

# BALESTIER HERITAGE TRAIL

A COMPANION GUIDE



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# INTRODUCTION



*The Sim Kwong Ho shophouses along Balestier Road, 2018*

The Balestier precinct is named after Joseph Balestier, the first American Consul to Singapore, who owned a sugarcane plantation there. Today, the area is well-known for eateries as well as shops selling lighting equipment and bathroom goods.

During the 1900s, the Balestier precinct started to evolve into a residential neighbourhood, and it was in Balestier where the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) built its first housing estate at Lorong Limau in the 1930s. Most of the SIT houses were later replaced by Housing & Development Board flats by the late 1970s.

Within the precinct, there are a number of important sites and landmarks such as Tan Tock Seng Hospital and the former Malay Film Productions studio; religious and cultural

institutions such as Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple, Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sin Sia and Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi Kebun Limau; as well as numerous sports clubs located on Balestier Plain.

The Balestier Heritage Trail uncovers the rich history of the area as it transformed from a plantation into a precinct filled with shophouses and buildings with diverse architectural styles. It also explores the communities, clubs, schools, healthcare institutions and religious landmarks that collectively make up Balestier's unique cultural landscape.

Follow us on this self-guided trail as we explore Balestier's rich heritage and gain insights into this precinct through the memories of those who have lived, worked and played here!



# EARLY HISTORY

Like much of Singapore in the early 1800s, the Balestier precinct was covered in forest. A small river, initially known as Balestier River and later renamed Sungei Whampoa, ran through the area and emptied into the Kallang River Basin.

Sungei Whampoa was fed by tributaries that originated in the vicinity of Bukit Brown, Mount Pleasant and Thomson Road. In the 1860s, the area west of Thomson Road was developed into Thomson Road Reservoir, which was renamed MacRitchie Reservoir in 1922 after municipal engineer James MacRitchie. MacRitchie Reservoir remains the primary source of Sungei Whampoa today.

North of Sungei Whampoa were hills and swamps that later became known as Toa Payoh (“big swamp” in Hokkien, *payoh* being derived from *paya*, Malay for “swamp”). Meanwhile, Balestier Road’s southern side was a hilly area which was later occupied by a Teocheow cemetery and Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

## DEVELOPMENT AND AGRICULTURE

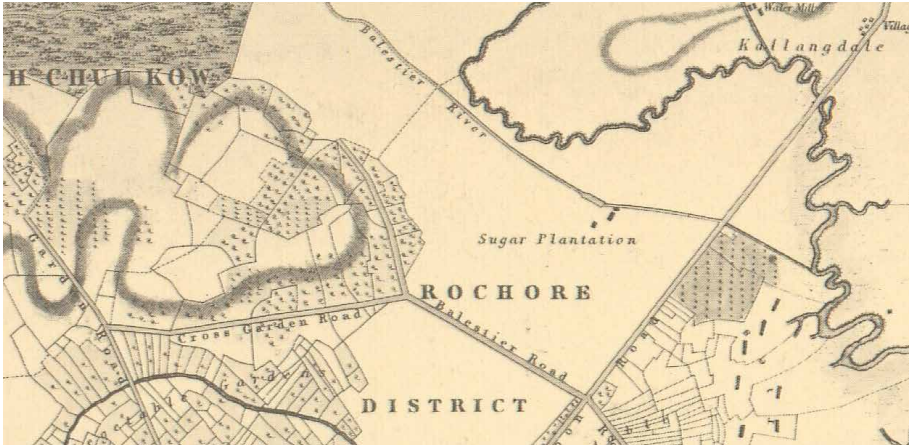
In the first decade after Singapore became a British settlement in 1819, the Balestier area was still *terra incognita* (unknown territory) and considered part of the island’s unexplored interior. The British later cleared forests and built roads to provide access to the area. This painstaking work was carried out by Indian convicts, who were first transported to Singapore in 1825 to serve as indentured labourers.

By the late 1830s, the lower end of Balestier Road (still unnamed) had been constructed, as seen from a map drawn by surveyor George Dromgold Coleman (1795-1844) in 1836. The map showed Balestier Road starting from the junction of Serangoon Road and Lavender Street (both then unnamed as well), and ending near the present junction of Moulmein Road.

Coleman’s map depicted a largely agricultural landscape around Balestier Road. Sirih (betel) and vegetable gardens lined the area around the junction of Balestier Road and Serangoon



Balestier Road (unnamed) as indicated in the Map of the Town and Environs of Singapore by George Dromgold Coleman, 1836 Survey Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Balestier Road and Balestier River (now Sungei Whampoa) as indicated in the Plan of Singapore Town and its Adjoining Districts by John Turnbull Thomson, 1846*  
 Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Road. South of Balestier Road were vast paddy fields. These gardens and fields were probably established by early settlers to provide food for the island's growing population.

Coleman marked the area north of Balestier Road as being "partly cleared for sugar and cotton plantations". This same area was later depicted as a "sugar plantation" in a map drawn by surveyor John Turnbull Thomson (1821-84) in 1846. The plantation was owned by Joseph Balestier, the first American Consul to Singapore, and the adjoining road was named after him.

By this time, Balestier Road had been extended to the present Kim Keat Road junction, and fruit trees lined the road as well as the hilly area north of Moulmein Road (then known as Cross Garden Road). The entire area was then known as Rochore District after the Rochor River which formed its southern boundary.

### **JOSEPH BALESTIER, THE FIRST AMERICAN CONSUL TO SINGAPORE**

Born in 1788, Joseph Balestier lived in Boston, a city in the state of Massachusetts in the United States of America (USA). He married Maria Revere (1785-1847) in 1814 and she bore their only son Joseph Warren Revere Balestier in 1819.

During the early 1820s, Balestier was mostly based at St Thomas, a Caribbean island, where he learned about growing and processing sugarcane. He also served as a Consular Commercial Agent on the island of Puerto Rico. These stints equipped him with the skills to later work as a planter and Consul in Singapore.

From 1824-30, Balestier established a trading business in New York City, but unfortunately this venture failed. Balestier then applied to the US government for an overseas posting, and in 1833, Balestier was appointed America's Consul to Riau (now Bintan).

The Balestiers arrived at Riau in May 1834 only to find a quiet port with no European or American merchants. This was because regional trade had shifted to Singapore by then. The Balestiers promptly relocated to Singapore where they first resided in Boustead Building, a warehouse by the Singapore River. Balestier then wrote to the US government to be redesignated Consul to Singapore instead, and this change was formalised in 1837.

Balestier's consular duties included looking after and helping distressed and shipwrecked American sailors or those accused of crimes. To supplement his meagre salary as Consul,

Balestier also worked as a shipping agent, taking a commission for goods he bought or sold on behalf of visiting vessels, and supplied provisions to visiting ships.

These sources of supplementary income allowed the Balestiers to relocate to a bungalow at Kampong Gelam in October 1834. The Balestiers stayed at Kampong Gelam until 1836, when they relocated to a two-storey house along North Bridge Road (now the site of Capitol Theatre).

### **Balestier the planter**

Balestier was an active member of the colonial community, serving on the Grand Jury and in the Singapore Chamber of Commerce. He also provided information about the USA to local newspapers and wrote articles about agriculture.

Balestier was able to apply his agricultural knowledge in 1835, when he successfully applied for 1,000 acres of land for use as a plantation. The land, which was bordered by Balestier Road, Serangoon Road, Sungei Whampoa and Kim Keat Road, was originally a swampy area covered by dense jungle.

To prepare the land for planting, Balestier employed Indian convicts to drain the swampy ground and cut the forest. At first, Balestier tried growing cotton, but the crop succumbed to pests. Thereafter, he switched to sugarcane, which he believed would fare better in Singapore's climate.

To process the sugarcane, Balestier constructed a wooden mill which was powered by a water wheel that used water channelled from a small river next to his estate. This river was originally known as Balestier River, and renamed Sungei Whampoa in the early 1900s. The river also allowed goods to be carried by boats down to the Kallang Basin and beyond.

Balestier's workers included Indian labourers who cut and transported the cane as well as Chinese workers who worked in the mill and processing factory. Hokkiens from Fujian province in China were also employed in

the cane fields in the 1840s. These Hokkien workers established Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple in 1847, which still stands at Balestier Road today (more details about this temple can be found on page 56).

Balestier's efforts bore fruit in 1838 when his sugarcane was finally ready for harvest. After processing the crop, he placed newspaper advertisements to sell "Singapore (Muscovado and bleached) sugar manufactured according to late improvement" and "Singapore molasses". Muscovado is a kind of brown sugar while molasses is a thick sugary fluid. Balestier also manufactured rum, an alcoholic beverage made from sugarcane juice.

In 1840, Balestier's family moved to the estate, where they lived in a small wooden plantation house with two bedrooms, a parlour and a dining room. The house was later extended to accommodate up to 14 servants who cooked and took care of livestock. While Maria took care of the household and plantation workers, Balestier managed the estate with the help of his son and another assistant.



*Muscovado sugar, 2018*



*Molasses, 2018*

## WHAT IS SUGARCANE?

Sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) or *tebu* in Malay is a large, tropical member of the grass family. This crop has been cultivated in Asia since ancient times for its juice and raw sugar, which are obtained by crushing sugarcane stems. The resulting sap is boiled until the sugar crystallises.

Sugarcane juice can also be processed into rum or another liquor called *arrack*. The crushed cane residue (*ampas* in Malay) has many uses: it is processed into paper, used as fuel for boiling the juice, converted into fertiliser or sold as animal feed.

Sugarcane was among the many crops considered for cultivation in Singapore by the Agricultural and Horticultural Society. Founded in 1836, this society included Balestier and prominent European residents who wanted to pursue the cultivation of economically valuable crops such as cotton, sugar, coconut, pepper and nutmeg in Singapore.



A watercolour of the sugarcane plant, early 1800s  
Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore,  
National Heritage Board



A young Malayan tiger, 1900s  
Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of  
National Archives of Singapore

In 1842, Balestier received an old friend, Captain Charles Wilkes from the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-42. Wilkes described Balestier as being “well known among men of science in the United States” and added:

*“He was extensively engaged in the cultivation of sugar, on a plantation of one thousand acres, within two miles of Singapore [town], nearly half of which was under cultivation... He is the first person who has attempted the cultivation of sugar in Singapore, and for his success he was awarded the gold medal of the Calcutta Agricultural Society [in 1840].”*

Despite these successes, plantation life was not without its risks. Tigers became a threat after the extensive clearing of forests in Singapore’s interior forced them to venture out to rural areas and plantations to seek prey. A tiger killed two of Balestier’s workers in 1842, and a Chinese man was killed in 1843 while constructing a tiger pit at the back of Balestier’s plantation.

## Decline of the estate and Balestier’s departure

Joseph Balestier suffered a great blow in 1844 when his son died after a violent fever and was buried at the European cemetery on Government Hill (now Fort Canning Park). In 1846, his wife Maria fell seriously ill and eventually died on 22 August 1847. She was buried next to her son.

Around that time, Balestier began to experience business difficulties. One such difficulty was the United Kingdom’s heavy import duties on sugar and rum from Singapore. Another





*Labourers loading harvested sugarcane onto boats, Malaya, early 1900s*  
 Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board



*Sungei Whampoa, formerly known as Balestier River, 2018*

challenge was increased competition from cheaper sugar from Siam and Indochina. In some years, unseasonal rain also destroyed the crop before harvest time.

By early 1848, Balestier's health was failing, even as he mourned the loss of his family. Floods had destroyed the previous year's crop and flooded the estate. He suffered a nervous breakdown in March at the prospect of not being able to pay off his debts. Eventually, Balestier had to give up his plantation and all his property. He even had to spend some time in the debtors' gaol.

After he was released, Balestier made preparations to return to the USA. On 20 March 1848, he appointed an American named Joseph Harvey Weed as acting Consul. Unfortunately, Weed died suddenly in June that year and the post was left vacant.

From April 1848, newspaper advertisements began to appear for the sale of the "Balestier Plantation". Balestier's former house on the estate was renovated and offered "to let" in 1849. There were, however, no buyers, for the estate or the house.



Balestier left Singapore on 8 May 1848 and, in his farewell tribute, the British governor William Butterworth (1801-56) wrote that Balestier counted as “one of the oldest and most respected residents” of Singapore. He added that “the name of Balestier, the American Consul at Singapore, will have a leading place in the hearts of many and the minds of all, and that you carry with you the greatest respect and highest esteem of the community”.

### **Balestier after leaving Singapore**

Balestier would later return to Singapore briefly in 1849 on a mission to extend American commercial ties in East Asia. He continued to Hong Kong, Guangdong and Macau, but achieved little there due to the region’s political instability.

Similar attempts by Balestier to obtain permission for Americans to trade in Cochinchina (now Vietnam) and Siam (now Thailand) were unsuccessful. Balestier was, however, able to sign a treaty to establish commercial relations between America and Brunei in 1850.

Balestier returned to America in September 1851 and officially resigned as American Consul to Singapore on 21 January 1852. Soon after, he married Caroline Matilda Fitzhugh Thompson and settled in Stafford County, Virginia. After Caroline died in 1857, Balestier moved to York, Pennsylvania, where he died on 12 November 1858.

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## **THE REVERE BELL**

In 1843, Maria Balestier presented a bell cast by the Revere Foundry in Boston, USA, to St Andrew’s Church (now St Andrew’s Cathedral). Known as the Revere Bell, this is the only bell cast by the Revere Foundry to be located outside the USA.

The Revere Foundry was established by Paul Revere (1734-1818), Maria’s father, a smith and supporter of the American Revolution against the British. Revere was famous for his daring midnight ride on 18 April 1775 from Boston to Lexington to warn fellow revolutionaries of approaching British troops. After the USA gained independence in 1776, Revere opened his foundry in 1788.

St Andrew’s Church was built in 1835-37 by George Dromgold Coleman. A tower and spire were later added by John Turnbull Thomson. When these additions were completed in 1843, Maria gifted the Revere Bell to the church on the condition that it be rung for five minutes to signal the start of a curfew every evening at 8pm. The curfew reminded sailors to return to their ships and residents to be watchful, as crimes were common after dark.

The Revere Bell was in use until 1889. It was then kept in storage until 1911 when the bell was installed at St George’s Church at Tanglin Barracks. Unfortunately, the bell cracked and was again returned to storage until 1937, when it was given to the Raffles Museum (now National Museum of Singapore). Today, the bell is displayed in the National Museum’s permanent gallery.



*Revere Bell, undated*  
Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

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# AFTER BALESTIER

**B**alestier's former sugarcane estate had no buyers, most likely because people then no longer felt that sugar was a lucrative business in Singapore. Eventually, in the mid-1850s, the British government acquired the land, which became known as Balestier Plain. A newspaper article in 1874 summed up Balestier Plain's early history:

*"The Balestier Plain, as it is called, after an American planter of that name, who lost his own and other people's money in trying to manufacture sugar and rum, ultimately became and now is the property of Government, with the view to make the place a sheep farm... That project failed, and the property became a free shooting ground."*

## BALESTIER ROAD IN THE LATE 1800S

By 1848, Balestier Road had been extended to reach Thomson Road. This development made the area more accessible and attractive to landowners. Around this period, the hilly area south of Balestier Road was divided into lots that were acquired by Ung Kim Cheah (also spelt Ang Kim Cheai) and Hoo Ah Kay. Little is known about Ung except that he was a merchant who contributed to the building of the Dalhousie Obelisk at Empress Place in 1850.

Hoo Ah Kay (1816-80), on the other hand, was a prominent Cantonese businessman who was also known as Whampoa after his birthplace, Huangpu in China's Guangdong province. Part of the hilly area between Balestier Road and Moulmein Road, which he owned in the 1800s, was known as Whampoa's Hill during the late 1840s.

From the 1860s, another major landowner in the Balestier area was Low Jun Tek, a Teochew opium farmer. The land owned by Low spanned the area between Thomson Road, Balestier Road, Sungei Whampoa and the present Boon Teck Road. He also had a burial ground in what is now Toa Payoh Town Park.

In 1896, Low's property was advertised for sale and described as having a bungalow and productive fruit trees. Three roads led to Low's property from Balestier Road, and these roads were later named Ah Hood Road, Tai Gin Road and Boon Teck Road.

Meanwhile, plots in the area between Kim Keat Road and Jalan Ampas was acquired by different landowners in the 1860s-70s. They included a Mrs Bowker, G Norris (probably George Norris, a civil servant), William Henry Gomes (an Anglican missionary) and Wee Boon Whatt, a conveyancer.

By the early 1880s, small villages had also been established along Balestier Road. These were probably the dwellings of Chinese cultivators who leased part of Balestier Plain for use as vegetable gardens. One of these villages, which was located between Balestier Road and Sungei Whampoa, later grew into a large settlement called Balestier Village.

By the late 1920s, Balestier Village had become a dense neighbourhood of attap houses. The residents included hawkers and vegetable farmers who sold produce such as taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) that was grown in the many ponds covering the swampy area. Other villagers included artisans, factory workers and pig breeders.



*Then Minister for National Development Tan Kia Gan and government staff touring a kampong off Balestier Road, 1959*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



A kampong off Balestier Road, 1959

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

### The many names of Balestier Road

Although officially named Balestier Road, locals had their own names for the road and its surrounding area. For instance, Hokkiens referred to Balestier Road as Or Kio (“black bridge”), after a bridge that was said to have been located near the junction of Balestier Road and Moulmein Road.

Tan Kee Seng (b. 1927), who stayed at Ah Hood Road in the 1950s, was familiar with Balestier Road’s Hokkien name:

*“Balestier Road was also called Or Kio. You would take bus 19 and get off at the [Thomson Road] end – that was Or Kio. The whole area was called Or Kio. I think it was because there was a black-painted bridge there. But the bridge was probably demolished long ago.”*

Another Hokkien name for the road was Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong. This referred to a temple dedicated to the Chinese deity Tua Pek Kong, which was built at Balestier Road in 1847. The name “Goh Chor” means Rochore in Hokkien, referring to the district’s name during this period. Meanwhile, the Cantonese referred to Balestier Road as Wu Hap Thong or “taro pond”, as this crop was widely planted here in the late 1800s.

In Tamil, Balestier Road was known as Thanir Kampong or Thannir Kampan (“water kampong”) as water, likely drawn from Sungei

Whampoa, was transported in bullock carts from the area to other parts of the island for sale.

Another old name for the area was Kebun Limau (Malay for “lime garden”), as many lime trees were once cultivated in the area, especially around Kim Keat Road and Moulmein Road. Zainul Aljunied (b. 1947), who once lived near the junction of Ah Hood Road and Balestier Road, explained the origin of this name:

*“I was told that before our family house at 540 Balestier Road was built, the land was a plantation for limau kasturi or calamansi [a species of lime].”*

The junction of Balestier Road and Serangoon Road also had different names. It was once called Rumah Miskin (“House of the Poor” in



A bus along Balestier Road, 1956

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

Malay), referring to Tan Tock Seng Hospital (also known as the Chinese Pauper Hospital), which was based there from 1860-1909. Rumah Miskin was also the name of a police station that stood at this junction from the late 1800s until the early 1990s.

Near this junction, there was also a Malay village with many *nangka* or jackfruit trees. This gave rise to the area's Hokkien name of Mang Ka Kha or "foot of the jackfruit tree". Teo Ah Wah (b. 1940), who grew up near Balestier Road in the 1950s, shared:

*"This end of Balestier Road – the Lavender Road and Serangoon Road junction – was known as Mang Ka Kha. Why? Some said jokingly that it was because there were many mosquitoes which bit people's legs. But I don't think it was this reason. It should have been because there were many nangka trees there then. So the area around these trees was called Mang Ka Kha."*

## COUNTRY BUNGALOWS

From the late 1800s, larger houses began to appear along Balestier Road, as the town area had by then become crowded and commanded high rents. This situation, according to a 1895 newspaper report, was "driving Europeans and Eurasians of slender means to the suburbs, and what was only a collection of attap hovels on Ballestier [sic] Road, is gradually giving place to decent though inexpensive houses".

By 1901, much of Balestier Road was lined by country bungalows owned by residents who



A bungalow at Akyab Road, 1982  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved.  
Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.



Kim Keat Road, which led to Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery in Toa Payoh, c. 1930s  
Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

worked or had businesses in the town area. Country bungalows were also built along roads such as Boon Teck Road. This road was named in 1901 after Wee Boon Teck (1850-88), a Teochew merchant whose family owned land in the area.

There were also country bungalows along Kim Keat Road, whose residents included Chew Lye Huat, a Straits Chinese merchant, and Lee Hak Heng, a building contractor and fish trader. The road's most prominent resident, however, was Choa Kim Keat (1858-1907), who built a country house in the neighbourhood in 1895. Both Kim Keat Road, which led to Choa's house, and Kim Keat Lane, a side road, were named after Choa in 1901 and 1902 respectively.

Born in Melaka, Choa came to Singapore to work as a salesman. In 1886, he joined Straits Trading Company and became a successful sales agent. He also managed the rice business of Tan Kim Ching, the eldest son of Tan Tock Seng and also Choa's father-in-law.

During his lifetime, Choa was also well-known as a collector of rare plants and orchids. He hosted regular parties at his Balestier home, where visitors could admire his prize-winning flowers. Choa also took part in flower shows at the Botanic Gardens, where he displayed begonias, roses and dahlias. After Choa's death, his plant collection was auctioned off and most of his land at Balestier Road was



*The home of George Bennett Taye at 2 Kim Keat Road during a flood, 1930s*  
 Courtesy of Gerardine Donough-Tan

either acquired by the government or sold off by his descendants just after World War II.

George Bennett Taye (1883-1946), a Straits Chinese entrepreneur and insurance agent, also had a house at Kim Keat Road in the early 1900s. Describing her grandfather's house, Gerardine Donough-Tan (b. 1955) said:

*"No. 2 Kim Keat Road was where my grandfather's family lived. There was a long driveway, because the house was far in from the road. Now, Kim Keat Gardens stands there, renumbered 6 Kim Keat Road – the first block of flats behind the Sim Kwong Ho shophouses."*

Living near the Tayes was the family of Song Hoot Kiam (1830-1900), a prominent Straits Chinese who was the father of Song Ong Siang (1871-1941), a lawyer and the first Chinese to be knighted by the British in 1936. Recalling what her mother and aunts had shared about their neighbours, Donough-Tan said:

*"The Songs had a huge house with a compound, a lake and a long driveway... My aunts, the girls of the Taye family, used to play and fight with the neighbours – they took mud from the lake and threw it at the Songs!"*

## HOMES AT AH HOOD ROAD

Ah Hood Road was originally named Mandarin Road in 1901, but was renamed a year later after Wee Ah Hood (1828-75), a Teochew pepper and gambier merchant. Wee's family owned a burial ground at Ah Hood Road where his son Wee Kim Yam, an opium and spirit farmer, was buried in 1914.

According to former resident, Koh Swee Gek (b. 1945), Ah Hood Road once crossed Sungei Whampoa and led to a hilly and wooded part of Toa Payoh, before the Pan-Island Expressway (PIE) was built in the 1970s. Koh's granduncle, Seow Cheng Watt, owned a large family estate off Ah Hood Road until the late 1950s, when the land was acquired by the government. Recalling the estate, Koh shared:

*"There were three houses there. One was my grandmother's brother's house, another was our house, and up the hill was my granduncle's second wife's house. The whole estate belonged to my grandmother's brother."*

Describing her house at 13/2 Ah Hood Road, which often flooded during the rainy season, Koh said:



*"It was a very beautiful house in the sense that you can't find such houses today. The house was very big with an open patio. Inside was an air well so you had sunlight coming in... In December, it was always flooded. We had to wade through the area. It was like a valley and behind us was a hill which had many fruit trees. Every time the fruit season came, we would go and pick durians and rambutans."*

Koh's cousin, Dr Ruth Chia (b. 1940), also remembered Ah Hood Road and Balestier Road well. Describing the area in the 1950s, she said:

*"Sometimes I would take a bus [from school], stop at Balestier Road and walk into Ah Hood Road. There was a river and a bridge, and we crossed that and there was my grandmother's house."*

Chia recalled that Balestier Road then was "one of the more built-up areas, busy and bustling," although it was "not posh like Orchard Road". Side roads such as Ah Hood Road were still dirt tracks and lined by small shops and houses on stilts. She shared:

*"We used to buy things from the little shops, like rubber bands to play and shoot things. The most memorable experiences I had was running around up the hill among the tombstones to play hide and seek - can you imagine that?"*

### **The Aljunieds at Balestier**

Another prominent family who made Balestier Road their home were the Aljunieds. The Aljunieds are descendants of Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied (1792-1852), an Arab from the Hadhramaut region in Yemen. Syed Omar was a merchant and landowner who came to Singapore from Palembang shortly after the island became a British port in 1819. He was a generous philanthropist who contributed to the building of Singapore's oldest mosque, Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka, at Keng Cheow Street in 1820. He also donated the land on which St Andrew's Cathedral was built, as well as the original site of Tan Tock Seng Hospital at Pearl's Hill.

The Aljunieds originally resided at High Street, but they moved to Balestier Road in the late

1800s. Their house was built by Syed Abu Bakar bin Omar Aljunied. He later passed down the property to his only daughter Sharifah Alwiyah Aljunied, who married her cousin Syed Abdul Rahman Aljunied, the founder of Madrasah Aljunied at Victoria Lane in 1927.

Zainul Aljunied, who grew up at the Aljunieds' family home at 540 Balestier Road, described his grandfather Syed Abdul Rahman as a man of great stature with a commanding presence:

*"He was a very loving person, he loved to carry me and kiss me. I remember him until I was about 6 or 7 years old; after that he passed away. He had a lot of charisma, but he was always smiling and down-to-earth."*

Describing the area around the house, which was called Kebun Limau, Zainul said:

*"Our compound went all the way to the Whampoa River. We had all sorts of fruit trees like rambutans, coconuts and mangos, and fantastic orchids. We would swim in the river, catch fighting fish, play with spiders, and during floods, we cut and tied banana leaves together into a raft."*



*Family portrait of Sharifah Alwiyah Aljunied (seated front left) with her five daughters, undated. Reproduced with permission of the family of the late Sharifah Alwiyah Abubakar Aljunied*

When the floods became too severe, however, such as in 1967, the Aljunieds provided shelter to nearby residents who took refuge on the upper level of their house until the waters subsided.

The Aljunied home was particularly lively during weddings and festivals, as Zainul recalled:

*“Our house was like a community centre. When people in the area were getting married, we would supply them with periuk besar [big pots] to cook their biryani and special serving plates.”*

During Ramadan (the Muslim fasting month), the Aljunieds also hosted prayer sessions led by a family member and prepared communal meals so that fellow Muslims living nearby could break their daily fast. Sharifah Rukayah binte Haroon Aljunied (b. 1937), Syed Abdul Rahman’s granddaughter, recalled:

*“During Ramadan, people would come to our place to break their fast and for tawarih (special communal prayers performed during Ramadan). There were many Javanese kampongs along Ah Hood Road, Jalan Datoh and Jalan Dusun – also many Hailam (Hainanese) at Ah Hood Road living along the river. [The Javanese residents] would perform wayang kulit (shadow puppets) during weddings.”*

During the 1950s, Balestier Road was notorious for its gangsters. However, Zainul explained that he was never worried as people who lived in the area regarded the Aljunieds as benefactors of the community. “The



*The Aljunied family house at Balestier, undated  
Reproduced with permission of the family of the late Sharifah Alwiyah Abubakar Aljunied*

## REGIONAL ROYALTY AT BALESTIER

During the early 1900s, the Balestier area was also the home of the Sultan of Sulu, an archipelago between Borneo and the Philippines. Another royal personage who resided in the area was the Sultan of Siak, a regency in Riau province, Sumatra, Indonesia. The Sultan of Siak’s house was built in 1902 and located at Jalan Rajah, which was likely named after its royal resident (*raja* means “king” in Malay).

kampong folk protected us. We didn’t have to worry, they knew that we helped the poor,” he said. “They protected us and our house was never locked.”

Sharifah Alwiyah, the matriarch of the house, was affectionately called Mak Tok by her family and friends. Zainul recalled that Mak Tok was an expert in traditional herbal medicine. “At the back of the house was her workshop or *bangsal*, where she made her *ubat* [medicine],” he said. “I used to help her pound the *ubat*.” Zainul’s niece, Dr Sharifah Mariam Aljunied (b. 1967), added of Mak Tok:

*“People in the neighbourhood would come to her for herbal medicine. Chinese Nonyas (Straits Chinese ladies) would buy from her; she even made pulut (glutinous rice) for her Nonya friends when they went to pray at Kusu Island.”*

Mak Tok was also a traditional midwife who kept special rooms in the house, called the *bilik beranak*, for childbirth. Mariam explained:

*“This birthing room had to be pristinely clean. No kids were allowed inside. She had learnt how to be a midwife, a mak bidan, and this service was extended to family and friends in the neighbourhood.”*

Mariam was a regular visitor to the Aljunied family house before it was sold in the early 1970s. “I grew up with stories of Kebun Limau, which was part of my life,” she shared.

## TAI GIN ROAD AND THE SUN YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL

12 Tai Gin Road

Tai Gin Road is the site of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, a National Monument and the only surviving pre-war villa in the area. Named in 1901, the road's name means "big man" in Hokkien and referred to the Chinese Protector, a British official in charge of matters related to the Chinese community.

In the late 1800s, a merchant named Boey Chuan Poh (1873-1926) purchased a plot of land along Tai Gin Road, on which he built a villa



*Sun Yat Sen Villa, 1980s*  
National Museum of Singapore Collection,  
courtesy of National Heritage Board

in 1902. The villa was called Bin Chan House, possibly after one of his racehorses. The building's architecture is typical of colonial-era villas. It features wide verandahs on both sides to shield the interior from the sun, while large windows provide ample ventilation. Its front has a porte-cochere (carriage porch), above which is a large balcony supported by stately fluted Corinthian columns.

In 1905, Teo Eng Hock (1871-1958), a Teochew businessman, bought the villa as a retirement home for his mother and renamed it Wan Qing Yuan (Mandarin for "Serene Sunset Villa"). In the same year, Teo met Dr Sun Yat Sen (1866-1925), leader of the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance or Tong Meng Hui, a society that sought to overthrow the Qing dynasty and establish a modern republic in China.

Dr Sun had chosen Singapore as the nerve centre of his revolutionary movement in Southeast Asia. Teo became a strong supporter of Dr Sun and in late 1905, he offered his villa to Dr Sun as the Singapore headquarters of the Tong Meng Hui. In 1908, Dr Sun also made the villa the headquarters of the Tong Meng Hui in Southeast Asia.



*Dr Sun Yat Sen (pictured in the centre of the first row) with members of the Tong Meng Hui at Wan Qing Yuan, 1905-1906*  
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



*A bronze statue of Dr Sun Yat Sen within the villa's compound, 2018*

Dr Sun resided at the villa during his visits to Singapore to gather support and raise funds for the Chinese Revolution. Three uprisings to overthrow the Qing monarchy – the Huanggang Uprising and Zhennanguan Uprising in 1907, and the Hekou Uprising in 1908 – were planned at the villa. With the support of overseas Chinese communities, Dr Sun's revolution succeeded when the Qing government fell on 10 October 1911. He then became the first Provisional President of the Republic of China.

In 1910, Teo sold the villa and the building went through several owners until it was eventually acquired in 1937 by six Chinese community leaders: Lee Kong Chian, Tan Ean Kiam, Chew Hean Swee, Lee Chin Tian, Lee Choon Seng and Yeo Kiat Tiow. In 1938, these men donated the villa to the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which wanted to convert the building into a memorial hall for Dr Sun.

However, these plans were interrupted by World War II and the villa became a military

communication base during the Japanese Occupation. After the war, the building was reopened as a museum and library called the Sun Yat Sen Villa in 1966. The villa was gazetted a National Monument in 1994 and renamed the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall in 1996.

Subsequently, the National Heritage Board (NHB) took over the management of the building in 2009. It revamped the galleries and reopened the building in 2011 as a museum that explores the vital role of Singapore and Southeast Asia in the 1911 Chinese Revolution, as well as the impact of the revolution on the Chinese community in Singapore.

Today, the building is owned by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry and managed as a heritage institution under NHB.

### **EURASIAN ENCLAVE AND KAMPONG CHIA HENG**

By the early 1900s, a corner of Balestier Road had evolved into a small Eurasian enclave. The



Eurasians are a community of mixed European and Asian heritage, who maintain their distinct identity, culture and culinary practices.

Bobby Longpoetih (b. 1933), who stayed at Irrawaddy Road from the 1930s until the late 1990s, shared that many Eurasian families lived near him, as well as along Shan Road and Martaban Road. "There was a big plot of terrace houses on Irrawaddy Road and many Eurasian families lived in them," recounted Longpoetih. "Others lived in shophouses on the main Balestier Road."

The Eurasian families who resided in this area had surnames such as Scully, Donough, Aeria, Alves, Bennett, Fernandez, Valberg, De Souza, Milne, Palmer, Klem, Jansen, Bligh, Ferreira, Bull and Galistan. Among these residents was Cuthbert Oswald Donough (1920-2010), an employee of Cable & Wireless (a British telecommunications company) and father of Gerardine Donough-Tan, who recalled:

*"My father's family lived at 15 Irrawaddy Road in the 1930s-40s. From late 1962 until 1981, our family lived at Moulmein Road. After dad retired in 1975, he did community work, and more so when we shifted to the new HDB estate at Jalan Dusun in 1981. He later became patron of Moulmein Constituency Sports Club and Citizens Consultative Committee. He would walk the ground and talked about the district. That's why I know the area so well."*

One of the neighbourhoods that Donough visited as part of his community work was Kampong Chia Heng, a small village located behind the present Novena Church. Kampong Chia Heng was officially named in 1929 after Leow Chia Heng (1870-1931), a Teochew cloth merchant, banker, rubber planter and President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

In the 1930s, Kampong Chia Heng had a badminton court as well as an active football club called the Chia Heng Youngsters. However, living conditions deteriorated after World War II, and by the 1950s, residents nicknamed their village the "Kampong of Forgotten Souls" as

it lacked public services and suffered from clogged drains and mosquito breeding.

During this period, Kampong Chia Heng had about 1,000 residents and they included Chinese, Malays and Muslim Indians. Donough-Tan recalled that in the 1960s, Kampong Chia Heng "had a roadside market where the hawkers sold fruits, vegetables and food almost up to the Thomson Road junction". She added:

*"There was also a woman selling chai tau kway [fried carrot cake]. Those days, there was no white version. It was all black with sweet sauce, and was one of the best I ever had. There was also a standpipe not far in from the main Thomson Road. It was a communal gathering point amid the bustle of the open-air market."*

Dorothy Seet (b. 1945), who lived at Moulmein Road in the early 1950s, shared of Kampong Chia Heng:

*"The whole kampong was our playground, our friends were all around there. My grandmother used to cross a path through the graveyards to visit her friend at Kampong Chia Heng to play cherki [a card game]... There were cows there grazing among the grass. I was so scared; she's a Nonya lady with a scarf. I would tell her, 'Mama, please take away the scarf' because I was under the impression that the cows will attack when they see red."*

Foo Cheow Ming (b. 1964), who lived nearby in the 1970s, shared this memory of Kampong Chia Heng:

*"In the early 70s I lived in Jalan Novena Selatan which overlooked Kampong Chia Heng from the hilltop next to Novena Church. Looking down from my bedroom window was this huge, lush green land with a few zinc roof and attap houses to my right. It was very, very peaceful, and in the late evenings and morning the entire area would resound with insects and birds chirping."*

*"There was a little stream where people would go to wash clothes and bathe. On top of the opposite hill would be the hostel blocks for the Tan Tock Seng Hospital staff - I can still remember seeing*



*the big letter 'G' on the side of the block and the kids playing about. Lovely memories, like out of a misty dream."*

The land on which Kampong Chia Heng stood was acquired by the government in 1981 and the area was later redeveloped into the Novena MRT station.

### SHOPHOUSES AND TERRACE HOUSES

Sim Kwong Ho shophouses: 292-312 Balestier Road  
Kwan Yow Luen shophouses: 412-418 Balestier Road  
Art Deco apartment blocks: 230 & 246 Balestier Road  
Pre-war terrace houses: Pegu Road and Martaban Road

Shophouses started to appear along Balestier Road in the early 1900s to serve the area's growing number of residents. They were probably built by enterprising merchants who sold provisions and other goods to residents, while residing in quarters upstairs with their families.

The shophouse is an architectural form that once dominated Singapore's urban landscape. Its origins lie in a Town Planning Committee headed by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1822 which stipulated that houses in the town must have a uniform facade and "a verandah of a certain depth, open at all times as a continued and

covered passage on each side of the street". This passage is popularly known as the five-foot way (although in practice, most five-foot ways are wider than five feet).

Many traditional shophouses still line Balestier Road. Perhaps the most exquisite examples of this architectural form in the precinct are the Sim Kwong Ho shophouses. Located at the junction of Balestier Road and Kim Keat Road, these shophouses became known as the Sim Kwong Ho shophouses after the Chinese characters on their corner facade. They were built in 1926 by Sim Cheng Neo, a lady who also owned



*Shophouses along Balestier Road at the Kim Keat Road junction, 1982*  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved.  
Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.



*Shophouses along Balestier Road at the Pegu Road junction, 1982*  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.

properties at Sophia Road and Roberts Lane, and had a family home at 503 Balestier Road.

The Sim Kwong Ho shophouses were designed by the architectural firm of Westerhout and Oman in a richly ornamented style known as Chinese Baroque or Singapore Eclectic. Popular in the 1920s, this style combined European architectural elements with local motifs. For instance, the exterior walls are adorned with plaster stucco work of animals such as bats (a symbol of fortune and happiness) and peacocks while elaborate floral wreaths and festoons (garlands) are placed above French-style windows.

Sim was also the developer of another row of shophouses at the junction of Jalan Kemaman. Built in 1928, this row was designed by Kwan Yow Luen (1893-1977), a self-taught local architect who designed many traditional shophouses. The Kwan Yow Luen shophouses feature extravagantly detailed plaster stucco figures. These include creatures such as dragons and phoenixes as well as auspicious animals such as bats. The main pediment (roof frontispiece) features two lions flanked by buffalo figurines, while the ground floor columns of the corner unit depict Sikh *jagas* (Malay for “guards” or “watchmen”) who serve as symbolic guardians, as Sikhs were valued as policemen and guards during colonial times.

Ian Tan (b. 1976) stayed at a shophouse at 233A Balestier (now Rocca Balestier) until 2000 when a fire destroyed the building. He shared:

*“I cannot forget what it meant to grow up in a Balestier Road shophouse during the late 70s and 80s... 233A Balestier was a most remarkable building. By the 1960s, it was inhabited by a huge number of people. Most of the roof was covered with zinc sheets which meant unbearably hot interiors on warm days or a biting chill during the rainy season.”*

Tan also recalled an open-air courtyard between the living area and kitchen:

*“This was where we hung our clothes and learnt how to use a tek-goh [bamboo pole] most*



*The corner facade of the Sim Kwong Ho shophouses, 2018*



*Close-up of the peacock motif on the Sim Kwong Ho shophouses, 2018*



*Kwan Yow Luen shophouses, 2018*



*Close-up of motifs on the Kwan Yow Luen shophouses, 2018*



Art Deco apartment blocks at 230 and 246 Balestier Road, 2018



Pre-war terrace houses at Martaban Road, 1988



*expertly, played with all manner of toys, washed our clothes in a huge stone sink and looked up at the stars in the most quiet of nights."*

The shophouse design, with shops downstairs and living quarters upstairs, also influenced apartment blocks built along Balestier Road after World War II. These post-war buildings, which had individual apartments on each floor, had much simpler designs compared to pre-war shophouses.

Two apartment blocks, built in the 1950s across the road from Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple, stand out for their Art Deco corner facades. Art Deco is an architectural style that became popular in the mid-1900s and favoured streamlined profiles and simplified geometric patterns. Both blocks have corner facades with bold vertical fins that project above the roof level, conveying a sense of height and stature.

Another variation of the shophouse design is the terrace house, in which the ground floor also serves as a residential space. Such houses can be found at Pegu Road and Martaban Road. Built between the 1920s and 1940s, these dwellings recall the elegant terrace houses that line Emerald Hill off Orchard Road. Like some of Emerald Hill's houses, the front doors of these houses are separated from the street by small forecourts, which provide residents with privacy from passers-by.

The terrace house at 13 Martaban Road once housed orderlies (male nurses) who worked at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. It was later converted into a private home and won an Architectural Heritage Award from the Urban Redevelopment Authority in 2007 for the quality of its restoration.

Leonard Loo (b. 1959), who stayed at Moulmein Road in the late 1970s, remembers the Martaban Road houses well:

*"Until today it's a very nice walk to Tan Tock Seng Hospital through Martaban Road. You can see the big old trees and it's very quiet, very peaceful. And down Martaban Road, you see the*

*old houses? My grandmother's friends lived in Martaban Road and she would visit them. They actually ran a bottle shop along Balestier Road, it's closed already."*

## **FORMER INDUSTRIES**

From the late 1800s, a number of industries started to emerge in the area. One of the first was a government brick field established along Serangoon Road in 1858. The brick field used sand from Balestier Plain (currently the Balestier Plain sports fields), which was then known as the Crown sand pits.

In the late 1800s, there was also a private brick kiln along Kim Keat Road called Singapore Brick Works. It was owned by Fraser & Cumming, a company formed in 1875 by John Fraser and James Cumming. The kiln was located close to Sungei Whampoa, as the river was both a source of water as well as a dumping ground for the disposal of industrial waste.

From the 1900s, other industries began to appear in the area. These included tanneries, which processed raw animal hide into leather. They were located on the south side of Balestier Road, and concentrated along Mandalay Road. There were also oil mills and soap factories near Tai Gin Road and Boon Teck Road in the mid-1900s.

### **Sawmills, rubber factories and dye-houses**

There were sawmills and timber yards at Jalan Datoh, Jalan Dusun and Ah Hood Road. These facilities received logs from boats that travelled up Sungei Whampoa all the way from Beach Road. Rahmat bin Sulaiman (b. 1944), a long-time resident of the area, recalled these timber yards:

*"There were many timber yards here around the river. We kampong folk would sometimes go to them and they would pass us small pieces of timber which we brought back for our own use. These factories were gone some 40 years ago."*

Rubber factories also began to appear in the early 1900s due to the booming demand for rubber. In 1928, there were rubber factories at



A former timber yard in Balestier, 1984  
Courtesy of the Urban Redevelopment Authority

Jalan Rajah and Ah Hood Road that employed Hainanese coolies as well as a factory called Eko Rubber Factory along Balestier Road.

Another prominent industry that took root in Balestier in the early 1900s was textile dyeing. There were at least three large dye-houses located near Sungei Whampoa during the 1930s. Chua Lai Teck (b. 1957), who stayed at Ah Hood Road in the 1960s, recalled that there was a dye-house near the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall:

*“At Tai Gin Road, there was one company which dyed clothes. They dyed it all black. For the Chinese, when someone passed away, they had to wear black clothing, so they took whatever clothing they had and dyed it black.”*

Chua explained that the workers would pour dye into a large pail, heat it and throw clothes into the pail:

*“You could recognise those working there by their hands – all black. They had no precautions, not like these days when you’d wear gloves. After dyeing, the clothes were hung out to dry. Those*

*days, you could get it very fast; today send it, tomorrow can get.”*

### **Rattan factories**

Around the same time, another industry that emerged in Balestier was rattan processing. Rattan, also known as cane or *rotan*, is made from a forest palm (*Calamus* spp.) and widely used to make furniture and household items. In the 1930s and 40s, rattan factories were located mainly near Sungei Whampoa along Jalan Dusun, Jalan Rajah and Boon Teck Road. Those at Boon Teck Road were in operation until 1978 when they were destroyed by a fire.

During the 1950s and 60s, Tan Han Boon (b. 1949) stayed at a house at 582 Balestier Road which doubled as a rattan factory. Recalling the house, he shared:

*“It was a compound house, with probably 7-8 families – each family rented one room. There were 4 or 5 rattan factories nearby. Ah Hood Road had one, Kim Keat Road had one and also at Jalan Rajah.”*

Tan explained that the owner of the house used the compound for processing rattan. He said:





*Workers arranging rattan at a factory, 1948*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

*"They imported cane from Indonesia, then they soak it in a pond overnight to soften it. Then they use sand and some kind of straw to rub away all the thorns and smoothen it. After that, they put it inside a chamber and bleach it with sulphur dioxide. I could smell it every day, the sulphur dioxide. At that time, I didn't know whether it was harmful or not."*

The *rotan* was then sold to furniture makers, and quality rattan was used to make wicker baskets. As for poorer quality cane, Tan added: "The rejects, they would sell to your mother to whack you," referring to the old practice of using *rotan* to cane children who misbehaved.

### **Food-related industries**

Siong Hoe Biscuit Factory was established in 1952 and located at Ah Hood Road. This factory manufactured biscuits until the 1990s, after which the site was redeveloped for private housing. Tan remembered going to the factory to buy rejected products:

*"The factory was just across the canal [Sungei Whampoa]. We'd buy broken biscuits from there. We didn't buy the good ones. We bought the broken pieces – still can eat!"*

Lam Soon is another food-related enterprise that was formerly located at Balestier. The firm's original factory was based at 519 Balestier Road in the 1930s-40s. The factory doubled up as the family home of the firm's founder Ng Keng Soon, who set up Lam Soon Cannery in 1929. It produced soya sauce, canned food, cooking oil and soap. The factory relocated to Jurong in the 1950s.

During the 1930-50s, there were also ponds near Sungei Whampoa, where fish were reared for sale. These ponds, collectively known as Lee Hak Heng Kolam, were located near the current Block 103 Jalan Rajah. Chua Lai Teck shared:

*"There were three big fishing ponds. They reared fish and stretched up to Kim Keat Road, and were owned by this person called Lee Hak Heng. He was a fish trader."*

### **Other industries**

At McNair Road, there was a factory called the Elkayes Match Factory, which was established in 1922 by Lee Kim Soo (1887-1933). The factory was named after the way Lee's initials, LKS, were pronounced. It employed about 200 workers and produced matches under the Crocodile brand.

In the 1930s, the factory switched to manufacturing nails after Lee relocated his match manufacturing business to Johor. The factory, which later began manufacturing cement, was active until the early 1970s, when it closed following complaints about pollution by nearby residents.

Apart from private industry, Balestier was also the site of a vital public infrastructure in the mid-1900s. In 1936, a wireless receiving station was built between Sungei Whampoa and St Michael's Road. This facility allowed staff at Kallang Airport, which opened in 1937, to communicate with aircraft arriving or departing Singapore. The station operated until 1955 when a new receiving station opened at Yio Chu Kang to serve Paya Lebar Airport.

# LIVING IN BALESTIER

## SIT'S FIRST HOUSING ESTATE AT LORONG LIMAU

In 1932, the Balestier area became the site of the first public housing estate built by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), which developed low-rise units around Lorong Limau, a side lane off Kim Keat Road.

SIT had its origins within the Singapore municipal government, which set up an improvement trust in 1920 for tasks such as the creation of backlanes. SIT became an independent body when the Singapore Improvement Ordinance was enacted on 1 July 1927 with the mission “to provide for the Improvement of the Town and Island of Singapore”. This mission involved planning new roads and open spaces, condemning insanitary buildings that were found to be “unfit for human habitation” and redistributing land.

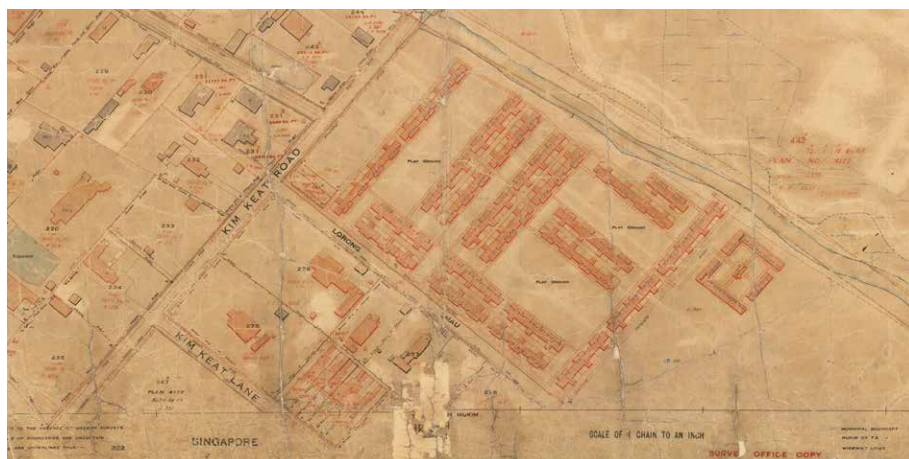
Initially, SIT was authorised to build homes only for people who had been made homeless by the clearing of insanitary buildings and slums. This changed later, when Singapore faced a severe housing shortage that could not

be met by private developers, and as a result, SIT had to assume the broader role of a builder of affordable homes.

The densely populated Balestier area was earmarked by SIT for a major development. In 1930, Balestier Village, which was regarded as insanitary due to overcrowding and the presence of ponds that promoted mosquito breeding, was acquired and redeveloped as part of this improvement scheme.

To rehouse the former village’s inhabitants, SIT built single-storey Artisans’ Quarters. The term “artisan” referred to skilled or semi-skilled workers such as tin-smiths, silver-smiths, basket-makers and night soil collectors who earned \$30-\$35 a month.

Available for a monthly rent of \$7, these quarters consisted of a living room with a bed recess, a kitchen, a bathroom and toilet. SIT also created open spaces around the quarters where children could safely play away from traffic. By 1940, SIT had completed 558 Artisans’ Quarters in the Lorong Limau Estate.



A map showing the SIT Lorong Limau Estate, 1938  
Survey Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Former single-storey Artisans' Quarters built by the Singapore Improvement Trust in Balestier, 1932-1940  
Image from *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947* (1948) by J M Fraser*



*Former single-storey Artisans' Quarters, 1952  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

Although these quarters were designed as improved homes for former slum dwellers, not all residents were satisfied by the condition of the homes. In 1935, some residents complained to the newspapers of unbearable heat. They explained: "The cause of this excessive heat is that these houses are built of solid concrete all round, even top and bottom, with a flat roof, also of concrete, with a layer of black molten tar and sand on top." The complainants added: "Had there been an ordinary roof of tiles, instead of a flat concrete and tarred top, this state of affairs would not have to be endured."

A different view came from an observer in 1936, who wrote: "But for sheer spectacular, breath-taking effect, there is nothing to beat the Improvement Trust estate at Balestier, where you may see families, only recently removed from attap huts or even more squalid alleys in Chinatown, living in neat little houses grouped around quiet, green quadrangles which are shaded by casuarina trees."

The writer added: "As you walk down the concrete pavements bordering these quadrangles you will note that they are perfectly clean - no refuse, no rubbish, no slops thrown out of the front door... I would have you peep into the little rooms and see how spotless, how neat, how tidy they are."

### **WHAMPOE ESTATE, RAYMAN ESTATE AND ST MICHAEL'S ESTATE**

After the Japanese Occupation, SIT built 200 Artisans' Quarters and 192 prefabricated houses along Kim Keat Road between 1947-48. This housing estate was called Whampoe Estate [sic] as it stood by the banks of Sungei Whampoa.

In 1948, SIT completed another housing estate in the area between Balestier Road, Jalan Kebun Limau and Towner Road. This estate was named Rayman Estate in 1949, after Lazarus Rayman, a former President of the Municipal Commission and Chairman of SIT.

Rayman Estate consisted of 296 Artisans' Quarters, Rayman Market (now Whampoa Makan Place), which opened in 1952, and Rayman School, which opened in 1953. There were also flats and shops at Towner Road, which housed a clinic and a post office. Towner Road was named in 1934 after Henry Venus Towner, an Assistant Superintendent of the



*Low-rise flats at Kim Keat Road (right)  
next to attap kampong houses, 1954  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

## LIFE AT LORONG LIMAU IN THE 1950S-60S

Ng Ah Mun (b. 1942), a retired teacher, has fond memories of growing up in Lorong Limau Estate. Her entire family resided in a single room inside a Circular Road shophouse until 1941, when they were given the opportunity to move to Lorong Limau. She shared:

*"I was born at C16 Lorong Limau. We considered ourselves lucky for having the chance to live in this small, clean and cheap house. It was spartan, but we could call it our own. The building was made of solid concrete – not even a single brick was used. There were eight houses in a row, and you had a backlane where we played hide-and-seek. The fields in front were grassy and interspersed with casuarina trees. The boys would get muddy and play in the Whampoa River."*

Ng's father was a skilled workman, while her mother was a housewife. "But she did all kinds of jobs to bring in income," Ng explained. For instance, the family would blend starch and coconut husks to make paper bags. "For that you earned one dollar or two a day."



Ng Ah Mun at Lorong Limau Estate, 1960s  
Courtesy of Ng Ah Mun

The Ngs' neighbours, who included Malay, Indian and Peranakan families, did work such as washing laundry, tailoring, baby-sitting or making food for sale. "I remember the *kebun* or Malay gardeners – their wives would cook and sell *mee rebus* (noodles in spicy gravy) or *tauhu goreng* (fried beancurd)," said Ng. "That's how you survive, you live frugally and do what you can to be better off."

Before 1951, the houses had no electricity and piped water. Ng recalled:

*"We had to cart water from the standpipe located at the end of some blocks. At the wash area where the pipes were, people would go collect water, and there you would gossip, complain about husbands, daughters-in-law, children, chit chat."*

Another former resident was Albert Oon (b. 1951), who lived at Whampoe Estate from 1951-67. Describing his house, Oon said:

*"It comprised three rows of single-storey eight-unit terrace houses with an open field in the centre. Each unit had one living room, one bedroom, one big kitchen, one bathroom and one bucket system toilet. Every morning, the night soil man would replace the bucket. Behind our kitchen, we reared chickens or ducks. Every morning we would collect fresh eggs from the coop."*

As the SIT houses were very close to Sungei Whampoa, flooding was a common and perennial problem. Oon shared:

*"We encountered flooding during the monsoon season and had to wade around in waist-deep waters to guide our ducks back. Everything inside the house was under water and we had to place wooden planks above the bed during the night to sleep."*

Oon added of the neighbourhood:

*"The main amenities were two row of shophouses, including a community centre, with a basketball court built within an open field inside the*



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*roundabout of the estate – an open field where everybody enjoyed a game of soccer or running around. And every week, there would be an open-air screening of shows by the community centre at the basketball court for free.”*

The Ngs and Oons left their Balestier estates in 1967. The estates were eventually redeveloped into HDB flats in the early 1970s.



*Albert Oon's siblings at Whampoe Estate, undated*  
Courtesy of Albert Oon



*Albert Oon's siblings at Whampoe Estate, undated*  
Courtesy of Albert Oon

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Public Works Department. The Balestier Road end of Towner Road was renamed Whampoa Drive in 1972.

Ang Seck Buan (b. 1940), who used to stay in a SIT flat along Towner Road, recalled:

*“We were staying in a row of shophouses near the corner of Balestier Road and Whampoa Drive. It was a three-storey building. We were on the second storey. Downstairs was a government clinic and coffee shops. In the 1960s, our doors were always open. We were one of the first to have a black-and-white TV, so all the neighbours would come over to view.”*

Unlike the Lorong Limau quarters which had flat roofs, the Whampoe Estate and Rayman Estate houses had pitched roofs. They also used a new prefabricated design which allowed them to be completed within just three months. By 1948, SIT's Balestier estates, which included Rayman Estate, Whampoe Estate and Lorong Limau, had 1,302 Artisans' Quarters, 20 low-rise flats and 63 shops.

North of Whampoe Estate was St Michael's Estate, which occupied the area that formerly housed the wireless receiving station until 1955. SIT took over the area and built double-storey terrace houses, low-rise flats, shops and a market. Completed in 1959, St Michael's Estate had roads with Malay names such as Jalan Bahagia (“happiness”), Jalan Tenteram (“peaceful”) and Jalan Ma'mor (“prosperous”).

## THE HDB ERA

The Housing & Development Board (HDB) was established in 1960 to replace SIT. The board adopted the practice of building high-rise flats and high-density housing estates to provide Singaporeans with affordable homes.

HDB's first project in Balestier involved St Michael's Estate, where 816 one-room flats were built in 1961 to resettle farmers who had to make way for the development of Toa Payoh. By 1962, HDB had completed 5,187 flats in St Michael's Estate, which housed about 35,000 people.

In 1966, HDB decided to redevelop SIT's Balestier estates. Most of the area's SIT units were demolished in the late 1960s. In 1971, HDB started work on a new housing estate in Balestier to rehouse residents of slums in the Hong Lim, Tanjong Pagar and Rochore areas.



*St Michael's Estate, 1964*

Image from *Social Transformation in Singapore* (1964) by Ministry of Culture, Singapore

The estate was completed in 1973 with nearly 5,000 housing units.

The new estate boasted a landmark that still survives today: a 4.8-metre-high dragon sculpture installed at Block 85 Whampoa Drive in 1974. Created by sculptor Chong Chee Siong, the dragon has red, green and pink scales made from broken porcelain bowls, and originally functioned as a fountain.

Meanwhile, the terrace houses along Jalan Tenteram and Jalan Ma'mor, were sold to tenants. These terrace houses are the only residences built by SIT at Balestier to survive today.

HDB also built Balestier Hill Shopping Centre at the junction of Balestier Road and Thomson Road in 1977. This shopping centre provided premises for shops that had to be cleared for the widening of Thomson Road.

HDB carried out two other projects at Balestier in the 1970s: Rajah Court at Jalan Rajah in 1979 and five blocks of flats at Ah Hood Road which were completed in 1981. The Ah Hood Road flats were built on land that was razed by a fire in 1974, which rendered nearly 200 people homeless.

In the early 1980s, HDB started to redevelop parts of Balestier into new estates. The



*The dragon sculpture at Block 85 Whampoa Drive, 2018*



*Former SIT (now HDB) terrace units at Jalan Ma'mor, 2018*

one-room flats at St Michael's Estate were demolished and redeveloped into four- and five-room flats, which were completed in 1986. To improve public transport access to the area, St Michael's Bus Terminal opened in 1985 at Whampoa Road.

The rejuvenation of the Balestier area continued in the 1990s, when old flats at Whampoe Estate were demolished and redeveloped into Whampoa Gardens. Along Whampoa Drive, flats built in the 1970s were also upgraded into the present Whampoa View in 1999.

In the 2000s, the Balestier area became the site of new Built-to-Order HDB flats, such as Whampoa Dew at Lorong Limau, Tenteram Peak at Jalan Tenteram, and McNair Towers along Towner Road.

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### PRE-WAR GOVERNMENT QUARTERS AT TOWNER ROAD AND MCNAIR ROAD

Apart from public housing estates, the colonial government also built quarters for civil servants in the Balestier area. These quarters were located at Towner Road and McNair Road in the 1920s, and conserved in 1990.

The quarters consist of 84 two-storey Art Deco terrace houses. Some units feature traditional Chinese architectural styles such as uniquely shaped facade beams and entrance columns.

Other units were influenced by Malay architecture and have pitched roofs and louvered vents, while another cluster has European features such as arched porticos and brick-and-glass panelled doors and windows.

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### OTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

Apart from residential developments, the Balestier area continued to house industries in the 1970s. In 1970, HDB completed flatted factories at Jalan Tenteram, which provided premises for small to medium-sized industries. In the same year, Siemens, a German engineering firm, also opened its first foreign semiconductor manufacturing plant at St Michael's Estate, which operated there until the early 1990s.

At Jalan Rajah, a private flatted factory called Golden Wall Flatted Factory was built in 1974-75. Its neighbour was Public Mansions (facing Balestier Market), a private mixed-use development that opened in 1973 with apartments on the upper storeys and shops and a bank on the lower levels. A few years later,



Balestier Complex (now Okio Residences), a shopping centre with about 40 shops, was completed opposite Ava Road in 1979.

The area's first high-rise development in the 1980s was Ruby Plaza (now The Mezzo), which was built in 1981. This 11-storey building was probably named after the nearby Ruby Theatre (more details about Ruby Theatre can be found on p. 43).

Ruby Theatre was later redeveloped into a new landmark, Balestier Point, which was completed in 1986. This 18-storey mixed-use development was originally named Central Plaza Complex by its developers, Central Plaza Developments. Balestier Point was designed by Chan Fook Pong of Regional Development Consortium (now RDC Architects), who drew inspiration from Habitat 67, an apartment complex in Montreal, Canada, that was designed by the famous Canadian architect Moshe Safdie.



Balestier Point, 2018



*Pedestrians preparing to cross Balestier Road near the Ava Road junction, 1982*  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved.  
Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.

Balestier Point stands out for its stepped form which resembles a stack of Lego toy blocks. This terrace-like design provides the upper storey apartments with privacy and a “garden in the air” effect. The architecture also pays homage to the five-foot way by using modular hollow cubes to form a shaded walkway in front of the ground-level shops. It won an Honourable Mention award from the Singapore Institute of Architects in 1987.

With developments such as Balestier Point, Balestier Road became a very busy street in the 1980s and was notorious for being one of Singapore's most hazardous roads. Recalling this era, former resident Ian Tan said:

*“Balestier Road was described in the 1980s as ‘the most dangerous road in Singapore’ for the most number of accidents per kilometre. Yet this was the road I spent half my childhood traversing. While cars zipped by, I would be happily walking on narrow ledges next to the drain canals pretending to be a tightrope walker.”*

One solution devised to tackle growing traffic congestion in the 1980s was the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) rail network. Despite having no MRT station, Balestier Road was a key location for this infrastructure. The ground-breaking for the MRT took place at Shan Road on 22 October 1983, where tunnelling works began on an underground railway passage between Toa Payoh and Novena.



*Ground-breaking ceremony for the MRT at Shan Road, 1983*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore





*Balestier Mixed School, 1959*

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

## SCHOOLS

The MRT ground-breaking at Shan Road took place on the former site of a Chinese school known as Shut Yung Public School. This was one of many schools established in the Balestier area from the mid-1900s to cater to the area's growing number of families. The school closed in 1979 due to dwindling enrolment. Another Chinese school in the area was Nam Ann School, which was established at Ah Hood Road in the 1940s. It later moved to Paya Lebar and eventually closed in 1975.

Balestier was also well-known for a cluster of schools on Balestier Hill, which was once part of Guang En Shan, a Teochew cemetery. Part of this burial ground was redeveloped into Balestier Hill School, which opened in 1963, and Balestier Hill West Primary School, which opened in 1965.

A third school, Balestier Hill Integrated Secondary Technical School, opened in 1964. The term "Integrated" meant that there were classes in English as well as Mandarin. In 1991, the school's name was changed to Balestier Hill Secondary. The school then merged with Beatty Secondary School in 2017

and the combined school now operates at Toa Payoh North.

Meanwhile, the two other schools on Balestier Hill were merged to form Balestier Hill Primary School in 1986. This school closed in 1988, and its pupils were transferred to Lee Kuo Chuan Primary School in 1989. A new Balestier Hill Primary School later opened at Balestier Hill in 2002. This school will merge with Bendemeer Primary School in 2019 and relocate to Bendemeer Road.

Another former school in Balestier was Rayman School which opened along Towner Road (now Whampoa Drive) in 1953. This primary school closed in 1984 and its pupils were transferred to Lee Kuo Chuan Primary School. Its former premises were then taken over by the Handicaps Welfare Association in 1985.

The Serangoon Road end of Balestier was home to another cluster of schools. These included McNair School, which operated from 1928-68, and Griffiths School, which was named after James Griffiths, then Britain's Secretary of State of the Colonies, who officiated at the opening of the school in 1950.



*Balestier Hill Secondary School, 1964*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Opening of Balestier Hill West Primary School, 1965*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of  
National Archives of Singapore

Three more schools were established in the area in 1955: Balestier Boys' School, Balestier Mixed School and Balestier Girls' School. Balestier Boys' and Balestier Mixed merged in 1984 to form Balestier Primary School, which closed in 1991. Balestier Girls' School operated until 1983 when it merged with Griffiths School. The combined school was named Moulmein Primary and relocated to Jalan Rajah until 2002.

### Special schools

Balestier was also home to a number of schools for the disabled. In 1962, the Singapore Association for Retarded Children (renamed Movement for the Intellectually Disabled in Singapore or MINDS in 1985) operated from a bungalow at Ah Hood Road, which was called Chin Pu Centre (Mandarin for "progress"). This centre provided housing as well as

specialised training for about 40 intellectually disabled children until 1968, when it relocated to Pasir Panjang.

MINDS also established another special school, Towner Gardens School, at the former Griffiths School in 1983. This school equipped students with skills that would enable them to be independent and to find employment. The school relocated to its current premises at Lengkong Lima in 1997.

Meanwhile, the Spastic Children's Association (renamed Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore in 2013) set up a workshop at the former Balestier Girls' School premises in 1984. This workshop provided vocational training and employment opportunities for people with cerebral palsy. It relocated to its current premises in Pasir Ris in 2003.

Another children's charity, Rainbow Centre, started Balestier Special School at the former Balestier Primary School premises in 1995. This school provided education for children with multiple disabilities until 2008, when Rainbow Centre relocated to its current premises in Yishun.

### Singapore's first technical school

Balestier was the site of Singapore's first technical school, a predecessor of the present Institute of Technical Education (ITE). In 1930, a Government Trade School was established at Scotts Road to teach skills such as carpentry and mechanics. The school relocated to Balestier Road in 1941.

After the Japanese Occupation, it reopened to cater to post-war demand for technical training and was renamed the Singapore Junior Technical School in 1951. In 1963, the school premises became the home of the Singapore Vocational Institute (SVI).

SVI trained young people in skills such as mechanical engineering, electrical fitting, radio servicing, motor vehicle mechanics, plumbing, woodcraft and metalworking. These skills were highly sought after during Singapore's drive to industrialise in the 1960s and 1970s.



*Students at the Singapore Junior Technical School, 1951*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of  
National Archives of Singapore



*Students at the Singapore Vocational Institute, 1987*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of  
National Archives of Singapore

SVI was then merged with two smaller institutes, McNair Vocational Institute and Kim Keat Vocational Institute, to form ITE Balestier in 1992. ITE Balestier closed in 2010 when the various regional ITEs were consolidated into three campuses in the east, west and central regions.

Since 2014, the former ITE Balestier campus has housed Northlight School, a school for students who face difficulty coping with the mainstream school curriculum.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT

The growing number of residents led to the establishment of police stations in the Balestier area in the 1800s. In 1849, a small police station was set up at Thomson Road near the Balestier Road junction. This station closed in 1975 following the opening of a new police post at Lorong 1 Toa Payoh.

Over at the Serangoon Road end, a Tannah (police division) was established in 1851. This station became known as Rumah Miskin (“house of the poor” in Malay) Police Station, as Tan Tock Seng Hospital (also known as the Chinese Pauper Hospital) stood next to it from 1860-1909.

Rumah Miskin Police Station closed in 1975 and the building was used by Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) for its headquarters. SANA was founded in 1972 to combat drug abuse among young people. The building also served as a halfway house and counselling centre for recovering drug addicts. SANA relocated to Scotts Road in 1978, before shifting to its current premises at Sengkang.

In 1982, the former Rumah Miskin police station was occupied by the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, which was established in 1949 to promote Indian dance, drama and music. The society used the building to conduct classes until 1993 when it moved to Starlight Road. The former police station was demolished shortly after.

In recent times, Balestier became the headquarters of the Singapore Police Force, which moved to New Phoenix Park at Irrawaddy Road in 2001. This facility, which also houses the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the Internal Security Department, was named after Phoenix Park, MHA’s earlier headquarters at Tanglin Road from 1977-2001.



*Former Rumah Miskin Police Station when it housed the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association, 1975*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

## Gangs and crime

Despite the police presence, Balestier Road was a hotbed for gangsters and secret societies in the mid-1900s. The Ah Hood Road area, in particular, was notorious for kidnappings, robberies, slashings and fights between rival gangs.

The area's criminal activities were so rampant that gang members were bold enough to shoot a police detective in broad daylight at a Balestier coffee shop in 1947. Similar crimes also took place at Kim Keat Road. At that time, Kim Keat Road led all the way to Toa Payoh, which was then infamously known as "Chicago of the East" due to the many gangsters who resided there.

Former resident Joseph Seah (b. 1924) recalled that the gangsters collected protection money from establishments in the 1940s-50s:

*"When shops come up, they would extort from the shops. You got to pay a certain monthly fee. If the hawker centres were to come up, they would extort from these hawker stalls."*

Another former resident, Teo Ah Wah, shared:

*"Around the area where I was staying, near the Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple, there was a Cantonese gang. I never joined such gangs. [But] back then, when you were a youth, even if you didn't join such gangs, you would have friends who were members and so you would know about them. I had a neighbour who was going to Hoover [Theatre] to watch a film, and he got stabbed in the back. After he recovered, he was very scared and his friends were too frightened to go back to that area."*

Sharing his memories of Balestier's gangs in the 1960s, former resident Chua Lai Teck said:

*"There were a lot of gangsters in the kampong areas those days, the Ah Hood area, Jalan Rajah, Boon Teck Road. When we heard signs that there was going to be a clash, our parents would not allow us to go out."*

Apart from robberies, kidnappings and extortions, another criminal activity then was the

illegal re-selling of cinema tickets. Chua recalled that gang members would ask him to buy tickets at Hoover Theatre, which were resold at higher prices to patrons who arrived late:

*"After queuing, they would come and collect the tickets and give me 20 cents, and I would go and queue again. They sell this on the black market, a syndicate."*

The gangs' grip began to loosen in the 1970s when the police stepped up patrols and launched major operations such as Operation Berseh which flushed out gangsters from their hiding places, and Operation Eagle which cracked down on secret society hideouts and gang leaders. Due to these efforts, gang activities mostly disappeared by the 1980s.

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## OLD POLICE ACADEMY AND SENIOR POLICE OFFICERS' MESS

Mount Pleasant, off Thomson Road near the junction of Balestier Road, became a landmark associated with the police force in 1929 when the Old Police Academy started operations in the area.

Originally known as the Police Depot, this site was Singapore's first permanent training facility for the police force. Located at 1 Mount Pleasant Road, it consisted of three barracks, an armoury, a classroom, a drill shed, a canteen, a firing range, medical facilities and parade grounds. There was also a mosque (demolished in 1968) for its Malay officers.

The depot was named the Police Training School after the Japanese Occupation. It later became known as Sekolah Latehan Polis after Singapore merged with Malaysia in 1963. Following Singapore's independence in 1965, the institution regained its original name.

It was then reorganised in 1969 to provide more comprehensive training facilities and renamed the Singapore Police Academy. The

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academy served as a training ground for police officers, the National Police Cadet Corps and the Police National Service until 2006, when training was shifted to the Home Team Academy at Old Chua Chu Kang Road.

Near the former academy stands the Senior Police Officers' Mess (SPOM), which was built in 1931 at 153 Mount Pleasant Road. The building originally served as a residence for unmarried senior British police officers.

Built by the Public Works Department, SPOM was designed in a style known as

Tudorbethan revival, which was typical of English houses from the late 1800s to early 1900s. It incorporates elements of the British Art and Craft as well as Art Deco architectural movements, which feature simple forms and bold geometric shapes. The building has a large main porch as well as verandahs, balconies and corridors that are cooled by natural ventilation.

From the 1950s-70s, SPOM served as a venue where senior police officers could interact and socialise. Formal events held here included the Dining-In, which involves a grand dinner, the presentation of the Temasek Sword (a ceremonial gift) to the Guest-of-Honour, and a "Loyal Toast", followed by after-dinner entertainment and games.

SPOM also served as a venue for festive celebrations and weddings of senior police officers. Today, SPOM remains a social club for senior officers in the police force and a venue for events that strengthen the force's *esprit de corps*.



Entrance to the former Police Training School, undated  
Courtesy of the Singapore Police Force



Senior Police Officers' Mess, 2014  
Courtesy of the Singapore Police Force

# CLUBS AND LEISURE

From the late 1800s, European residents established private recreational clubs on Balestier Plain. These early clubs were later joined by clubs and associations set up by other communities in the early 1900s. Today, Balestier Plain is still home to clubs such as the Ceylon Sports Club, Singapore Khalsa Association and Singapore Indian Association.

*\*Please note that entry into the present clubs at Balestier Plain is for members only.*

## FORMER SHOOTING CLUBS

The Swiss Rifle Shooting Club was probably the first club to be established in Balestier when it built a shooting shed between Balestier Road and Thomson Road in 1871. The area was a “small valley with a slight elevation on either side” which was ideal as a shooting range. The club subsequently built a larger clubhouse on the site in 1874.

In 1901, the club had to vacate the shooting range after it discovered that the land actually belonged to the Whampoa family and had been illegally occupied. The club then moved to new premises at Bukit Tinggi, which it still occupies today as the Swiss Club.

Another shooting club active in the area was the Singapore Rifle Association, which was established in 1873. In 1878, the association took over an old artillery range at Balestier Plain and used this as a shooting range. This range (now the Jalan Tenteram area) was accessible via Target Road, which was named in 1901. It remained in operation until 1922 when shooting activities had to stop due to the growing number of houses built nearby.

## SINGAPORE POLO CLUB

80 Mount Pleasant Road

Target Road, which was expunged in the 1930s, was located close to McNair Road, which was also named in 1901. From 1914-41, the corner



*Prince of Wales Edward VIII at the Singapore Polo Club during his two-day visit to Singapore, 1922*  
Arshak C Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

of McNair Road and Balestier Road was the playing field of the Singapore Polo Club.

Polo, a team sport played on horseback, was once called the “game of kings” as it was popular among royalty. Founded in 1866, the Polo Club’s members included the Sultan of Johor and Singapore’s governor Frederick Weld.

The Polo Club did not have permanent grounds until 1914, when it obtained a plot of land for a playing field and a clubhouse along Balestier Road. The club was used for polo games as well regular gymkhanas (events featuring horse-riding related competitions).

By the 1930s, however, the club was facing severe space constraints, as its Balestier grounds was surrounded by houses and other developments. The club then found a new site at Mount Pleasant which was completed in 1941. During the Japanese Occupation, the Mount Pleasant polo grounds were used as a gun emplacement area and later, occupied by squatters. After the war, the Polo Club returned and has continued to occupy this site till today.

## BALESTIER PLAIN: FROM LANDING GROUND TO SPORTS FIELD

In 1920, Balestier Plain was converted into a landing field for aircraft. The first commercial flight to land in Singapore took place at



*Balestier Plain, 2018*

Balestier Plain in 1927 when Van Lear Black, an American millionaire, arrived on a Royal Dutch Air Service (now KLM) charter en route to Jakarta.

However, Balestier Plain proved to be too short for aircraft to take off. As a result, the government had to build a proper airfield in Seletar in 1927 and, eventually, a commercial airport at Kallang in 1937. Nevertheless, Balestier Plain remained an emergency landing site before the Japanese Occupation.

Soon after the Balestier Plain landing field was built, people started to use it for football when no aircraft were landing. As the area was underutilised, the government allowed various clubs to use Balestier Plain as a sports field from the 1920s. These clubs included the Singapore Indian Association and Ceylon Sports Club.

Other associations that used Balestier Plain in the past include the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Ladies' Union, Singapore Malay Football Club, Municipal Services Club and Clerical Union. In 2002, the National Heritage Board marked Balestier Plain as a historic site.

## **SINGAPORE INDIAN ASSOCIATION AND KAMALA CLUB**

69 Balestier Road

The Singapore Indian Association was established in 1923 by a group of Indians who wanted to promote the welfare of the Indian community as well as provide for their leisure activities. The association's first home was at Short Street and its first president was Mahmood bin Haji Dawood, a merchant from Surat, India.

Its members were avid sportsmen who played hockey, soccer and cricket. In 1923, the association was permitted to use part of Balestier Plain as a playing field. It then built a pavilion on the grounds, which burnt down during World War II.

After the war, the association built a permanent clubhouse at Balestier Plain. The building's foundation stone was laid by India's then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1950 and the clubhouse was opened in 1951 by Commissioner-General Malcolm MacDonald.

The Indian Association had a sister club for women called the Indian and Ceylonese



*Singapore Indian Association, 1972*  
Courtesy of the Urban Redevelopment Authority



*Members of the Kamala Club, 1954*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Ladies' Club, which was formed in 1931 with Checha Davis as its president. It changed its name to Lotus Club in 1932 to signal that it welcomed members of all nationalities.

In 1950, Lotus Club merged with another club, Ladies' Union, to form the Kamala Club, which was named after Nehru's late wife Kamala Kaul Nehru. In 1957, the Kamala Club built its own clubhouse at the western end of Balestier Plain, which was opened by Lady Ena Goode, wife of Singapore's governor William Goode in 1958. The clubhouse

was demolished in 1983 for the building of the Central Expressway, and the club subsequently moved to a private building.

### **CEYLON SPORTS CLUB**

101 Balestier Road

The Ceylon Sports Club was originally formed in 1920 as the Lanka Union. Its members initially played on the Padang before moving to Balestier Plain in 1922, where they built a shed that served as a clubhouse. The union also set up a cricket pitch on Balestier Plain in 1924. In 1928, the union reconstituted itself as the Ceylon Sports Club with S Muthucumaru as its first president.

In 1930, the club built a semi-permanent clubhouse at Balestier Plain. The clubhouse was destroyed during World War II and the playing field was used to grow crops such as tapioca, sweet potatoes and bananas during the Japanese Occupation.

After the war, the club returned to Balestier Plain and used an attap shed as a temporary clubhouse. Its members raised funds to build a permanent clubhouse, which had its foundation stone laid by the Prime Minister





*Cricket match at the Ceylon Sports Club, 2018*



*Ceylon Sports Club, 1972*  
Courtesy of the Urban Redevelopment Authority

of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), D S Senanayake, in 1951. The clubhouse was officially opened in 1954 by Malcolm MacDonald, the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia.

Ceylon Sport Club's portion of Balestier Plain is said to have the best cricket ground in Singapore. While cricket is one of its strengths, the club is also active in other sports such as athletics, soccer and hockey. Today, the Ceylon Sports Club is an active sports and social club with members of all origins.

## SINGAPORE KHALSA ASSOCIATION

2 Tessensohn Road

The Singapore Khalsa Association has its origins in the Singapore Sikhs Cricket Club, an informal group founded in 1927 by seven students. The term "Khalsa" refers to people of the Sikh faith. Besides cricket, club members also played soccer, hockey, badminton and netball.

The club grew in the 1930s as more Sikhs moved to Singapore to work as civil servants and merchants. This prompted the members to formally register their club as the Singapore Khalsa Association in 1931. In 1932, the association was granted use of a playing field at Target Hill off St George's Road, which was converted into a cricket pitch and hockey field.

After the war, the association relocated to a new site at Jalan Bahagia in 1962. However, the government acquired the land in 1966 and the association had to find a new location. Fortunately, it was able to lease a plot of land on the Tessensohn Road end of Balestier Plain, on which a new clubhouse was built in 1969-70. This building includes a cultural centre,

a kindergarten, a gym, a restaurant, a futsal pitch and function rooms for weddings.

### SINGAPORE CHINESE RECREATION CLUB

49 Balestier Road

The Singapore Chinese Recreation Club was originally founded as the Straits Chinese Recreation Club in 1885. It was the first local club to offer games such as cricket, hockey, lawn tennis and athletics to the Chinese community. The club's first clubhouse was built in 1887 at Hong Lim Green (now Hong Lim Park).

In 1946, it was renamed the Singapore Chinese Recreation Club in an attempt to attract more members. The club relocated to Shenton Way in 1959, after which the clubhouse at Hong Lim Green was demolished. In 1964, the club took over a former cricket ground at Balestier Plain that had been used by the YMCA since the 1920s.

### CIVIL SERVICE CLUB AND SHITORYU KARATE ASSOCIATION

60 Tessensohn Road

The Civil Service Club at Tessensohn occupies a site that was formerly a clubhouse built in 1927 by the Junior Civil Service Association. In 1983, this site was redeveloped into a clubhouse for the Singapore Civil Service Sports Council (SCSSC), which was officially



Singapore Chinese Recreation Club, 1972  
Courtesy of the Urban Redevelopment Authority

opened by then President Wee Kim Kee in 1990. In 1996, the SCSSC was renamed the Civil Service Club.

The Civil Service Club building is also home to the Shitoryu Karate Association, which started as the Singapore Karate Association at a bungalow at 94 McNair Road in 1964. The association was founded by a group of law enforcement officers who practiced karate for exercise and self-defence.

The association's McNair Road headquarters was formerly the home of one of the founder-members who was a police officer. This building housed Singapore's first karate school, which had a Japanese instructor who trained local karatekas (karate practitioners) who competed internationally during the 1970s.

In 1977, the association changed its name to Shitoryu Karate Association, after a form of karate founded by Kenwa Mabuni, an Okinawan karate master. In 2016, it moved its headquarters and karate school to the Civil Service Club building in Tessensohn Road.

### FORMER MALAY FILM PRODUCTIONS STUDIO AT JALAN AMPAS

8 Jalan Ampas

From the early 1900s onwards, cinemas operated by companies such as Shaw Organisation and Cathay Organisation became a popular form of entertainment for the masses. These companies not only owned and operated cinemas, they also established studios where movies were shot and edited.

One of the first Malay films released in Singapore in 1934 was an independent production called *Laila Majnun* (the names of the protagonists in a Romeo and Juliet-like tragedy) which was directed by B S Rajhans. The success of this film encouraged Shaw Organisation, which was established in 1924 by brothers Runme Shaw and Run Run Shaw, to produce its own Malay movies.

In 1940, Shaw acquired a plot of land at 8 Jalan Ampas, where it built the first film studio in



Grounds of the former Malay Film Productions studio, 2015  
Courtesy of The Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd

Malaya. The first movie produced at this studio was *Mutiara* ("Pearl", 1940), followed by films such as *Bermadu* ("Polygamy", 1940), *Topeng Shaitan* ("Devil's Mask", 1941) and *Terang Bulan di Malaya* ("Full Moon over Malaya", 1941). These early Malay films featured acting talents from *bangsawan* (Malay theatre) troupes.

The studio ceased operations during the Japanese Occupation, but reopened as Malay Film Productions (MFP) after the war. In 1947, the studio produced its first post-war film, *Singapura Di-Waktu Malam* ("Singapore at Night"), starring Siput Sarawak (real name Ramlah binti Mohamad Sulaiman). This was followed by *Pisau Beracun* ("Poisoned Knife", 1948) and *Chempaka* ("Chempaka", 1948).

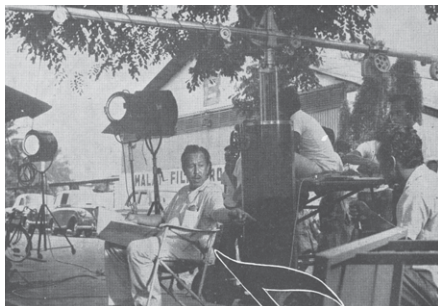
Before the war, Shaw's Malay films used directors and technicians from Hong Kong and China. After the war, however, MFP began to employ Indian directors such as B S Rajhans, B N Rao and L Krishnan, as their directorial style, which included Bollywood-style singing and dancing, was popular with people from all races. Other notable directors later hired by MFP included Jamil Sulong and Ramon Estella.



A still from the opening of a Malay Film Productions film, undated  
Courtesy of The Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd



Actor Shariff Dol (centre) and actress Normadhah (left) on the set of a Malay Film Productions movie, 1960s  
Image published in *Arena Film Magazine*, 1960s.  
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore



Filming taking place at the Malay Film Productions studio, undated  
Courtesy of Wong Han Min and Asian Film Archive

In 1948, MFP released *Chinta* (“Love”), which was directed by Rajhans. This was the first film to feature a then unknown actor from Penang named P Ramlee (real name Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Putih, 1929-73), who would become a major star in the Malay film world.

P Ramlee later starred in films such as *Bakti* (“Devotion”, 1950) and *Takdir Illahi* (“Will of God”, 1950), before directing his first movie, *Penarek Becha* (“Trishaw Puller”) in 1955. *Penarek Becha* featured a scene shot outside the shophouses at the junction of Jalan Kemaman, where Amran, a poor trishaw puller played by P Ramlee, rescues his love interest,

Azizah, from a gang of bullies (more details about the shophouses can be found on p. 18).

A gifted singer, actor, composer and director, P Ramlee composed about 250 songs, acted in 66 films and directed 35 movies during his career that spanned the late 1940s to the early 1970s. This period, particularly the stretch between the late 1940s to the late 1960s, was also often known as the Golden Age of Malay Cinema, as more than 300 high-quality Malay films were produced by MFP and its arch-rival Cathay-Keris Studio in Katong.

The last P Ramlee film that was shot at Jalan Ampas was *Tiga Abdul* (“The Three Abduls”) in 1963. This period also marked MFP’s decline due to intense competition for audiences from television and foreign films.

After the Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963, many talents, including P Ramlee, relocated to the federation’s capital Kuala Lumpur. MFP also shut temporarily in 1965 due to a strike by employees seeking higher wages. MFP’s last few productions, such as *Raja Bersiong* (“The King with Fangs”, 1968) and *A-Go-Go* (1967), failed to draw the crowds and Shaw eventually closed the MFP studio in 1967.

## MAKING MOVIES AT JALAN AMPAS

Jalan Ampas was named in 1901 and its name refers to *ampas tebu* or sugarcane refuse after sugar has been extracted. MFP was where Shaw’s Malay films were shot and edited before they were released in cinemas. Actors, singers, composers, directors, cameramen and technicians would work from dawn till dark to make films using sets made to resemble houses and kampongs. MFP produced more than 140 films over two decades.

MFP’s actors and directors had quarters at Boon Teck Road nearby. Besides P Ramlee, MFP’s stars include luminaries such as Jins

Shamsuddin, Zaiton Abdullah, Maria Menado, Aziz Sattar, Saloma (real name Salmah binte Ismail), Saadiah (real name Satya Baharom), Sarimah Ahmad and Ibrahim Pendek (real name Ibrahim bin Hassan).

Another former resident of the Boon Teck Road quarters was Kassim Masdor (1938-2014), a prolific songwriter who worked closely with P Ramlee. Kassim recalled starting out at MFP as a messenger boy in the early 1950s:

*“My duty every morning was to go to P Ramlee’s house to wake him up. My manager said, knock on the door, don’t leave or he will fall asleep again.”*





*P Ramlee at the Malay Film Productions studio, undated*  
Courtesy of Wong Han Min and Asian Film Archive

Kassim later became interested in music and learned music composition from P Ramlee:

*"He taught me how to write music. The first song I wrote was Berkorban Apa Saja ('Whatever the Sacrifice') for the film Hang Tuah."*

Describing how it was like to work with P Ramlee, Kassim said:

*"It was very enjoyable. He was a very patient man and very nice. But he's very detailed and very fussy and demanding. All his films were box office hits. That was why Shaw liked him very much."*

Kassim's big break came in 1963 when he wrote *Darah Muda* ("Young Blood"). He recalled:

*"The film was also called Darah Muda and directed by Jamil Sulong. They gave me the chance to write the song. After that, every director wanted me to write their songs because my songs were very catchy, easy to sing and easy to remember."*

After MFP closed in 1967, Kassim joined EMI, a record company, and wrote more than 400 songs.

A long-time resident, Rahmat bin Sulaiman, frequented the Jalan Ampas studio in the 1950s, as it was near his home. He recalled:

*"I used to go walk around the studio, because I had a friend there. Also Boon Teck Road, where the film stars had their quarters."*

He recounts seeing stars such as P Ramlee and Aziz Sattar, and even playing *sepak raga* (a game using a rattan ball) with them:

*"P Ramlee was very good, he had no airs. He would wear a singlet and shorts and sit at the sarabat shop [a drinks stall operated by Indian Muslims]."*

### FORMER CINEMAS AT BALESTIER

During the late 1900s, Balestier was the site of three popular cinemas. The first cinema to be built in the area was Cathay Organisation's Ruby Theatre, which opened in 1958. Linda Ang (b. 1966) of *Combat Durian* recalled:

*"Ruby Theatre had food stalls next to it. They were very popular – there was a dry laksa stall*



*Ruby Theatre, 1982*  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved.  
Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.

*and we had a stall there. They screened Chinese films. It was so expensive then – 50 cents. But we knew the people there so we could see the films.”*

The site of Ruby Theatre was sold in 1980 and later redeveloped into Balestier Point (more details about Balestier Point can be found on p. 30).

Shaw Organisation’s first cinema at Balestier was Hoover Theatre, which opened in 1960. The 900-seat Hoover began as a first-run Chinese language cinema, which meant that it screened the latest Chinese films. English films were also screened but only as reruns. Shaw closed Hoover Theatre in 1982 due to falling audience numbers. The building was then renamed Hoover Live Theatre and featured live variety shows performed by comedians, singers and dancers.

Between 1988 and 1992, the building was occupied by a church called His Sanctuary Services. The building became a cinema once more in 1992 when it reopened as New Hoover Theatre, which screened Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi and Sinhalese films. In 1996, Shaw redeveloped the site into Shaw Plaza-Twin Heights, which opened in 1999.

Shaw Plaza-Twin Heights also occupies the site of another Shaw cinema, the 1,200-seat

President Theatre, which opened in 1973. The cinema was then converted into a smaller theatre with fast food outlets in 1988, before it was redeveloped, along with Hoover Theatre, in 1996-99.

Lam Chun See (b. 1952) was a frequent patron of Hoover as a student in the 1960s. He shared:

*“I often came to Hoover with my elder brother David after school. Some years later, another theatre called President was built just beside Hoover. What kind of movies did we see at Hoover in those days? I remember we saw a lot of Shaw Brothers sword-fighting (wu xia) movies. At that time, the most famous actors were Wang Yu, Yue Hua and Chang Yi who usually played the hero’s roles, whilst the villains were usually played by Lo Lieh and Chen Hung Lieh.”*

Former Moulmein Road resident Leonard Loo shared:

*“The cinemas were along Balestier Road: there was Hoover, where tickets were 50 cents to \$1.50 each. President showed the best of Shaw Brothers’ kungfu flicks, all the Mandarin movies. Hoover was all English movies, and the wonderful thing about it is you can go and watch the old classics like James Bond and Sean Connery, the Walt Disney specials – all the reruns.”*



*Hoover Theatre, 1982*  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved.  
Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.



*President Theatre, 1982*  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved.  
Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.

# HEALTHCARE AND HOSPITALS

Balestier today is home to many healthcare institutions such as Ren Ci Community Hospital, Dover Park Hospice and the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine. The first and largest healthcare institution to be established in the area, however, was Tan Tock Seng Hospital, which moved to Balestier Plain in 1860. In 1909, Tan Tock Seng Hospital relocated to the area between Balestier Road and Moulmein Road, where it remains today.

## TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

11 Jalan Tan Tock Seng

Singapore's first Pauper Hospital was set up by the British in 1821 to house sick or injured migrants with no means of support. This hospital, an attap shed with a few cots, was located at Stamford Road (then known as Hospital Street).

In 1834, a new Pauper Hospital was completed on the same site by George Coleman. However, the building was converted into a temporary convict jail in 1835 and the paupers had to make do with an attap shed once more until 1837, when a new jail was completed at Pearl's Hill.

Due to a lack of funding, the Pauper Hospital admitted only patients suffering from "accidents or acute disease", as the authorities felt that the Chinese community should take care of their sick and poor members. The future of the hospital was in doubt until 1843, when Tan Tock Seng offered \$5,000 to build a new Pauper Hospital for the "relief of sick, destitute, diseased and decrepit persons of *all* classes in Singapore who are unable to earn a livelihood or to obtain the means of subsistence except by begging on the streets". This offer was accepted, and the foundation stone of the Chinese Pauper Hospital, which also became



*A portrait of Tan Tock Seng, undated*  
Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

known as Tan Tock Seng Hospital, was laid in 1844 at Pearl's Hill.

Tan Tock Seng (1798-1850) was a Melaka-born Hokkien merchant and philanthropist. He started off as a fruit and vegetable seller and became wealthy after entering into a partnership with John Horrocks Whitehead, an English trader. Over time, Tan rose to become a leader of the Chinese community and was the first Asian to be named a Justice of the Peace. He is buried at Outram Road near Tiong Bahru.

The new hospital was completed in 1847 but received its first patients only in 1849. During the 1850s, the hospital was financially supported



*Tan Tock Seng Hospital's pavilion wards, undated*  
Courtesy of Tan Tock Seng Hospital



*Nurses heading to the pavilion wards, 1960*  
Courtesy of Tan Tock Seng Hospital

by the generosity of people such as Tan Tock Seng's eldest son Tan Kim Cheng, Syed Allie bin Mohamed Aljunied and the Parsi community.

In 1856, the hospital was taken over for military use. A new site for Tan Tock Seng Hospital was found at Balestier Plain near the junction of Serangoon Road (now Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital). The new hospital was completed in 1860 and began to house patients from June 1861. It also included a ward for lepers and a ward for women, which received a \$3,000 donation from Tan Tock Seng's widow Lee Seo Neo.

During that period, the hospital suffered from overcrowding and a high mortality rate. There were frequent accidents due to the lack of attendants and poor upkeep of the building and its facilities. For instance, poor building maintenance had caused portions of

the ceiling to fall on the patients. To improve this situation, the government took over the management of the Pauper Hospital in 1873.

Over time, it was felt that the hospital's site was unhealthy as it stood on swampy, low-lying ground. The hospital committee searched for a new site in 1903 and eventually chose a hilly area between Balestier Road and Moulmein Road. Loke Yew, a prominent contractor, provided \$50,000 to purchase the land, while another major benefactor was the late Wee Boon Teck.

The new Tan Tock Seng Hospital at Moulmein Road was ready to receive and treat patients in 1909. Its main buildings then consisted of pavilion wards or Nightingale wards (named after Florence Nightingale, a British nurse who invented this design in the 1850s). These wards feature a long, central aisle, high



*Former pavilion wards at Jalan Tan Tock Seng, 2018*



ceilings as well as good lighting and ventilation – features which improved patient recovery and reduced death rates from diseases such as tuberculosis and dysentery.

The pavilion wards occupied much of the area around Jalan Tan Tock Seng and Akyab Road. Today, the wards along Akyab Road have been redeveloped and the only surviving row, known as the upper pavilion wards, remains at the far end of Jalan Tan Tock Seng.

### The war years

During the Japanese invasion, the hospital was struck by air-raids, which killed medical student Yoong Tatt Sin on 14 February 1942. Tragically, ten other students also died when a bomb fell on them during Yoong's funeral. During the Japanese Occupation, Tan Tock Seng Hospital was renamed Hakuai Byoin or "Universal Love Hospital". It served as a civilian hospital where wounded war victims were treated.

Food was scarce during this period, and to survive, hospital staff planted vegetables and reared chicken and pigs in the grounds of their quarters. They also smuggled in drugs to treat their patients. The American Air Force air-dropped medical supplies at the Sime Road prisoners-of-war camp, and this prompted Dr Benjamin Chew (1907-94), a senior doctor, to risk a visit to the camp to obtain penicillin.

Recalling this episode, Dr Chew's son, Professor Chew Chin Hin (b. 1931), shared:

*"My father gave the first penicillin injection at Tan Tock Seng Hospital when the US forces had their Boeing B-29 bombers drop medical supplies at Sime Road Camp in August 1945. That was like a god-send because then, those who had severe infections usually died without antibiotics. Dr Clarence Smith, a physician and the head of a medical unit, was himself on the verge of death with a roaring lung abscess... Dr Chew administered the first penicillin injections and dramatically, Dr Smith's condition improved."*

Another person who smuggled in drugs was Elizabeth Choy (1910-2006), a teacher and

volunteer nurse who operated a canteen with her husband Choy Khun Heng at Tan Tock Seng Hospital in 1943. The Choys had secretly passed on messages and supplies to British prisoners-of-war who were being treated at the hospital.

After the Japanese discovered these acts of defiance, they arrested the couple in late 1943 and subjected them to more than 200 days of starvation and torture at the Kempeitai (Japanese Military Police) headquarters at Dhoby Ghaut. Recounting this period, Professor Chew shared:

*"Elizabeth Choy's canteen was just opposite my home at 345 Jalan Tan Tock Seng. It was a simple canteen selling coffee, tea and some cakes, serving the hospital and patients. They were paid with banana currency which was useless! One day, she disappeared along with her husband. We knew where they went, the YMCA, where they were tortured."*

The doctors at the hospital also took the opportunity to pass medicine to prisoners-of-war who were receiving treatment. Professor Chew explained that this was done in the X-ray room:

*"The X-ray room was all dark. The doctors' eyes were of course adapted to the dark, but the guards, as soon as they come in, they can't see anything. So that was when they passed the supplies to the prisoners – they were never caught."*

Another close call occurred at the bachelors' quarters, a house at 15 Akyab Road that formerly housed unmarried doctors. Dr Benjamin Chew often visited these quarters with colleagues to listen to BBC news over the radio, an act prohibited by the Japanese. Recounting this experience to the National Archives in 1983, Dr Chew said:

*"We were getting news, radio news, illicit news, and that was punishable of course by the Kempeitai. We had a warning that we had been spied upon... We were in the process of walking to the bachelors' quarters, where the radio was."*

*And as we walked passed, usually doctors are very observant. And I am quite observant. And just at the corner of my eye I saw on a coconut tree somebody right on the top of the coconut tree overlooking that house."*

Dr Chew warned his colleagues of the spy, and added:

*"Anyway, we behaved normally and from that moment we took the radio, we buried it and we never used it again. We thought it was too dangerous."*

### **Tuberculosis treatment at Rotary Clinic and Mandalay Road Hospital**

Former Mandalay Road Hospital: 70 Martaban Road

After the war ended, Tan Tock Seng Hospital was designated Singapore's centre for tuberculosis (TB) treatment in 1947. TB was then a dangerous and contagious disease that was rife among the poor. Patients with severe cases of TB were then admitted to Tan Tock Seng Hospital for treatment, which could last for up to two years.

Outpatient TB treatment was carried out at the hospital's Rotary Clinic, which was opened in 1949 and named after its funder, the Rotary Club. This clinic was Singapore's primary tuberculosis treatment clinic, treating about 300 patients daily. It also conducted research that reduced TB treatment time from two

years to just six months. It was demolished in the 1990s.

The father of Dorothy Seet was a Hospital Assistant at Tan Tock Seng Hospital during the 1940s-50s, when TB was rife. She recalled:

*"He was always telling us about the TB patients, what he did for them and so on. As soon as I could read and write, I helped him to check his register – so many had died those days until they discovered penicillin!"*

Meanwhile, female and child TB patients who had to be warded were treated at Mandalay Road Hospital, which was originally built in the 1920s to treat pauper women. After the war, Mandalay Road Hospital served as a TB treatment centre of Tan Tock Seng Hospital as well as a teaching facility for nurses.

Due to staff shortages then, the authorities sought help from the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood, a Catholic congregation whose nuns serve in schools, hospitals and prisons. In 1949, Franciscan nuns arrived in Singapore, where they worked as nurses and also trained student nurses at Mandalay Road Hospital.

Beatrice Chang (b. 1940), who trained there as a nurse in the 1950s, recalled to the National Archives:



*Nursing class conducted by a Franciscan nun at Mandalay Road Hospital, 1959*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Former Mandalay Road Hospital, 2018



A Franciscan nun and a nurse tending to a patient at Mandalay Road Hospital, 1959  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

*"It was a hospital that was run by the nuns... I was there at the time and had the opportunity of pioneering the setup as well as learning from the nuns. Many were terminally ill patients and most of them were abandoned by their families and waiting for death... There were only three blocks. Each block could take about eight to ten patients at the most. The nuns taught us everything... They even taught us how to prepare nutritious meals for the patients."*

By the late 1950s, TB had come under control thanks to better treatment methods and new vaccines. The Franciscan nuns then established Mount Alvernia Hospital, which opened in 1961 at Thomson Road. Mount Alvernia is the name of an Italian hill closely associated with St Francis of Assisi, who founded the Franciscan order.

After the nuns left, Mandalay Road Hospital was converted into general medical wards. In 1973, it became a Rehabilitation Centre for patients

recovering from stroke and neurological disorders. The centre was supported by a \$250,000 donation from Dato Lee Chee Shan, a banker and stroke patient.

The Rehabilitation Centre operated until 1994, when it relocated to Ang Mo Kio Community Hospital. The site of the former Mandalay Road Hospital was later returned to the state and the building is now leased to private tenants.

### **From a tuberculosis hospital to a general hospital**

The first major post-war additions to Tan Tock Seng Hospital were five six-storey hospital blocks, which were built between 1954 and 1957. As TB cases fell in the 1960s, Tan Tock Seng Hospital evolved from a TB hospital to a general hospital that provided broad medical treatment and services.

In 1975, Tan Tock Seng Hospital was designated one of Singapore's four regional general hospitals, along with Thomson Road Hospital, Singapore General Hospital and Alexandra Hospital. By the late 1980s, the hospital's services included surgery, neurology and neurosurgery, paediatrics and geriatric medicine.

During the period 1993-99, much of the old Tan Tock Seng Hospital grounds, including most of the pavilion wards and the post-war hospital blocks, was redeveloped into the present Tan Tock Seng Hospital complex, which was officially opened in 2000 by then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.



*Tan Tock Seng Hospital, 2018*



*Multi-ward blocks at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, 1957*  
 Courtesy of Tan Tock Seng Hospital

The new 15-storey complex is Singapore's second largest general hospital after Singapore General Hospital. Its building also houses a Heritage Museum that showcases its history and old hospital artefacts.

### **MIDDLETON HOSPITAL (NOW COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CENTRE)**

Moulmein Road

In the early 1900s, infectious diseases such as typhoid and cholera were rampant in Singapore. To isolate and treat patients with infectious diseases, the authorities set up

a quarantine camp at Moulmein Road in 1907. Proper wards and staff quarters were later built at this site, which was named the Government Infectious Diseases Hospital in 1913. In 1920, the hospital was renamed Middleton Institution (and later Hospital) after retired Medical Officer William R C Middleton.

In the mid-1900s, Middleton Hospital played a major role in treating and controlling diseases such as typhoid, polio, diphtheria and smallpox. In 1985, it merged with Tan Tock Seng Hospital and became the Communicable Disease Centre (CDC). The CDC was instrumental



## CONSERVED BUNGALOWS AT MOULMEIN

Two pre-war bungalows at 142 and 144 Moulmein Road, conserved in 2014, are now part of Tan Tock Seng Hospital's grounds. Built in the early 1900s, 142 Moulmein Road has a ground floor made from brick and stone, while the second storey used timber beams, floorboards and columns. The bungalow's half-timbered construction is similar to that of black and white houses built during that era, but there are also neoclassical details in the moulded pilasters (columns) around the doors and entrance facade windows.

In the 1930s, this bungalow was the residence of Dr J C Tull, a government pathologist. After the war, the bungalow was occupied by the Franciscan nuns based at Mandalay Road Hospital, who called the building Mount Alvernia. The bungalow later housed Tan Tock Seng Hospital's Tuberculosis Control Unit, and continues to serve as the contact clinic for this unit.

Dorothy Seet, whose father worked for Tan Tock Seng Hospital in the 1950s, recalled having the nuns as neighbours. She shared:

*"We lived in 126 Moulmein Road... Next to us was a road up where the Mount Alvernia nuns had their quarters. They had a very big compound and used to rear turkeys for Christmas. My sister was a naughty girl; she's exuberant and she would go and take the turkeys' eggs. The nuns lived here but they ran a hospital in Mandalay Road. They were all very nice, always talking to us."*

Next door to the contact clinic is 144 Moulmein Road, a timber bungalow built in the 1920s. It was the home of Lim Soo Ban, a businessman. Later, it was used as a chapel for Tan Tock Seng Hospital staff, and eventually housed the hospital's Tuberculosis Control Unit.

This bungalow shows the influence of traditional Malay architecture, with masonry piers that raise it above the ground. Its interior

consists of a front room or *serambi* that runs the full width of the housefront, where guests were received. After the *serambi* is a central hall that leads to the rear of the house, which was flanked by bedrooms. Such a layout was typical of Malay-style houses.

However, European and local influences can be seen in other parts of the bungalow. The front facade features two octagonal turrets and a projecting porch supported by Doric columns. The building's exterior is also decorated with ornate plaster reliefs featuring Chinese motifs such as bats and coins.



142 Moulmein Road, 2018



144 Moulmein Road, 2018



Entrance of Middleton Hospital, 1954  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

in treating and controlling recent episodes of infectious diseases such as the nipah virus in 1999 and the deadly SARS outbreak in 2003.

In the past, Middleton Hospital was commonly known as Or Sai (“black lion” in Hokkien). This referred to a black lion that emblazoned the hospital’s entrance from 1913 and served as a “guardian” of the hospital compound. The black lion is still present by the CDC’s entrance today.

### FORMER NURSES’ QUARTERS (NOW LEE KONG CHIAN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE)

11 Mandalay Road

At 11 Mandalay Road stands an elegant building that opened in 1925 as a hostel. Originally known as the Straits Settlements Mandalay Road Hostel, this building housed medical students who received clinical training at Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

Describing student life at the hostel in 1941-42, Dr Abdul Wahab bin Mohd Ariff (b. 1919) wrote:

*“Life in the Tan Tock Seng Hospital before the bombing and heavy shelling was pleasant enough for the students. They had their ward duties, playing poker among themselves, walks by the nurses’ quarters. At times, they quietly slipped away into a nearby bar off Balestier Road for beer to make their life more lively in the new surroundings... When the Tan Tock Seng Hospital area became a battlefield, the students were busy looking after the wounded and the dying.”*

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed (b. 1925), Prime Minister of Malaysia, was a resident of the hostel after the war. He wrote:

*“I remember being allocated a room in Tan Tock Seng Hostel near Balestier Village. Ragging was still in fashion then and I was told by one of the seniors that if I made any noise while sleeping, he was going to ‘tub’ [a form of ragging] me... A military truck driven by a colourful character known as ‘Goucho’ took the ‘freshies’ to the hostel... Goucho’s truck took us on hair-raising rides from Tan Tock Seng to the lecture rooms in Sepoy Lines and also to Raffles College.”*

In 1957, the medical students moved to King Edward VII Hall at Sepoy Lines. The hostel then housed nurses who worked or trained at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. It served as nurses’ quarters until 1995, when it was converted into administrative offices for the hospital which was undergoing redevelopment. From 2000 until 2010, the former nurses’ quarters was vacant.

In November 2010, the building was chosen to house the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKCMedicine), a medical school jointly set up by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Imperial College London. The former nurses’ quarters were restored for adaptive reuse. It was gazetted as a conserved building in 2013, the year it re-opened as the headquarters of LKCMedicine.

The restored building retains its original neoclassical features: it consists of two double-storey wings and a central three-storey portion. The ground level windows



Nurses in front of the former nurses’ quarters (now Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine), undated  
Courtesy of Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine



*Former nurses' quarters, 2018*

have prominent arches similar to those at the Diocletian Baths of ancient Rome, while a Roman lattice underlines the windows. The building is supported by simple yet elegant pilasters and graced by an entrance canopy that features arched bracings and slender wrought-iron supports.

### **DOVER PARK HOSPICE**

10 Jalan Tan Tock Seng

Next to the former nurses' quarters is Dover Park Hospice, which was established in 1992 as a secular non-profit organisation to meet the growing need for hospice care for terminally ill patients. Founded by Dr Seet Ai Mee and Dr Jerry Lim, the institution is Singapore's first purpose-built hospice.

The hospice's original location was Dover Road (thereby explaining its name), but it relocated to Jalan Tan Tock Seng in 1997. The three-storey red brick building features a central courtyard with a koi pond and garden. A new wing with additional beds was opened in 2012.

### **REN CI COMMUNITY HOSPITAL**

71 Irrawaddy Road

After Tan Tock Seng Hospital moved to its new complex in 1999, its pavilion wards were taken over by Ren Ci Community Hospital (Mandarin

for "compassion" and "benevolence"), a Buddhist healthcare charity set up in 1994 by Venerable Shi Ming Yi, Abbot of Foo Hai Ch'an Monastery.

Ren Ci used the pavilion wards as a nursing home and to house chronic sick patients. The wards were converted into a full-fledged nursing home in 2008 and operated as such until 2017, when the patients were relocated to new premises at Ang Mo Kio.

In the meanwhile, Ren Ci started construction works for a 15-storey community hospital at Irrawaddy Road in 2005, which officially opened in 2010. The hospital continues to



*A child receiving dental care at the School Dental Clinic, 1964*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Former School Dental Clinic building, 2018*

work closely with Tan Tock Seng Hospital to provide rehabilitation and care for patients prior to discharge.

### **FORMER SCHOOL DENTAL CLINIC**

1 Pegu Road

Singapore's first stand-alone school dental clinic opened in 1963 at Pegu Road. This facility originally opened in 1959 as an outpatients' clinic and dispensary. In 1963, the dispensary was joined by the School Dental Clinic, which was officially opened by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

The clinic provided dental services for schoolchildren who were sent there for regular check-ups. From 1979, it also started to offer dental services to adults. The facility operated until the 1990s when its services were transferred to the National Dental Centre which opened at Outram in 1998.

In 1996, the site was taken over by Singapore Anglican Community Services which renamed it Bales-tier Care Centre. Singapore Anglican Community Services was established in 1967 as the community service arm of the Anglican Diocese of Singapore.

Bales-tier Care Centre provided day care, residential facilities and vocational training for people suffering from mental health issues. It closed in 2004 when its services were transferred to new care centres at Hougang and Simei. Today, the site is leased out for commercial use.

### **HANDICAPS WELFARE ASSOCIATION**

16 Whampoa Drive

The Handicaps Welfare Association was founded in 1969 by a group of disabled persons to promote self-help and provide mutual aid. Originally registered as the Singapore Handicaps Friendship Club, it changed its name to Handicaps Welfare Association in 1976.

The association's activities included teaching the disabled to drive as well as providing counselling, subsidies for food and mobility aids, and scholarships. In 1980, it introduced a door-to-door transport service for the disabled, especially the sick and elderly, who find it hard or impossible to use public transport.

The association's first office was located in the Singapore Council of Social Service building at Penang Lane. In 1985, it moved to the





*Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital, 2018*

former Rayman School building at Whampoa Drive. The association later renovated the building to house a computer laboratory and an employment and education centre. It also set up a physical rehabilitation centre with exercise and gym equipment in the building, which opened in 1993.

### **KWONG WAI SHIU HOSPITAL**

705 Serangoon Road

After Tan Tock Seng Hospital relocated from Balestier Plain to Moulmein Road in 1909, its former site was granted to Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital. This hospital was founded in 1910 by Wong Ah Fook and Leong Man Sau, two Cantonese community leaders who sought to provide free healthcare for poor migrants. The hospital was named after three prefectures – Kwong-Chau, Wai-Chau and Shiu-Heng – in China's Guangdong province.

Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital moved into the former Tan Tock Seng Hospital grounds in 1911 and has continued to occupy this site till today. The hospital expanded after the war, adding twelve new buildings from 1951-60. These included the three-storey Main Front Block, which was built in 1960 and conserved in 2012. This elegant modern building housed offices and an outpatient clinic on the ground floor and wards on the upper levels.

Another post-war addition was the elegant Huo Ran Ting Garden, which was also conserved in 2012 along with the three single-storey buildings around it. The latter, which

were built in the late 1850s as part of Tan Tock Seng Hospital, feature tiled pitched roofs supported by robust Doric columns.

From 1974, the hospital started to offer its services to all members of the public free of charge. It had previously offered free treatment to any needy patient, but provided hospitalisation only to people who originated from Kwong, Wai and Shiu prefectures. In 2002, the hospital opened a Day Rehabilitation Centre for elderly patients as well as a traditional Chinese medicine outpatient centre.

During the late 2010s, the hospital underwent a major revamp that included the building of a 12-storey nursing home, a senior care centre, a traditional Chinese medicine centre, the Academy of Chinese Medicine Singapore and a heritage gallery.

### **THE NATIONAL KIDNEY FOUNDATION**

81 Kim Keat Road

The National Kidney Foundation (NKF) was founded by Dr Khoo Oon Teik, a nephrologist (kidney specialist), who set up Singapore's first dialysis unit in an attic at the Singapore General Hospital in 1969. NKF was officially inaugurated on 7 April 1969 by then President Yusof bin Ishak, who was also its patron.

NKF was established to provide affordable dialysis for people who would otherwise suffer from kidney failure. Apart from running dialysis centres, NKF also organises campaigns to encourage people to pledge their organs for donation to kidney patients and to raise awareness about kidney disease.

The first NKF dialysis centre in the Balestier area opened in 1982 at Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital with 10 machines. NKF also moved its headquarters to a section of the hospital that year. In 1989, NKF's opened its second satellite dialysis centre, the National Panasonic-Lifeforce Dialysis Centre (now the Tay Choon Hye-NKF Dialysis Centre), at Kim Keat Road. This centre was later redeveloped into NKF's headquarters, which opened in 1995. Today, NKF runs more than 34 dialysis centres across Singapore.

# HOUSES OF FAITH

As the Balestier area became more populated from the mid-1800s, its communities established religious institutions that administered to their religious needs. Apart from places of worship, the area also had cemeteries established by the Teochew and Jewish communities in the past.

*\*Most of these religious buildings are open to the public, but do follow instructions on appropriate attire and behave with decorum when visiting them.*

## GOH CHOR TUA PEK KONG TEMPLE

249 Balestier Road

Founded in 1847 by Hokkien workers from Balestier's sugarcane estate, Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple is the oldest religious institution in the area. "Goh Chor" is Hokkien for "Rochore", the district's name in the mid-1800s, while Tua Pek Kong ("Grand Uncle" in Hokkien) is a deity widely worshipped by the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

The temple was also known as Fu De Tang ("Fortune and Virtue Hall"), and apart from Tua Pek Kong, also houses shrines to the Tiger God and the Earth God. It probably began as a wooden structure, although it was later extensively refurbished in 1920 and 1928 into the brick building it is today. The temple is now under the trusteeship of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan.



Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple, 1971  
Paul Piollet Collection, courtesy of  
National Archives of Singapore

## TUA PEK KONG

There are various theories on the origin of Tua Pek Kong. Some believe that Tua Pek Kong is the spirit of Zhang Li, a Chinese migrant to Penang in the late 1700s who was respected for his wisdom and guidance and thus deified after his death.

Another theory suggests that Tua Pek Kong originated as a Sino-Malay deity among the overseas Chinese community in Southeast Asia during the 1700s. Whatever the case may be, Chinese migrants to this region often set up shrines for Tua Pek Kong, to whom they prayed for blessings, protection from danger and recovery from illness.

Built in a southern Chinese style, the temple's low-tiled roof features ornate ridges decorated with dragons, birds, fish, pearls and flowers made by using a technique called cut-tile, in which large tiles are cut into smaller pieces. Another unique feature of the temple is its use of red-painted plaster to simulate terracotta wall tiles, recalling a Hokkien architectural tradition which uses red bricks or terracotta tiles for external walls. The roof is supported by timber beams and rafters, as well as granite columns made by craftsmen from China.

A notable feature of this temple is the freestanding wayang (Chinese opera) stage next to its forecourt. This stage was built in 1906 by Tan Boo Liat (1874-1934), a Hokkien businessman and great-grandson of Tan Tock Seng. It is one of three surviving wayang stages in Singapore (the other two are at Jalan Kebaya and Pulau Ubin).

Chinese operas are staged here during important festivals to provide ritual entertainment for the deities as well as temple



Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple, 2018



An opera performance held on Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple's wayang stage, 2018

devotees. Teo Ah Wah (b. 1940) shared the following memory of the temple and its wayang performances with the National Archives:

*"There was a wayang stage next to the temple, which is still there today... the stage was built later than the temple... The temple was our neighbour across the road. Whenever there was a show on the stage, we would be there. We always looked forward to the performances."*

In the past, there was another temple behind Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple. Called Tian Teck Keng, this temple was dedicated to Nezha the Third Prince, a deity who wields a

magical ring and spear. This temple moved to Tampines Link in 2004 after its land was acquired for redevelopment

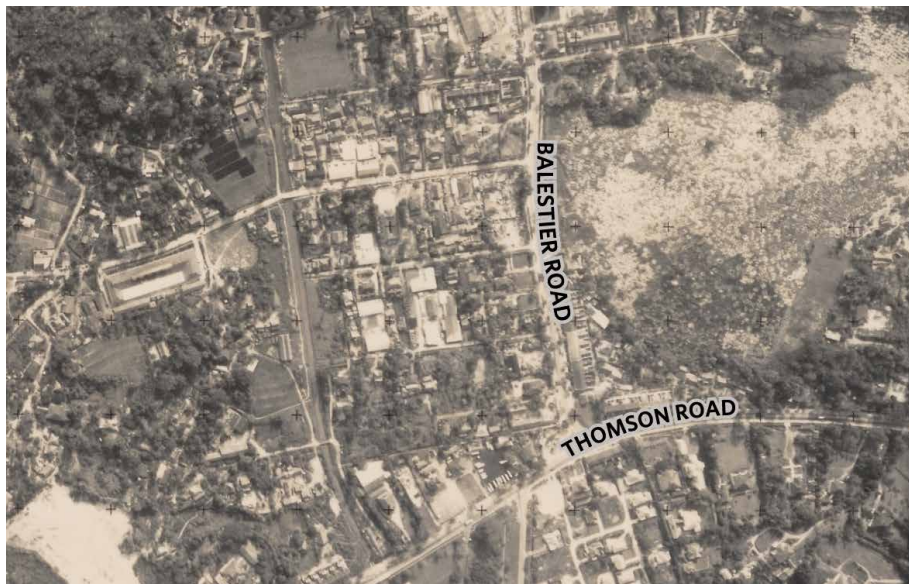
### THONG TECK SIAN TONG LIAN SIN SIA

1A Boon Teck Road

Hidden away at Boon Teck Road, this temple has its roots in Thong Teck Sian Tong and Lian Sin Sia, two religious and charitable groups established in 1940. These two groups merged in 1950 to form Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sin Sia and built the temple at its current location in Boon Teck Road. The temple was later rebuilt in 1976.



Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sin Sia, 2018



An aerial view of the Balestier area, showing the Guang En Shan cemetery on the right, 1957  
Aerial photographs by the British Royal Air Force between 1940 to 1970s, from a collection held by the National Archives of Singapore. Crown copyright.

## FORMER GUANG EN SHAN TEOCHEW CEMETERY

In the past, there was a large Teochew cemetery in Balestier known as Guang En Shan. Established in the 1800s by Ngee Ann Kongsí, the cemetery was located at the Thomson Road end of Balestier Road, all the way until Irawaddy Road.

Ngee Ann Kongsí is a self-help organisation founded in 1845 by local Teochew community leaders. Ngee Ann is an old name for Chaozhou prefecture in Guangdong, China, while Kongsí refers to a mutual help organisation set up by migrant Chinese. Its aims were to promote and observe the rites, customs and religious beliefs of Teochews in Singapore, and to look after the welfare of poor Teochew migrants.

Guang En Shan was one of many plots of land acquired by Ngee Ann Kongsí in the 1800s for use as cemeteries. It was considered a suitable

burial site according to Chinese fengshui (geomancy) beliefs as it was a hilly area facing a waterway (Sungei Whampo).

After World War II, the Kongsí sought to redevelop most of its cemeteries to raise funds for its educational and charitable activities. Guang En Shan was thus exhumed and redeveloped.

In 1947, Ngee Ann Kongsí built a row of single-storey terraced units on its former cemetery land near the Thomson Road junction. Terraced units such as these were once commonly built along main roads in rural and suburban Singapore to cater to residents in these areas. The architecture of these units is simple and functional, but there are touches of Art Deco on the curved front pediment of one unit (627 Balestier Road). These shops, the longest surviving row of their kind in Singapore, were conserved in 2003.



In the 1950s, other portions of Guang En Shan were acquired by the government for the expansion of Tan Tock Seng Hospital. To make way for the new hospital buildings, about 5,600 graves were exhumed and the remains reinterred at Seletar. Other parts of the cemetery were redeveloped into the Balestier Hill cluster of schools in the 1960s.

### FORMER JEWISH CEMETERY AT THOMSON ROAD

The Balestier area once contained a Jewish cemetery located off Thomson Road. Jewish traders first came to Singapore in the early 1800s. They set up Singapore's first Jewish cemetery at Orchard Road (now site of Dhoby Ghaut MRT) in 1841. By the late 1800s, this cemetery was running out of space and, in 1900, the community acquired land near Thomson Road for a new cemetery.

This Jewish cemetery served as a burial site from 1904-73. Among those buried here were the family of Manasseh Meyer (1846-1930), a prominent businessman who built Maghain Aboth Synagogue at Waterloo Street in 1878 and Chesed-El Synagogue at Oxley Rise in 1905. Meyer's remains were interred in a marble mausoleum in the cemetery that resembled a Greek temple, with Doric columns designed by Cavalieri Rodolfo Nolli (1888-1963), an Italian sculptor.



Former Jewish cemetery at Thomson Road, 1980s  
Jewish Welfare Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Leonard Loo, who stayed at Moulmein Road in the 1970s, recalled:

*"The Jewish cemetery was beautiful. There was a forest, a winding road up there. I went there for peace and quiet, the tombstones are beautiful."*

The cemetery was closed in 1974, and the land was then acquired by the government in 1982. The site was eventually redeveloped into the Novena MRT station.

The shrines in this temple are dedicated to its patron saints and deities, including Yun Jie Bodhisattva, Fu You Di Jun (also known as Lu Dong Bin) and Sung Ta Fung. The temple is divided into three sections: one houses the shrines to the patron saints, while the others are reserved for ancestral shrines and niches for the deceased.

The temple's mission is the practice of compassion through the provision of free medical consultation, funeral services, and assistance to the poor and needy. Since the 1950s, the temple has operated a Chinese Medical Service Clinic at its Boon Teck Road premises which provides free medical consultation and traditional Chinese medicine to patients of all backgrounds.

During the 1950s and 1960s, its members provided food and clothing to victims of fires in Kallang, Geylang and Bukit Ho Swee. It also



The water kiosk at Boon Teck Road, 2018

provides free burial, cremation and/or funeral services to needy families. To care for the elderly in need, the temple opened Thong Teck Home for Senior Citizens at Geylang East in 1997.

The temple is also known for its tradition of setting up water kiosks for thirsty passers-by. In the past, such kiosks were set up along Kim Keat Road, River Valley Road and Balestier Road to provide refreshments for labourers working or living in these areas. Today, the only surviving water kiosk is located at the corner of Boon Teck Road and Balestier Road. The kiosk has two containers: one holding water and the other a cooling tea known as *su teh* in Teochew.

### CHAN CHOR MIN TONG AND OTHER FORMER ZHAI TANG

Chan Chor Min Tong:

2 Jalan Kemaman and 3 Bassein Road

Phang Pheng Mei Temple: 12 Jalan Ampas

Qing De Tang: 13 Lorong Ampas

Tai Pei Yuen Temple: 7 Jalan Kemaman

Chan Chor Min Tong is a Buddhist organisation with institutions at two locations in Balestier: Jalan Kemaman and Bassein Road. The Jalan Kemaman temple, a single-storey building

with a garden filled with fruit trees and herbs, was built in 1926 and named after its founder, a Cantonese philanthropist. It served as a home for migrant men with no family or means of support. The Bassein Road temple, a two-storey structure surrounded by cloister-like walls for privacy, was built in 1936 to house migrant women.

Chan Chor Min Tong is a *zhaitang* (“vegetarian hall” in Mandarin), a type of Buddhist home cum temple that was established in Southeast Asia, usually by migrants from Shunde district, Guangdong province, in the late 1800s and early 1900s. A *zhaitang*’s residents were usually women, who had to be vegetarian, remain single and perform Buddhist rites in order to stay there. They were not nuns, however, and were permitted to earn a living outside, often as seamstresses, cooks or housekeepers. The main deity in a *zhaitang* is Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy.

Balestier is also home to other former *zhaitang*. One of these is Phang Pheng Mei Temple (also known as Feeha Cheng Seah, “Lodge of the



Chan Chor Min Tong at Bassein Road, 1985

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



Chan Chor Min Tong at Jalan Kemaman, 2018

Flying Roseate Clouds”) at Jalan Ampas. This former *zhaitang* was home to working as well as retired Cantonese *amahs* (housekeepers). The present four-storey building, which now houses a temple and senior citizens’ home, was constructed in 1977. Meanwhile, Lorong Ampas is the location of Qing De Tang, a former *zhaitang* founded in the mid-1900s to house Hakka women. At Martaban Road, there was also a *zhaitang* called Happy Lotus located in one of the conserved terrace houses.

Another former *zhaitang* is Tai Pei Yuen Temple, which was founded as Kuan Yin Lodge at Jalan Kemaman in 1938 by Chow Siew Keng, a migrant from Guangdong. After Chow died in 1948, her daughter Poon Sin Kiew took over as abbess with the title Venerable Sek Fatt Kuan. The temple was then rebuilt in 1961-64. It later expanded its activities to open Tai Pei Old People’s Home at Jalan Ampas in 1982 and Tai Pei Buddhist Centre at Lavender Street in 1985.



Phang Pheng Mei Temple, 2018



Leng Ern Jee Temple, 2018

### LENG ERN JEE TEMPLE

15 Jalan Rajah

Leng Ern Jee Temple has its origins in a shophouse at Circular Road, where a shrine to Ji Gong (a monk who was later deified) and Lu Dong Bin (one of the Eight Immortals of Taoist mythology) was established during the Japanese Occupation. In 1951, the shrine relocated to Jalan Rajah and was named Leng Ern Jee Temple after another temple in China.

The original temple, a single-storey structure, was redeveloped into the present three-storey building during the 1980s. The temple also houses the ancestral ashes and tablets of its members. Since 1968, it has also operated a traditional Chinese medicine clinic that charges a nominal fee for medical treatment.

### FU HUP THONG FOOK TAK KONG

15 Kim Keat Lane

This small Cantonese temple is dedicated to the Earth God Tu Di Gong and his wife, Tu Di Po. It was established in 1953 and initially based in a shophouse at Balestier Road. In 1958, the present site was acquired and the temple then moved to Kim Keat Lane.

This temple is popular among Cantonese residents from the Toa Payoh and Whampoa areas. Today, it continues to celebrate important

festivals with performances by Cantonese opera troupes and celebration dinners with free meals for members and senior citizens.

### MAHA SASANARAMSI BURMESE BUDDHIST TEMPLE

14 Tai Gin Road

Completed in 1991, Maha Sasanaramsi Burmese Buddhist Temple serves as a religious and social site for Singapore's Burmese Buddhist community. The temple was originally founded in 1878 at Kinta Road by a Burmese named U Thar Hnin (also known as Tang Sooy Chin).

In 1918, the temple's trustee U Kyaw Gaung (also known as Khoo Teo Gou) found a 10-tonne block of white marble near Mandalay, which was then carved into a 3.3-metre-high image of Buddha and enshrined in the Kinta Road temple in 1921. It is the largest known marble Buddha statue outside Myanmar.

During the 1980s, the temple had to move as its Kinta Road site was earmarked for urban redevelopment. The temple was granted a site at Tai Gin Road in 1986. The new temple's architecture combines modern amenities with traditional Burmese elements such as intricate teak carvings on the tiered roof and figurines of deities on the interior walls.

The most striking features of the temple are the two lions (*chin thay*) that guard the temple's entrance and the golden pagoda which houses a Sima House for religious



Maha Sasanaramsi Burmese Buddhist Temple, 2018

### BALESTIER'S BURMESE CONNECTION

Apart from the Burmese Buddhist Temple, Balestier has several roads named after places in Myanmar, which was ruled by the British from 1824 until 1948. These include Akyab Road, Ava Road, Bassein Road, Bhamo Road, Irrawaddy Road, Mandalay Road, Martaban Road, Minbu Road, Moulmein Road, Pegu Road, Prome Road, Rangoon Road and Shan Road.

discussions and ceremonies. There is also a bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*), the species of tree under which Buddha gained enlightenment, within the temple ground.

Inside the temple is a shrine and worship hall housing the marble Buddha. There are also murals depicting the temple's history as well as sculptures and artefacts related to Burmese culture and history.

The temple is the site for important cultural and religious festivals such as Abhidhamma Day (day when Buddha descended from Tavatimsa Heaven), Hta Ma Ne Pwe (Harvest Festival), Thin Gyan (Myanmar New Year, also known as Water Festival) and Vesak Day. It also organises talks and classes about Buddhism.



The prayer hall of the temple, 2006



## MASJID HAJJAH RAHIMABI KEBUN LIMAU

76 Kim Keat Road

Completed in 1984, Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi Kebun Limau was named after Kebun Limau (Malay for “lime garden”), an old name for the area. It was also named after philanthropist Hajjah Rahima Bee Ahmad Angullia.

The origins of this mosque date back to 1959 when Muslim residents of Rayman Avenue, Lorong Limau, Whampoa Road and Kim Keat Avenue requested for land to build a *surau* (“prayer hall”). The community was granted a plot of land along Kim Keat Road by the government in 1961. Muslims in the neighbourhood then contributed to the building of the *surau*.

Completed in 1964, Surau Kebun Limau was a double-storey brick and wood building with a prayer hall upstairs and offices below. The population of the area grew in the early 1970s, and by 1974, Kebun Limau had about 1,000 Muslim families. Although the *surau* was renovated in 1974 (and renamed Masjid Kebun Limau), there was not enough space for all the worshippers. This prompted the mosque committee to plan for the building of



Hajjah Rahima Bee Ahmad Angullia (centre) and her husband Haji Yacoob Mohamed Angullia (left) at the piling ceremony for the new mosque on 24 July 1983  
Courtesy of Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi Kebun Limau



Masjid Kebun Limau, 1970s  
Courtesy of Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi Kebun Limau



Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi Kebun Limau, 2018



Friday prayers at Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi Kebun Limau, 2018

a larger mosque to accommodate its growing number of worshippers.

Fund-raising for the new mosque began in 1979, and by 1981, the community had raised about \$600,000, which was still insufficient. Fortunately, in 1981, the mosque received a donation of \$1.6 million from Hajjah Rahima Bee Ahmad Angullia, a housewife who donated in memory of her late daughter, who died in 1976.

Hajjah Rahima Bee also wanted to continue her family's tradition of building mosques which was started by her grandfather Mohammed Salleh Eusoofjee Angullia. Mohammed Salleh Eusoofjee built Angullia Mosque at Serangoon Road in the 1890s while her father, Ahmed Mohamed Salleh Angullia, built the former Angullia Park Mosque near Orchard Road in 1933.

Rahmat bin Sulaiman, a longtime resident of St George's Road, was familiar with the original *surau* and the subsequent fundraising. He recalled:

*"The old surau was very small. Whenever it rained, the water would enter the building. They sought donations but it was not enough. Back then, to give a dollar or more - that was already hard. How much did we earn then? But thank God, Hajjah Rahima Bee gave."*

Construction works for the new mosque started in 1983 and it was completed in 1984. The mosque re-opened as Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi Kebun Limau, in honour of its benefactor.

## CHURCH OF ST ALPHONSUS (NOVENA CHURCH)

300 Thomson Road

The Church of St Alphonus, popularly referred to as Novena Church, was established in 1935 by the Redemptorists, a Roman Catholic order dedicated to serving the poor and abandoned. The Redemptorist order was founded in 1732 by St Alphonus Liguori (1696-1787), an Italian priest.

The first Redemptorists arrived in Singapore from Australia in 1935 at the request of then

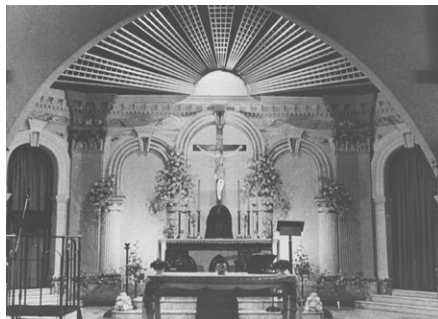
Bishop of Malacca Adrien Pierre Devals. They first rented a house at 339 Thomson Road (now Thomson Medical Centre), which served as a residence and site for public devotions. The Redemptorists also visited the nearby Tan Tock Seng Hospital during World War II to render aid to injured or dying patients.

After the war, the Redemptorists moved to another rented house at 418 Thomson Road in 1945. When the house was sold in 1947, the Redemptorists acquired a bungalow at 300 Thomson Road that had belonged to Wee Kah Kiat, a businessman and board member of the Singapore Improvement Trust.

The Redemptorists moved to this house in 1948 and began holding masses in a room that served as a temporary chapel, while awaiting the completion of its new church building. In January 1949, the first Saturday novenas were held in the chapel.



Church of St Alphonus, 1984  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Interior of the original church building, 1976  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Interior of the church's new extension, 2018*



*Church of St Alphonsus, 2018*

A novena is a devotion carried out over nine days or weeks ("novena" means "nine" in Latin). This devotion became highly popular with both Christians as well as non-Christians, and has attracted as many as 20,000 people to the church each weekend. Due to the immense popularity of these devotions, the surrounding area and later, the nearby MRT station, acquired the name Novena.

Another popular church tradition is an annual procession held during the feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour (a title given to the Virgin Mary), which takes place on the first Sunday in September. During this procession, the church facade is covered by thousands of flowers and bouquets in elaborate designs.

The original church building was completed in 1950 and designed by the architectural firm of Swan & Maclaren in an Eclectic-Modern style. Classical elements such as fluted Doric columns line the external corridors, entrances and side porticoes.

The most prominent feature of the original building is a front pediment with three arches topped by a cross - with the central arch featuring a round stained glass window that symbolises "oneness" or unity. In the 1950s, the church expanded to accommodate more worshippers by removing its side walls and covering the side porticoes to allow for more pews to be added.

To cater to a growing crowd of worshippers, the church site was redeveloped in 2014-2017. Conserved in 2011, the original church building is now conjoined with a new Gothic-style extension, which opened in 2017.

### SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

120 Balestier Road

This church was originally built in 1938-39 by the Assemblies of God (AOG), a Christian denomination. AOG missionaries Cecil and Edith Jackson first arrived in Singapore in 1928 and set up a wooden chapel in Balestier Plain, which catered to Cantonese-speaking residents of nearby areas. AOG then acquired the present site and built the church, which was dedicated in 1939.

After the Japanese Occupation, AOG decided to sell the building in 1948. It was acquired by the Seventh-Day Adventists, another Christian denomination, which occupied the building from 1951. Since then, it has served as the worship hall for the Seventh-Day Adventists' English-speaking congregation. The Adventists' Chinese-speaking congregation relocated to their own building at Thomson Road from 1957.

Designed by architect C Y Kong in an Art Deco style, the church has a stepped facade that resembles the profile of a pipe organ. Inside, the worship hall has a domed roof and a floor that slopes down towards the stage, giving worshippers at the back a clear view of the pulpit. The hall's interior also receives natural lighting from its side windows, which consist



Seventh-Day Adventist Church, 2018

of green glass panels. The church building was conserved in 2005.

### SALVATION ARMY BALESTIER CORPS

126 Balestier Road

Based next to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Salvation Army Balestier Corps is located on a site that was originally occupied by the Eye Hospital, a private healthcare institution opened by Singapore's first local eye surgeon, Dr Tan Soo Hock. Dr Tan was originally based at a Selegie Road shophouse in 1934 but moved to Balestier Road in 1939, where he built a modern facility with outpatient clinics, an operating theatre and hospitalisation wards.

Since 2011, the building has been occupied by the Salvation Army, a Christian denomination founded in 1865 by William Booth in the United Kingdom to reach out to the poor and destitute. Salvationists first arrived in Singapore in 1935 and established their headquarters at the former House of Tan Yeok Nee at Tank Road in 1938-91. They also set up a Salvation Army Hall at Balestier Road in 1936, which became known as the Salvation Army Balestier Corps.

After the Japanese Occupation, the Salvation Army Balestier Corps built a new hall at Martaban Road in 1948, which was rebuilt in 1961. It served as a worship place and activity centre until 2006, when the site was acquired by private developers. The Salvationists then acquired the former Eye Hospital building and converted it into a church and community centre, which opened in 2011.

### FAITH ASSEMBLY OF GOD

1A Kim Keat Road

This church has its origins in a SIT shophouse at Rayman Avenue, which was rented by two American pastors, Vallance and Lula Baird, in 1949. The Bairds set up a church called Assembly of God Gospel Hall that catered to Cantonese-speaking believers living nearby. In 1959, the church moved to Kim Keat Road, where it acquired a property and remodelled it for religious purposes. It was then renamed Faith Assembly of God in 1960.



# FOOD HERITAGE

**B**alestier Road has always been associated with food and culinary heritage, given its wealth of popular eateries, food centres and bakeries. The area's growing reputation as a "makan place" started in the early 1900s, when Balestier Road was transforming into a residential neighbourhood.

As the area's population grew, food vendors and street hawkers became a common sight, especially around landmarks such as temples and wayang stages. A number of public markets also opened in the 1900s to provide spaces for roadside food vendors, while coffee shops, bakeries and other eateries were established in the shophouses that began to line Balestier Road from the early 1900s.

Today, Balestier continues to be a popular area for foodies, who flock to the area for favourites such as durian, *tau sar piah* (bean paste pastry), *bak kut teh* (pork rib soup), chicken rice, *rojak*, traditional sliced bread, herbal tea and coffee powder.

## BALESTIER MARKET

411 Balestier Road

Built in 1922, Balestier Market is Singapore's only surviving rural market building. The

municipality purchased the site in 1920 and built the market to provide a place where fresh food vendors could sell their produce without obstructing traffic. The market was originally just a concrete platform, and a roof was only added in 1925.

Locals referred to it as Or Kio Pa Sat ("black bridge market" in Hokkien), after a black bridge located in the area. It was also known as Tee Pa Sat ("iron market"), due to an iron fence that once ran around the building.



*Then Minister for Foreign Affairs and Culture S Dhanabalan visiting vendors at Balestier Market, 1983*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Balestier Market, 1992*

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



Balestier Market, 2018

Another local name was “Tua Pa Sat” or “big market” in Hokkien. Chua Lai Teck explained that this was because in the mid-1900s, there was another smaller market at Kampong Chia Heng, a nearby village:

*“Behind Tan Tock Seng there’s Kampong Chia Heng. You got to walk through a muddy track, pass through the kampong and there’s a small road – Kampong Chia Heng was where you could buy vegetables, fish, on the side of the road.”*

Balestier Market was the only municipal market in the area until the mid-1900s. It was a “wet market” with about two dozen stalls, most of which sold fresh vegetables and pork, as well as live chickens, ducks and frogs. Describing the market in the 1950s, Hoe Juan Jok (b. 1947) said:

*“The wet market that time, you can imagine all the vegetables were all on the floor. The wooden tables were selling pork, chicken... and the vegetable stall was just a wooden shelf or on the floor. And the pork stall was on a wooden table and they had an iron bar to hook all the pork for display... You could get live chicken and fresh fish, duck, even pigeons and frogs. They kill on the spot.”*

There were also a few stalls that sold dry goods such as groceries and coffee powder. Tan Han Boon’s father was one such stallholder and he shared:

*“My father was working at Balestier Road Market. He had a stall there, a sundry shop in the market. He sold dried goods, provisions, mushrooms. I helped to deliver goods by bicycle. That time you could order and we would deliver to your house – not everybody, only the big customers.”*

During the Japanese Occupation, the market served as a distribution centre for food rations. After the war, the market continued to operate as a wet market, and was upgraded in 1952 to increase its number of stalls and improve hygiene standards. It was conserved in 2003 and later converted into a food centre, which it still is today.

## STREET HAWKERS AND MARKETS

In the past, the road outside Balestier Market was lined with hawkers who sold a variety of cooked food such as *char kway teow* (stir-fried flat noodles), *nasi lemak* (rice cooked in coconut milk) and *roti prata* (fried flatbread with curry). These hawkers were a common sight at

Balestier until the 1970s when most of them were rehoused in modern hawker centres. Hoe Juan Jok remembers these hawkers:

*"Outside the market, along the road, they were selling fried kway teow, kway teow soup, wanton mee – these were [itinerant] hawkers, but it's permanent. I never see them move around."*

There were also many roadside hawkers around Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple. Teo Ah Bah recounted:

*"I remember there was a kway teow soup [push-cart] stall next to the temple. It was there every day and I would go there to have a bowl for 20 cents. Another one was a fried chai tau kway and a yong tau foo stall. Back then, the temple had a sidewalk in front. In the afternoons, from 4-5pm, it became an evening street market. People would go there to buy and sell vegetables until 6-7pm. The goods were displayed on the ground... Later on, because of hygiene concerns, the government moved these vendors and stalls to the present Whampoa Market."*

One former street vendor of the area is Ang Seck Buan, who now runs Combat Durian fruit stall next to Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple. He shared:

*"I was at Ruby Theatre, selling durians and other fruits. Last time, we could sell on the roadside – at 4-5pm all the people would come here to buy fruits after work."*

Ang's daughter, Linda, explained how Combat Durian subsequently moved to its present location: "At some point, we asked the temple for a place to sell durians. We have been on this site for about 50 years or so."

### WHAMPOA MAKAN PLACE

90-92 Whampoa Drive

Whampoa Makan Place, a popular wet market and food centre, stands on the site of the former Rayman Market which opened in 1952 to serve the residents of the nearby former Rayman Estate. Rayman Market was built as a proper market to replace temporary shelters built by local hawkers.



A durian stall in front of Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple, 1980  
Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore





Whampoa Makan Place, 2018



Whampoa Market and Food Centre, 2006

The former Rayman Market stood on the site of the current Block 90 of Whampoa Makan Place. In 1973, it was replaced by a new market that was named Whampoa Market and Food Centre. This facility was later upgraded into the present Whampoa Makan Place in 2006-08.

Many Whampoa Makan Place stallholders started as roadside hawkers in the Balestier or Toa Payoh areas. One of the oldest stalls there is Balestier Road Hoover Rojak, which was founded by Lim Ngak Chew in 1961. Lim began selling *rojak* from a pushcart but set up his stall opposite Hoover Theatre in 1971. The stall

eventually moved to Whampoa Drive Food Centre in 1978 and is now run by Lim's son.

Another longstanding stall is Loy Kee Chicken Rice, which opened in 1953 at the former Rayman Market. The stall was founded by Loy Nie, a Hainanese migrant. James Loy (b. 1955), Loy's younger son, shared:

*"My father was a sailor. After that he started a business at Rayman Market. At first they just sold Hainanese pork porridge, but later, because there were a lot of workers in the area, my mother started to sell chicken rice in the 1950s. My father and mother would sleep at the stall - sometimes they never went back home. Because from early morning they had to boil the porridge and cook the chicken - they didn't have any help those days."*

In the 1990s, Loy Kee expanded into a shophouse at 342 Balestier Road next to Shaw Plaza. However, the original Loy Kee stall at Whampoa Makan Place still remains and is run by James' elder brother, Loy Sai Hong.

Leonard Loo, who stayed at Moulmein Road in the late 1970s, recalled Whampoa Market fondly:



*"Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Balestier Road, was our playground. The good food was at Whampoa Market... Whampoa Market has two sections: one is the market with a bit of food, the other one is just cooked food, where the Whampoa Rojak is. Last time, one plate of char siew fan (roast pork rice) was 80 cents, a plate of chicken rice was a dollar, and rojak was like 50 cents."*

### TRADITIONAL KOPITIAM

Loy Kee's chicken rice shop at Balestier Road occupies a former kopitiam (coffee shop) whose owner retired. Many kopitiam once lined Balestier Road, providing residents with fresh coffee or tea, as well as snacks and other food items. Former resident Tan Han Boon recalled:

*"In the early days there were many coffee shops: Prome Road had two, Martaban Road had one. But Loong Fatt was the oldest."*

Loong Fatt Tau Sar Piah (639 Balestier Road) is the oldest surviving kopitiam in Balestier. It was opened in 1948 by Li Fan Long (1922-2018), a Hainanese migrant. Today, it is well-known for its *tau sar piah* (a baked bean paste confection).

However, according to Loo Suan Mui (b. 1952), a supervisor at the shop, Loong Fatt was originally a bakery which made cakes and confectionery:

*"We only started making tau sar piah in the 1970s. There was a sifu [master] who worked here from 1972 until 1993. He specialised in tau sar piah, both sweet and savoury."*

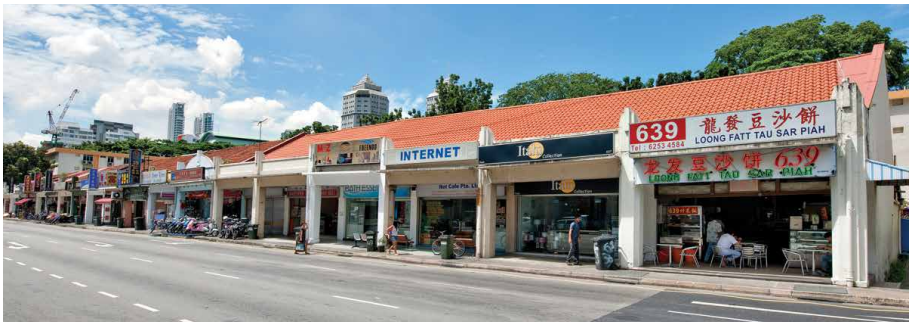
Apart from Loong Fatt, another surviving kopitiam is Kai Juan (395 Balestier Road) which has been around since the 1960s. This kopitiam is well-known for *bak kut teh* (literally "meat bone tea"), a dish made by stewing pork ribs in a soup with various herbs and spices.

Another popular shop at Balestier that sells this dish is Founder Bak Kut Teh at 347 Balestier Road. Established by Chua Chwee Whatt, a former pig farmer, Founder Bak Kut Teh had its origins in Jurong in the 1970s but moved to Balestier in the 1980s. Chua's son Nigel (b. 1974) explained:

*"My father loves bak kut teh a lot. As he was a pig farmer, he tried making bak kut teh using his own pork and invited his neighbours to eat. They said, 'this bak kut teh is very nice, you should open a stall.' He started his stall in Jurong. But my father's friend told him, Balestier Road [is] famous for bak kut teh and nightclubs, and asked him to try over here."*



A former kopitiam housed at the junction of Ava Road, 1982. From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.



Loong Fatt Tau Sar Piah (right most unit), 2010

## TRADITIONAL FOOD SHOPS

### Lam Yeo Coffee Powder

In the days before fancy cafés, most people drank coffee brewed using freshly roasted coffee powder. One shop that still roasts and sells traditional coffee powder is Lam Yeo Coffee Powder Factory at 328 Balestier Road.

Lam Yeo was founded in 1959 by Tan Thian Kang and his wife Lim Chok Tee. Tan was a former assistant editor at *Nanyang Siang Pau*, a Chinese newspaper, and named his business after a Hokkien translation of “Nanyang” (meaning “South Sea”).

Tan initially sold coffee beans door to door from a van. In 1960, he moved to a shophouse unit at 328 Balestier Road, where he roasted and ground coffee beans into coffee powder for sale to hawkers, coffee shops and households. The shop continues to be run by Tan’s descendants today.

### Traditional bakeries

During the 1970s, there were about 200 traditional bakeries that made and supplied sliced bread loaves to kopitiam and other shops across Singapore. Today, few remain but two such bakeries can be found in the Balestier area.



*Coffee beans at Lam Yeo Coffee Powder, 2011*

One of these is Sweetlands Confectionery and Bakery, which was established in the 1960s at Kim Keat Lane. This bakery produces about 800 loaves a day which are delivered to coffee shops and cake shops.

Another traditional bakery is Ghee Leong, also known as Sing Hon Loong Bakery, at Whampoa Drive. This family-owned bakery was established in the 1950s and has been making bread by hand up to the present day.



*Bread from the traditional bakeries in Balestier, 2006*

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Charlotte Chu

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Gerardine Donough-Tan

Giles Massot

Jack Chia

Khoo Ee Hoon

Kwan Cheng Fai

Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine

Maha Sasanaramsi Burmese Buddhist Temple

Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi Kebun Limau

National Archives of Singapore

National Library Board

School of Design & Environment, Faculty of  
Architecture, National University of Singapore

Singapore Hokkien Huay Kwan

Singapore Police Force

Tan Tock Seng Hospital

The Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd

Urban Redevelopment Authority

Victor and Doris Yue

Wong Han Min

### >> **PROJECT TEAM**

Stefanie Tham

Ian Lin

### >> **PRIMARY RESEARCHER**

Marcus Ng Fu Chuan

### >> **DESIGNER**

Oneplusone

### >> **PHOTOGRAPHER**

Alex Heng

---

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# SUGGESTED SHORT TRAIL ROUTES

## HISTORICAL LANDMARKS OF BALESTIER

45 mins; on foot (1.7km)

Balestier Road is home to many historical sites, from colonial-style villas to traditional shophouses and temples. This thematic trail introduces you to some landmarks that have shaped Balestier Road from its early days to the recent past.



Start your journey at [Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall](#). This colonial-era villa was once the Southeast Asian headquarters of Dr Sun Yat Sen's Tong Meng Hui (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance). This National Monument now houses galleries showcasing the role of overseas Chinese communities in the 1911 Chinese Revolution. Next, visit [Maha Sasanaramsi Burmese Buddhist Temple](#) located beside the villa at Tai Gin Road. Established at Kinta Road in 1878, the temple relocated here in 1991 and houses the largest marble Buddha statue outside Myanmar.

After viewing the temple, walk through Zhongshan Park and turn left at Balestier Road. At Boon Teck Road, you will see a [water kiosk](#) with two dispensers. This kiosk is provided by [Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sin Sia](#), a Buddhist-

Taoist temple established in 1950. The kiosk offers water and tea at no charge as an act of charity and is probably the last of its kind in Singapore. Feel free to enjoy a refreshing sip of water or tea here and visit the temple, located a short distance from the kiosk.

Return to Balestier Road, where you will find, at the junction of Jalan Kemaman, the [Kwan Yow Luen shophouses](#). Built in 1928 and designed by local architect Kwan Yow Luen, who was well-known for designing traditional shophouses, these richly ornamented shophouses feature detailed plaster stucco figures, including two symbolic Sikh guards, on their facades.

Next, cross the road to [Balestier Market](#), a former rural market built in 1922 to house roadside vendors. It was converted into a food centre in the 1990s and conferred conservation status in 2003. You may wish to grab a bite here before continuing down Balestier Road. When you reach Pegu Road, turn in to find a row of conserved [pre-war terrace houses](#) and a single-storey building that used to house the [former School Dental Clinic](#), which operated from 1963 until the mid-1990s.

Continue your journey down Balestier Road towards the Kim Keat Road junction where you will see two contrasting landmarks. The [Sim Kwong Ho shophouses](#) across the junction were built in 1926 and are outstanding examples of Chinese baroque architecture, with colourful tiles and elaborate plaster stucco work. Facing these shophouses is [Balestier Point](#), which was completed in 1986 and inspired by the work of Canadian architect Moshe Safdie.

Finally, continue down Balestier Road until you reach [Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple](#). Established in 1847 by Hokkien workers of

Joseph Balestier's sugarcane estate, this temple is the area's oldest surviving landmark and the only visible legacy of Balestier's once vast plantation.

## FAITH, FILM AND FOOD

1.5 hours; on foot (2.3km)

The Balestier area is home to many places of worship, traditional food trades as well as landmarks from the Golden Age of Malay Cinema. This thematic trail brings you to religious buildings, a former movie studio as well as "makan places" around the neighbourhood.



Begin your journey at [Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple](#), which was founded in 1847 by Hokkien workers of a nearby sugarcane estate owned by Joseph Balestier, the first American Consul to Singapore. Located beside the temple is one of the last surviving free-standing wayang stages in Singapore.

Next, walk up Balestier Road and cross the road at the Whampoa Drive junction. Along Whampoa Drive, you will pass a row of conserved post-war shophouses. This row is the location of Sing Hon Loong, a traditional bakery which has been making bread for more than half a century. After the shophouses, you will see a single-storey building housing the Handicaps Welfare Association. This building served as [Rayman School](#) from 1953 until 1984. It is the only surviving legacy of the former Rayman Estate, built in the 1940s by

the Singapore Improvement Trust to provide homes for former residents of urban slums.

Cross Whampoa Drive to reach [Whampoa Makan Place](#), which occupies the site of the former Rayman Market, built in 1952 for residents of Rayman Estate. In 1973, it was replaced by Whampoa Market, which later expanded into the present-day Whampoa Makan Place. You may wish to grab some food here before continuing on to Kim Keat Lane, where you will find another traditional bakery, called Sweetlands Confectionery, offering freshly baked loaves.

At Kim Keat Road, turn right to reach [Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi Kebun Limau](#). Opened in 1964 to serve Muslim residents of the Balestier area, this mosque was rebuilt in 1984 and named after a philanthropist who contributed to its reconstruction.

Cross Kim Keat Road and enter Whampoa Park Connector for a pleasant stroll along [Sungei Whampoa](#). Many rattan factories were once located by this river. At Jalan Ampas, you will find [Phang Pheng Mei Temple\\*](#), a former Buddhist vegetarian hall which was once home to female devotees. A short distance from the temple is Shaw Organisation's [former Malay Film Productions studio](#), where movie stars such as P Ramlee and Maria Menado made films during the Golden Age of Malay Cinema in the 1950s-60s.

Return to the Park Connector and continue on towards Jalan Kemaman, where you will find another former vegetarian hall called [Chan Chor Min Tong\\*](#). This hall was founded in 1926 and housed male devotees. The building is not open to public, but you can take the lane right of the compound to view its garden, which is filled with medicinal plants. The lane leads to Boon Teck Road, where you will find [Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sin Sia](#). Established in 1950, this temple provides religious and charitable services, including a water kiosk at the junction of Balestier and Boon Teck roads that offers free water and tea.



Turn left after the kiosk and you will see the **Kwan Yow Luen shophouses**. Built in 1928 by local architect Kwan Yow Luen, these shophouses provided the backdrop to P Ramlee's classic 1955 film *Penarek Becha* ("Trishaw Puller"). You can admire their facade before crossing the road to **Balestier Market**, Singapore's only surviving rural market. Built in 1922 to house roadside vendors, this conserved building is now a popular food centre where you can grab a bite before heading home.



*\*Phang Pheng Mei Temple and Chan Chor Min Tong are not open to public.*

## BUILDING BALESTIER

2 hours; on foot (3km)

Balestier is a showcase of architectural diversity with its temples, shophouses as well as various buildings that used to be part of Tan Tock Seng Hospital. This thematic trail brings you to some of these landmarks, many of which continue to serve the religious, residential and healthcare needs of the community.



Begin your journey at **Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple**, which was established in 1847 by Hokkien workers employed at Joseph Balestier's sugarcane estate nearby. Built in a southern Chinese style, this temple is the area's oldest surviving landmark and the only visible legacy of Balestier's former estate. Across the road from the temple, you can also see two **Art Deco apartment blocks**. Built after the war, these buildings feature eye-catching corner facades with bold vertical fins typical of Art Deco design.

Walk up Balestier Road until the Kim Keat Road junction. On your left stands **Balestier Point**, a mixed-use high-rise completed in 1986 and inspired by the work of Canadian architect Moshe Safdie. Across the road, you will see the **Sim Kwong Ho shophouses**. These conserved shophouses were built in 1926 in an ornate style known as Chinese baroque and feature elaborate plaster stucco work and colourful tiles.

Next, turn into Pegu Road and you will find, on your left, a single-storey building that was once the **former School Dental Clinic**, which operated from 1963 until the mid-1990s. Pegu Road is also the site of a row of elegant **pre-war terrace houses** that were conserved in 2003. A lane next to these houses leads to Martaban Road, which features another row of conserved **pre-war terrace houses**, including one (13 Martaban Road) that used to house orderlies from Tan Tock Seng Hospital.



Continue up Martaban Road towards the Minbu Road junction to reach the old Tan Tock Seng Hospital grounds. On the left, you will see the

rear of the **former Middleton Hospital** (now Communicable Disease Centre), which opened in 1913 to treat patients with infectious diseases. On the right, you will see the **former Mandalay Road Hospital**, which treated Tan Tock Seng Hospital's tuberculosis patients in the 1950s.

At the end of Martaban Road, turn left into Mandalay Road. After the car park on the left, you will find a stately **black and white bungalow** that once housed a Medical Superintendent and is now a private residence. Across the road is the **former nurses' quarters** (now part of the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine), a neoclassical building built in 1924. Next to it is the new Clinical Science Building, which has a terrace concourse from which you can enjoy a panoramic view of the area.



Next, walk back down Mandalay Road and turn into Bassein Road. On your left stands **Chan Chor Min Tong\***, a former Buddhist vegetarian hall founded in 1936 as a cloister-like home for female devotees. You can admire its Cantonese-style architecture before continuing up Bassein Road. Turn right after Jalan Tan Tock Seng and you will find, on your left, a row of **former pavilion wards** (also known as Nightingale wards) that housed patients after Tan Tock Seng Hospital relocated here in 1909. Facing the wards on your right are **black and white houses** that once housed the hospital's senior doctors.

After viewing the pavilion wards, turn right at Minbu Road and head towards the car park on your left. Take the path on the right of the car park to reach **Balestier Market**. Built in 1922 to house

roadside vendors, it was converted into a food centre in the 1990s and conserved in 2003 as Singapore's only surviving rural market building. You may wish to grab some refreshments here before continuing on your journey.

Next, cross Balestier Road and walk towards Jalan Kemaman. Turn into this lane and you will find another former vegetarian hall, also called **Chan Chor Min Tong\***. This differs from the Bassein Road hall as it housed male devotees. Take the lane on the right of the hall to view its garden, which contains many medicinal plants. The lane will bring you to Boon Teck Road and **Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sin Sia**. Established in 1950, this temple provides religious and charitable services, including a **water kiosk** at the junction of Boon Teck and Balestier roads, which offers free water and tea for passers-by.

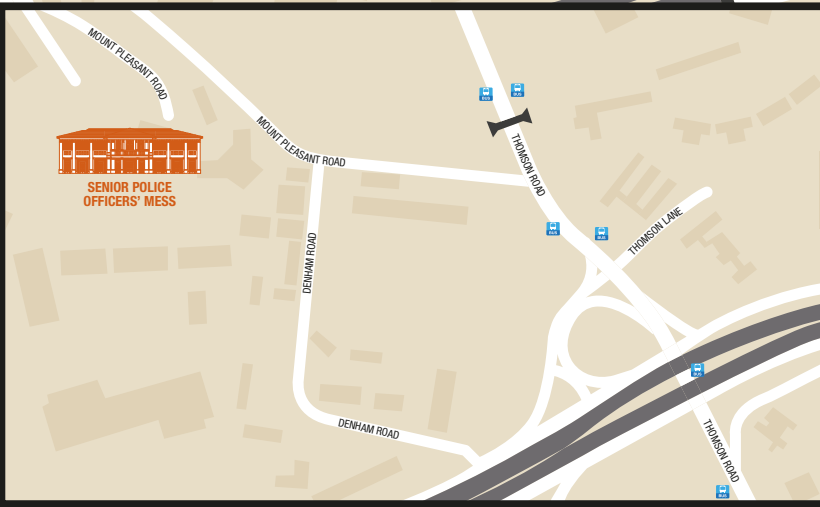
After this, continue up Balestier Road until you reach Zhongshan Park. Walk through the park and you will see the final stop, **Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall**. Built in 1902 as a merchant's home, this villa later became the Southeast Asia headquarters for Dr Sun Yat Sen's Chinese revolutionary movement. You have now completed the longest route in the Balestier Heritage Trail! You can cool down by exploring the galleries here which highlight the 1911 Chinese Revolution from the perspective of the overseas Chinese communities.

**Optional:** You may wish to continue up Balestier Road towards the junction of Thomson Road. Facing Jalan Datoh, you will see a row of **single-storey terraced units** built in the 1940s by Ngee Ann Kongsi. Today, this conserved row is known for its variety of shops, including Loong Fatt Tau Sar Piah, a coffee shop that opened here in 1948. After this, take a bus at Thomson Road to **Church of St Alphonsus (Novena Church)**. This religious landmark is known for its Saturday novenas, which began in 1949 and after which the surrounding area and nearby MRT station were named.

*\*Both Chan Chor Min Tong halls are not open to public.*



Historical Landmarks of Balestier	Faith, Film and Food	Building Balestier	Building Balestier (Extended Trail)



PAN ISLAND EXPRESSWAY

CENTRAL EXPRESSWAY

KALLANG RIVER

SUNGEI WHAMPOA



NOVENA



MAHA SASANARAMSI BURMESE BUDDHIST TEMPLE



SUN YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL



ZHONGSHAN PARK



THONG TECK SIAN TONG LIAN SIN SIA



CHAN CHOR MIN TONG (AT JALAN KEMAMAN)



FORMER MALAY FILM PRODUCTIONS STUDIO



PHANG PENG MEI TEMPLE



MASJID HAJJAH RAHMABI KEBUN LIMA



BOON TECK ROAD WATER KIOSK



BALESTIER MARKET



KWAN YOW LUEN SHOPHOUSES



FORMER PAVILION WARDS

BLACK AND WHITE HOUSES



PRE-WAR TERRACE HOUSES



FORMER SCHOOL DENTAL CLINIC



SIM KWONG HO SHOPHOUSES



WHAMPOA MAKAN PLACE AND FORMER RAYMAN ESTATE



CHAN CHOR MIN TONG (AT BASSEIN ROAD)



FORMER MANDALAY ROAD HOSPITAL



FORMER NURSES' QUARTERS



FORMER MIDDLETON HOSPITAL



BALESTIER POINT



GOH CHOR TUA PEK KONG TEMPLE



ART DECO APARTMENT BLOCKS



FORMER RAYMAN SCHOOL



FORMER MIDDLETON HOSPITAL



NOVENA





Balestier Road, 1982  
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The Balestier 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.

Supported by



*Terrace houses at Pagu Road, 1988*

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