

RISING FROM THE RANKS

From its early days as a military base to its modern incarnation as a hub of high-end hotels and malls, Admiralty has always been at the heart of Hong Kong, writes Christopher DeWolf

H

ong Kong in the 1840s was a rough place. "The European inhabitants are obliged to sleep with loaded pistols," wrote Colonial Treasurer Robert Montgomery Martin, who described gangs of armed robbers that prowled the streets, "ready to sacrifice their plunder if they can obtain a large plunder".

The city's large military garrison was no exception.

Soldiers lived in disease-ridden squalor – nearly a quarter of them were infected with syphilis, while hundreds of others perished from malaria. Barely a year after the British established themselves in Hong Kong, soldiers were deserting their post and trying to sneak away on American whaling ships.

The military's solution was to build a base in the heart of the city. Soldiers would no longer have to sleep in bamboo huts; instead, they would have a bed in imposing stone structures with spacious verandahs, surrounded by lush greenery. These were the beginnings of the district known today as Admiralty. Today, 175 years later, it is an upscale enclave of shopping malls, hotels and public institutions. Traces of its military past are few and far between.

And yet few other places shaped Hong Kong's development as much as Admiralty, which for more than a century was known as the Victoria Cantonment. "I was really surprised by what a contentious piece of land it had been from the very beginning," says Katie Cumber, director of the University of Hong Kong's undergraduate architectural conservation programme.

Cumber began researching the area a few years ago for a book published by the Asia Society Hong Kong Centre, *Heritage Revealed*. "As soon as it was reserved by the military, the colonial government objected and for the subsequent 150 years was trying to get this prime piece of land back."

In the 19th century, Hong Kong was an important strategic outpost for the British military, which is why the government in London gave the military so much land in the middle of the burgeoning city. Just two public



roads crossed the cantonment, Queensway and Kennedy Road. The navy controlled the land near the harbourfront, while the army established itself uphill, building several sprawling barracks, including the Murray Barracks, built in 1844 on the site of today's Bank of China Tower, and the Victoria Barracks, built between the 1840s and 1870s, where Pacific Place, the High Court and Hong Kong Park now stand.

Unlike today's PLA soldiers, British troops were free to go where they liked, and they made their presence felt in the streets of Hong Kong. That kept Robert Eggleston busy. As a sergeant in the Royal Military Police in the early 1970s, he spent most of his time in Wan Chai's red light district, keeping an eye on wayward personnel. He recalls Victoria Barracks as a haven of tranquility, with a military-run Naafi department store and a swimming pool where families cooled off on muggy summer days. "I will always remember the delicious chow fan served up by the poolside," he says. "To this day I have not tasted anything better."

One of the most fascinating portions of the site was the explosives magazine compound located in a gully beneath Kennedy Road, cut off from the rest of the site by a nullah. Housing munitions in such a secluded area was a necessary precaution. In 1865, a schooner was sent to retrieve gunpowder from a ship anchored 3km offshore in Victoria Harbour. The powder ignited and caused an explosion so powerful it killed 39 people and shattered windows throughout the city.

The compound's remote

I do think it is a bit of a shame that more of the structures were not revitalised, but instead so many were simply demolished to be replaced by skyscrapers

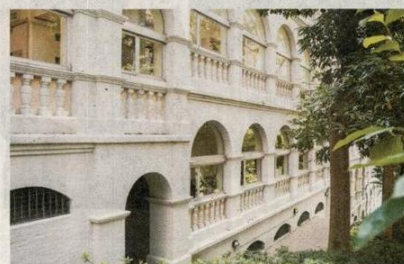
KATIE CUMMER, DIRECTOR OF HKU'S UNDERGRADUATE ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

location made reaching it difficult and dangerous. Every night, an orderly officer was taken to the compound to inspect the guards, and the coolies tasked with carrying his sedan chair would sometimes slip and fall into the nullah. In 1901, an aerial ropeway was built to haul goods from the waterfront to the magazines. Amazingly, despite barrels full of explosives dangling precariously from a rope, the site never suffered from any accidental explosions.

Aerial warfare made the explosives magazine obsolete and it was eventually replaced by modern facilities elsewhere in the city. After the second world war, it fell into disrepair. Some soldiers remember having parties in the empty, bunker-like magazines. Danny Thapa, a Gurkha radio technician who was stationed at Victoria Barracks in the 1970s, remembers how wild it seemed when he first arrived. "It felt like Indiana Jones, like a jungle," he says. "It was in a real dilapidated condition."

The writing was on the wall for the rest of the cantonment, too. The colonial government had long coveted the prime land occupied by the military and, in the 1970s, it finally got its chance to take it. Victoria Barracks was a shadow of its former self – in 1976, it was home to three Gurkha and one British battalion – and, in 1979, it was formally ceded to the government. Plans were drawn up for a new park and home for the Supreme Court, but it was the billions of dollars worth of development opportunities that had government officials salivating.

Even so, it seems the government was willing to



From top: Victoria Barracks in 1870; the Cassels Block, which once housed married British officers, in 1988 and today.

sacrifice some of its revenue for political considerations. In 1982, the site of the Murray Barracks was sold to the Bank of China for HK\$1 billion, an exchange that was roundly criticised as a sweetheart deal for a Chinese state-owned company looking to flex its political muscles before the handover. Just a few months later, a property slump made it difficult to sell off the old Victoria

Barracks. The land was finally purchased by Swire Properties in 1985 for nearly HK\$8 billion.

The government took pains to ensure that much of the cantonment's greenery was preserved. Swire's land lease for Pacific Place required the developer to preserve a centuries-old banyan tree. Contractors insured it for HK\$20 million and built an enormous planter

around its roots, leading some to dub it "the most expensive tree in the world". More swaths of greenery were incorporated into Hong Kong Park.

Built heritage was another matter. Even before the park opened, many noted how little was left of what had stood there before. "The builders seem to have gone out of their way to snuff out any signs of the site's former use," read an item in the April 3, 1991 edition of the *Post*. Cumber says many of the conservation initiatives suggested by a planning committee in the 1970s were ignored. "I do think it is a bit of a shame that more of the structures were not revitalised, but instead so many were simply demolished to be replaced by skyscrapers," she says.

University of Hong Kong historian Stephen Davies laments the way the old cantonment's roads were renamed or removed outright. He is especially dismayed that the air raid tunnels beneath the site were sealed off. And he points out that parts of the area's history are still being destroyed, including a piece of the old Wellington Battery that was recently destroyed during work on the MTR. He calls it "the only remaining bit of one of Hong Kong's oldest fortifications".

There are a few exceptions to this historical disregard. Flagstaff House, built in 1846, was converted into the Museum of Tea Ware. Nearby, the former explosives magazine compound was preserved and renovated in the 2000s by the Asia Society Hong Kong, which turned it into a new cultural centre. The renovation work revealed some surprises, including four centuries-old guns, one of which had been captured from pirates by the British navy.

There is new history being made in Admiralty, too. Pacific Place underwent a HK\$1.5 billion renovation in 2011, with a naturalistic new design by Thomas Heatherwick, but many lament the old days when the mall was somewhat less upscale. "There was no better mall on the Island. It was a game changer," says Louise Wong, who worked at RTHK's Admiralty office in the 1990s. Former Diocesan Girls' School student Andrea Tam remembers going to American-style steakhouse Dan Ryan's with her friends after class. "That was the fancy spot when good baked potato skins were still hard to find," she says. "Back then it was all quite affordable. I miss the old Pacific Place."

It's all relative, though. Artist Anthony Leung Po-shan, who grew up in a Kowloon public housing estate, says Pacific Place and the rest of Admiralty have always felt alien to her. "The special zone or cluster of the very high class and foreign places like the British Council, the Asia Society and the five-star hotels are all for the high-end tourists," she says. "Even as an art critic, I find the Asia Society very exclusive."

Leung's sentiment makes sense. In the mid-19th century, when Hong Kong was an unruly port rife with disease and violence, Admiralty was conceived as a place apart from the city around it. And in many ways, it still is. life@scmp.com



Flagstaff House and garden today (left) and in 1978 (right). Built in 1846, it was home to the commander of British forces in Hong Kong. Now the Museum of Tea Ware, it is one of only a handful of colonial-era structures to have been preserved.



Queensway looking west towards Central, with the Bank of China Tower in the distance (left), built on the former site of the Murray Barracks (right). Photos: Christopher DeWolf, courtesy of Asia Society Hong Kong Centre

