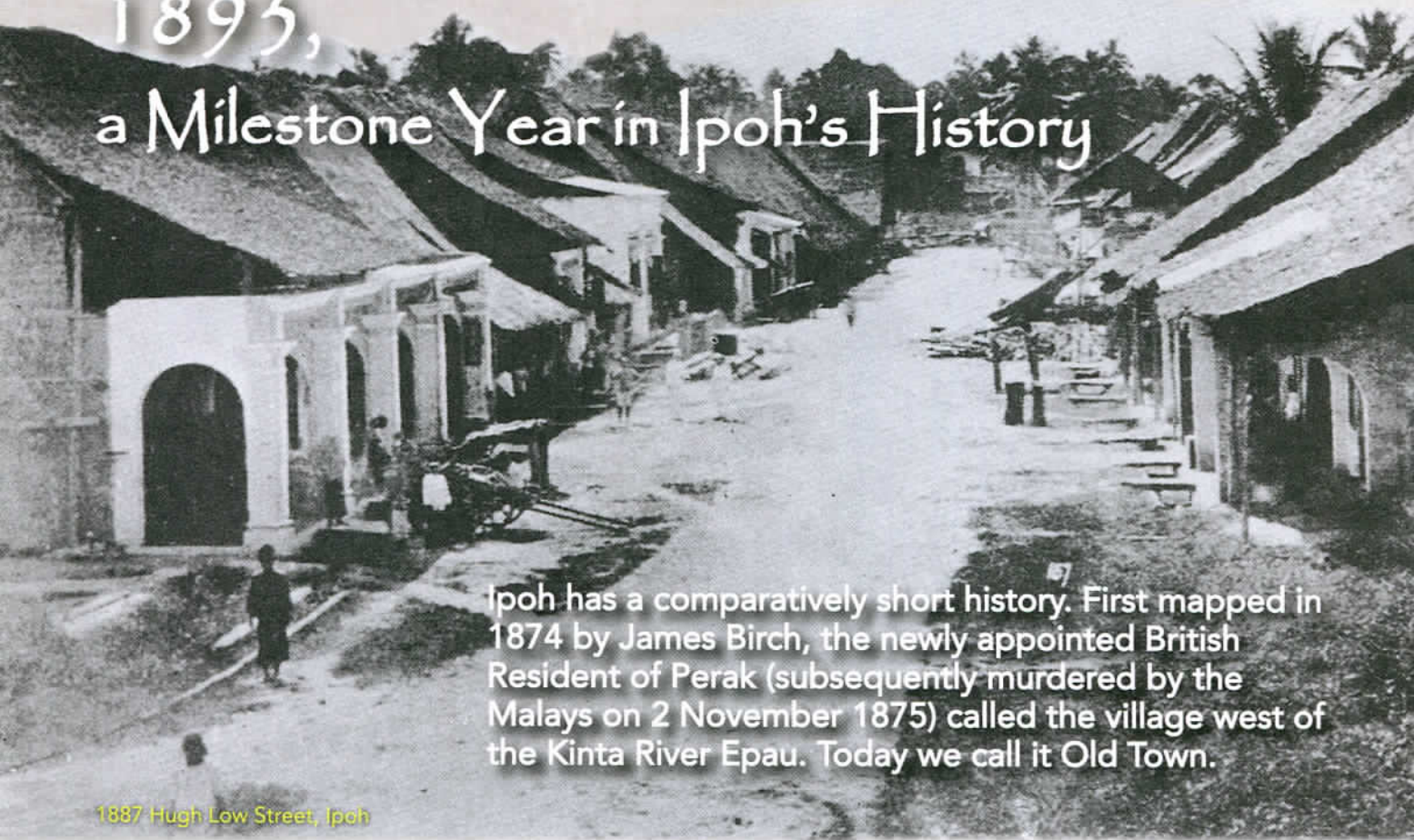


1893, a Milestone Year in Ipoh's History



Ipoh has a comparatively short history. First mapped in 1874 by James Birch, the newly appointed British Resident of Perak (subsequently murdered by the Malays on 2 November 1875) called the village west of the Kinta River Epau. Today we call it Old Town.

1887 Hugh Low Street, Ipoh

In 1886, with the population increasing steadily, the town was reorganized by Datoh Panglima Kinta, the local landowner, and laid out to a more disciplined plan. As part of his strategy for the new town, he sold plots of land to would-be owners at Straits dollars 20 per shop-house plot. The Land Office issued Titles. Over the intervening 130 years there have been many milestone years for Ipoh, but probably none as important as the year of 1893 when the demand for tin was massive world-wide, and thus Ipoh and the Kinta Valley tin rush was in full flood. Of course to understand the value of the events of any year, one needs to consider the status of the previous year, 1892, as a baseline.

From the very beginning, Ipoh had been planned to be an orderly place. Roads were straight and (for those days) comparatively broad. Indeed by 1887, the main street named after the fourth British Resident (appointed 1877) Sir Hugh Low, actually sported some concrete and brick buildings among the wood and atap. The Town Planners in the Land Office were doing their job! But as the population increased (almost doubling from 1891 to 1893) the authorities lost control. Chinese immigrants flocked into town and haphazardly erected their wood and

atap shacks wherever there was space. The buildings were close together and alongside the river, there were piles of tin ore and rough-cast tin ingots waiting to be transported down river to Teluk Anson and on to Singapore for smelting. Ipoh had become a lawless, overcrowded and insanitary shanty town of some 11,000 inhabitants, 9,000 of which were Chinese! Diseases like Cholera and Beri-Beri spread like wildfire.



A Lawless, Overcrowded and Insanitary Shanty Town

But fate was on the side of the Land Office when a mysterious fire broke out on 1 June 1892 which quickly spread through the town and burnt down more than half the buildings. 123 houses were gone and there was huge amount of damage to those remaining. Fortunately, there is no record of lives being lost.

This was a golden opportunity for authority to step in and rebuild the town in the way it had been intended by its original benefactor. The task of re-planning the

town fell to a British Officer W J P Hume, the then Collector of Land Revenue, Kinta. But Hume had a major problem as he was bound by the then planning laws which included roads as wide as 60 feet, fire breaks between blocks of houses and a 5-foot way to shelter pedestrians from the burning sun and the torrential rain – and the government would not allocate a single cent for the task! It was time for him to adopt a barely legal strategy.

Backed only by the power of his office, Hume had all the remaining wooden buildings demolished and where owners could produce their titles he forced them to push back their plot to provide the necessary requirements. He then issued new titles for the new (often smaller) plots. The new Ipoh started to take shape. Then he encouraged the rich Tin Mining Towkays to become developers and after purchasing more plots, build new shop-houses along Hume's newly planned streets. This was a popular move with the rich Chinese who could see that money could be made. One such developer was Towkay Leong Fee who developed blocks of shop-houses in today's Jalan Bandar Timah (originally named Leech Street after Mr. J M B Leech, District Officer, of Kinta) and Jalan Bijeh Timah (the latter named Treacher Street after Sir William Hood Treacher KCMG who was British Resident, Selangor in 1892).

Having built these properties and presumably sold them at considerable profit, Leong Fee provided one of his buildings at No. 3 Treacher Street for the free use of his rich Hakka tin mining colleagues. Thus the Hakka Tin Miners' Club* was formed on the first day of the fifth Lunar month - the first Chinese club in Ipoh.

But this was not the only club formed that year for the "Whites Only" Ipoh Club was planned by a small group of Europeans in 1892 at the Oldfield's Dispensary. They had got into the habit of dropping in to the dispensary around noon and partaking of a glass or two from their personal bottle of Scotch whisky secreted behind the medicine bottles. This was generally diluted with a little Soda Water sold to them by Oldfield. The outcome of these meetings was "an atap and timber affair" built at the junction of Hugh Low Street and the newly-named Club Road. It also opened in 1893. It was a predominately male club but unlike the Chinese Club, wives were allowed to attend functions when invited.

But other good things came in 1893. One major innovation was the formation of the Kinta Sanitary Board whose task was to ensure the cleanliness level of Ipoh. It was an uphill task but, one striking advance that was made was the construction of a platform over the river at

the top of Hale Street (Jalan Tun Sambathan) for people to bathe. It is said this was mainly taken advantage of by the Chinese.

Another major event was the arrival of Malaya's first fire engine in Ipoh. In 1892, fire precautions had been almost non-existent with the best that could be achieved was volunteer wooden push carts carrying buckets of water from the river. So, learning from the "Great Fire", the Town Council ordered a magnificent machine from London. It was a Merryweather 'Greenwich' Steam Fire Engine ordered from its manufacturers and delivered to Ipoh - the first such appliance to reach the shores of Peninsula Malaya. The Merryweather Company was a legend, founded in 1690 and producers of hand-worked fire pumps. They had gotten into steam appliances at the earliest opportunity and shipped their products world-wide.

The new Fire engine was horse-drawn and manned by Sikhs under the supervision of the Police. It was capable of pumping 400 to 600 gallons per minute and when galloping to the scene of a fire it was said to be the fastest thing on wheels in the whole of the country.

Apart from these major advances in the life of the citizens of Ipoh, there were many more steps forward that followed in their wake, but it was not all good news.

With the large influx of Chinese, crime had increased dramatically. Gang warfare was common and in January 1893, Lieutenant Colonel Walker, Commandant of the Sikh States Guides, made an assessment tour with the aim of boosting the Ipoh police presence. In February, there was a very bad drought with so little water in the Kinta River that even small boats could not get on or out. Even the main jetty at Batu Gajah was useless. Kinta Valley tin ore could not reach the smelter. Later in the year, the disease Beri-Beri took a huge toll of the local rice-eating people, particularly the Chinese coolies who, it is recorded, only had an average life-expectancy of 25 years. Clearly the Town Council and the Sanitary Board still had much to do.

The next major milestone for Ipoh was the construction of New Town in 1909, but that's another story.

**Han Chin Pet Soo, the Hakka Tin Miners' Club, now a museum, is open to visitors. Bookings may be made via www.ipohworld.org/reservation.*