm and wages were paid daily – "a boiled potato, some brown sugar and a cup of rice".

Hassan also recalls a brush with danger when he issued a bag of two-inch long nails to a Chinaman against a signed permit. Later, Japanese soldiers came to the store to see the permit. It was a forgery. The Chinaman was "hunted down and beaten to death with a wooden baton spiked with the nails".

Later Hassan was transferred to the factory to make arms and he remembers that he worked processing carbon, an essential ingredient of ammunition manufacture. He also saw other workers packing some substances into battery-like shells which he believed were for the Burma campaign."

Another resident Mariam Abu Bakar, 63, who lives in the original guardhouse for Japanese sentries, said that her mother had told her that the adjacent grey pillar and missing arch were built by the villagers and that as there was no cement, the red bricks of the chimneys were held together with a paste made of river gravel and duck eggs.

Turning to the tunnels, Mariam's aunt, Alang Saemah Yob Abdullah, 72, who also grew up in the village, said she remembered playing in the underground tunnels that were built by Japanese soldiers. She remembers entering in one place and coming out many metres away at a different end of the village.

After leaving the main village we continued to explore and came across other tunnel entrances and remains of old buildings. We were told that the tunnel entrances have also been sealed to prevent the village children from wandering in and that many of the tunnels have caved in over the years. So all that is left of this fascinating piece of history is one damaged chimney, some pieces of what we believe are carbide and the odd skeleton of what were once Japanese buildings.

History has given way to development, deliberate destruction and a simple lack of interest in local history. Such is the way of the world in Malaysia. The factory was featured in an episode of Hidden Cities Malaysia on Astro's History Channel in 2010.