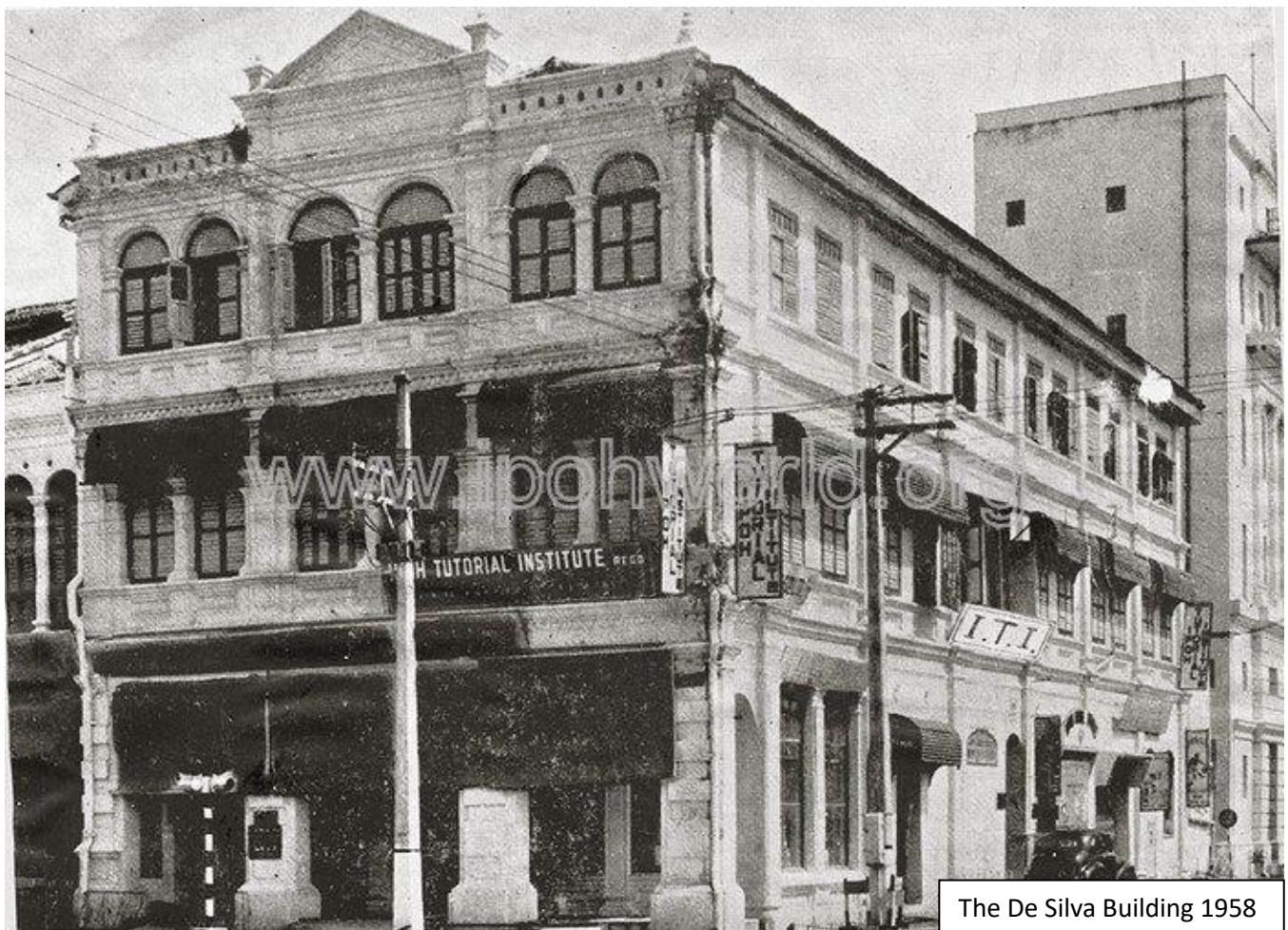


Heritage - Shorthand - Heritage or Outdated Skill?

In the good old days, little girls always wanted to be film stars and little boys, train drivers (the steam-driven ones of course). But we do not always get what we want in life and often we have to take second best. For little girls that probably meant being the secretary to some important business tycoon. Sadly, to achieve that you had to learn shorthand, the most common version being that invented and developed by Englishman Sir Isaac Pitman in 1837. In the early days, Ipoh's Tutorial Institute in Station Road was exactly the right place to do just that.

The Ipoh Tutorial Institute (ITI) started in the S.P. De Silva Building (at No. 43 Station Road, Ipoh) with a long frontage in Belfield Street (next to HSBC). The building was completed in 1904, but it was not until the early 1950's that the Institute moved into the upper floors. Several subjects were available. Particularly strong in the English language, the classes also specialised in Commercial subjects like bookkeeping, basic commercial accounting and Pitman shorthand. External courses from the London Institute of Marketing were also available from here. The Institute was owned and operated by a soft-spoken Indian gentleman by the name of Mr Kurup and his wife also taught there.

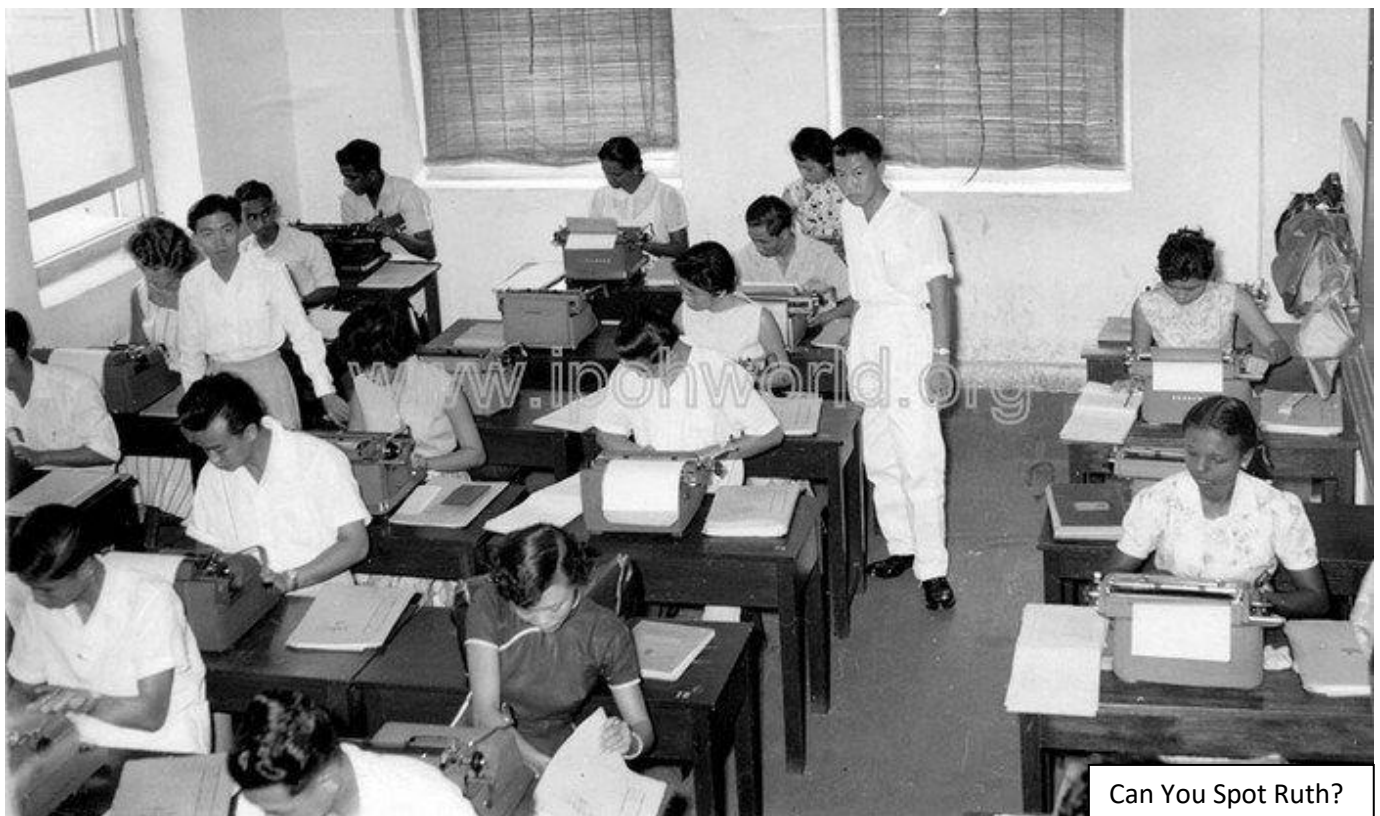


The De Silva Building 1958

Running in parallel with the original Institute were additional premises in Gurdwara Road, Ipoh. The Straits Times Classifieds published the following on 29 January 1955:

“EXTENSION OF IPOH TUTORIAL INSTITUTE at Gurdwara Road, Ipoh has a few vacancies in Standard One. Children from 6 years to 8 years. For admission apply to the Principal, Ipoh Tutorial Institute, No. 43 Station Road, Ipoh before the 10th February, 1955.”

At the time, the ground floor at Station Road was occupied by commercial premises. There was an auctioneer along the Belfield Street frontage run by I. Packi. The front part of his hall was occupied by David, his nephew and they were dealing in sports goods. There was a secondhand bookshop alongside the entrance, with its rickety staircase to the Institute. An old gentleman who practised as a Commissioner of Oaths, sharing a small cranny in the bookshop.



Ruth Iversen (daughter of the famous Danish architect) shared her experiences with us:

“I went to the Commercial Class of the Ipoh Tutorial Institute in the 1950s. It was on the first floor of the De Silva building in Station Road/Belfield Street. Here I tried to learn Pitman’s shorthand. You will see the only European pupil on the photo – that’s me! My teachers were Messrs. Hong Thye and Chai Lok.”

The question is, “With all the digital tools available today, does anyone still use Shorthand?” A professional journalist answers: “Everyone can interview someone using a smartphone, but you can’t use them in court or for Inquests. If you have to write in long-hand, you’re going to miss an awful lot of information. Shorthand still has its place in the digital world.”

Believe it or not, you can still take Pitman's Shorthand courses online today. After 182 years that's serious heritage to be proud of!

We are indebted to Ruth Iversen, Ken Chan, Charlie Choong, Kami Suria and S.Y. Lee to their inputs to this article.