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## Glimpse into our rich railway past

By [Alan Teh Leam Seng](#) - June 12, 2021 @ 9:59am



Aftermath of the first major derailment in our country caused by a collision with an elephant along the new 30km Tapah Road to Teluk Anson (today Teluk Intan) line in 1894.  
PIX BY ALAN TEH LEAM SENG

THE recent collision involving two trains on the Kelana Jaya Light Rail Transit (LRT) line was a wake-up call for many who had taken the consistently smooth and efficient service for granted.

This unfortunate mishap, the first in the full -automated metro line's 23-year history, saw 47 people sustaining serious injuries, while 166 others escaped with minor impairment.

The Kelana Jaya LRT line was inaugurated on Sept 1, 1998, when the first train rolled out from the Subang Depot.

Serving one of the busiest parts of our nation's capital, demand grew exponentially and, in less than a year, the second section of the 37-station route – between the Pasar Seni and Terminal Putra LRT stations – came into service. In the days prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, this rail network proved indispensable to nearly 300,000 commuters on an average working day.



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While joining all Malaysians in wishing the victims speedy recovery, the incident also piqued my interest to unearth past mishaps recorded in our nation's illustrious railway history.

Unlike today's modern interstate railway service, which provides for a comfortable and seamless commute from Perlis in the north all the way south to Johor, early transport by rail was just the opposite.



A train coach being hoisted by a crane after it was derailed due to sabotage by bandits.

### DAWN OF THE LOCOMOTIVE ERA

During those formative days, trains were brought to Malaya out of economic necessity. Successes in the lucrative Perak tin mines resulted in the construction of our nation's first railway track, where the inaugural use of the steam locomotive engine was operated by the Perak Government Railway in 1885.

Following close on the heels of this maiden rollout, similar operations in Muar (Johor), Klang (Selangor), Sungai Ujong (Negri Sembilan), Bukit Mertajam (Penang) and Singapore followed suit in the 1890s.

As the rail network opened up new frontiers throughout the country, the inevitable clash with nature soon became apparent.

On Sept 17, 1894, the newly opened 30km Tapah Road to Teluk Anson

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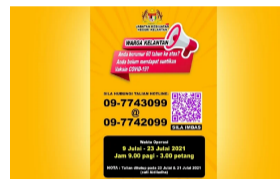


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(today Teluk Intan) branch line made unenviable history when it witnessed Malaya's first major train derailment.

On that fateful evening, the three-carriage steam locomotive had set off for Teluk Anson, filled mostly with passengers who were involved in the booming Perak tin mining industry.

As the train was approaching its destination, a large bull elephant suddenly appeared in the middle of the tracks.

The engine driver panicked as his efforts to give fair warning through loud whistle shrills and bright flashing lights proved futile. The giant pachyderm stubbornly stood its ground and refused to budge even an inch even as the locomotive raced towards it at top speed.

Unable to stop in time, metal soon met flesh and the elephant was killed on the spot.

Although the engine and its carriages were thrown off the tracks, fortunately there were no casualties among the passengers who were forced to traverse the remaining 5.5km to their destination on foot. Damage to the tracks was so extensive that remedial work rendered the line unusable for the next five days.

News of the derailment spread like wildfire and that eventually sent the local rumour mill into overdrive. Many were puzzled at the elephant's adamant character as pachyderms were usually very sensitive to loud sounds and bright lights, preferring to move away rather than seek confrontation.

This strange phenomenon led certain quarters to speculate that the suicidal mission was meant to avenge the death of a calf belonging to the herd, which was mowed down by the same train by accident at the same spot some time back. Another popularised tale told of how the elephant leader had selflessly stared death in the face to protect the others who were following close behind.



The North Borneo Railway in the late 19th century.

## BATTLE BETWEEN BEAST AND MACHINE

Soon after, ample warning was quickly issued for drivers to exercise caution in places where elephant encounters were most prevalent. These words of caution proved timely as just two years later, another tusker appeared at nearly the same spot where the first mishap occurred.

This time, however, the Teluk Anson-bound train driver had learnt his

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This time, however, the Teluk Anson bound train driver had learnt his lesson and skillfully brought the train to a halt with metres to spare from the elephant.

Instead of moving away, the huge male turned inquisitive. It ambled up to the engine and seemingly imagined that the funnel was the trunk of another competing bull. The inexperienced creature was in for a rude shock when it curled its trunk around the hot protruding metal. Trumpeting thunderously in rage and pain, it charged at the engine and tried to overturn it by using his huge tusks as effective levers.

The infuriated elephant would have succeeded in its endeavour had the security personnel guarding the adjacent mail carriage not appeared in the nick of time with his rifle to put an end to the unfortunate episode.

Thought of trains playing this unique communication role by acting as a conduit between post offices prompts me to pause and reach out for a nearby folder containing my postal history collection. While flipping through the pages filled with letters sent long ago, it is easy to pinpoint those that were once transported by rail as each had the words "TRAIN LETTER" stamped clearly on them.



Mail carried on trains were marked with a boxed 'TRAIN LETTER' like this one sent from Penang, and carried by rail to Alor Star for onward transmission by flight to Europe.



By the mid-20th century, the extensive rail network has reached most corners of Malaya, including various harbours like this one in Port Dickson.

## BANDIT ATTACKS

Soon after World War 2 ended, the battle-hardened Malayan communist insurgents set their sights on the country's crucial railway communication system.

Keen to create as much chaos as possible, bandit gangs came up with

elaborate plans to attack mail trains and destroy large swaths of telephone wires that typically parallel railway lines, and relayed vital messages and telegraphs between police posts, railway stations and nearby post offices.

Just a year before the Malayan Emergency was declared on June 16, 1948, saboteurs sawed off metal bolts and removed a section of rails along the line connecting Layang-layang and Sedenak towns in Johor.

It resulted in the derailment of the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore night mail train that very evening, where five were killed and 30 others seriously injured.

Eyewitness reports told of heart-rending scenes enacted in the pitch darkness as survivors groped blindly in the Stygian gloom for their friends and family members.

Rescuers, some still in their pyjamas, lit bonfires along both sides of the wreckage before attempting to free those trapped or buried under the debris.

It brought a tear to many eyes that evening after victim Tang Fook Hoi passed away in the arms of his weeping two-day-old bride.

The incident attracted nationwide grief and prompted the Malayan Union Governor Sir Edward Gent to despatch a telegram expressing regret and sincere condolence to the relatives of those who perished and were injured.



Unable to continue their journey, train wreck passengers were forced to proceed to their destination on foot.

## MISHAP AVERTED

Attacks on railway lines intensified soon after the Emergency was declared, with many parts of the country receiving the brunt of communist attacks.

Among the earliest incidents happened on the evening of Oct 31, 1948, when terrorists blew up a bridge within the vicinity of Rengam and Kulai towns. Fortunately, their target, a goods train, managed to stop at the 11th hour and escaped damage.

The loud explosion alerted nearby police mobile squads and their prompt arrival forced the bandits to beat a hasty retreat.

Among the relieved 250 passengers on board the mail train were the Perak Malay football team and officials, who were on their way to participate in the Sultan's Gold Cup semi-final tournament against their counterparts across the Causeway.

It took workmen some 14 hours to rectify the damage done to the bridge

It took workers some 14 hours to rectify the damage done to the bridge and replace numerous cracked rail sleepers under the watchful eye of police and military escorts, before the train could resume its journey to Singapore.

Things would have taken a turn for the worse that same evening had a bomb, intended for the Kuala Lumpur night mail train, gone off as planned on the railway line between Kluang and Nyor towns.

The next morning, a farmer had a shock of his life after discovering the wires and explosives on the tracks. He alerted the bomb disposal unit, which handed over the bomb to the police special branch for further investigations.

### ARSON ATTACKS

Apart from train ambushes and rail track vandalism, the communist terrorists also resorted to arson as a means to disable the railway communication system.

On Aug 2, 1950, the Postmaster-General in Kuala Lumpur announced that mail, comprising of 75 bags of letters and 57 parcels, despatched from Singapore in the night mail train were completely destroyed by fire.



A Malayan Railway ticket used in the 1950s for travel between Alor Star and Bukit Mertajam.

The two rear coaches, which were set ablaze, were brand new and had just left the workshop the day before. The contents, which also included flammable materials like newspapers and movie reels, caught fire quickly and the heat intensity rendered the firefighters helpless.

By the early 1950s, support for the communist terrorists, especially those from poor, uneducated squatters living in jungle fringes, began to wane.

The long suffering people were terrified of the various atrocities committed by the bandits. The Malayan government took full advantage of this change in public sentiment.

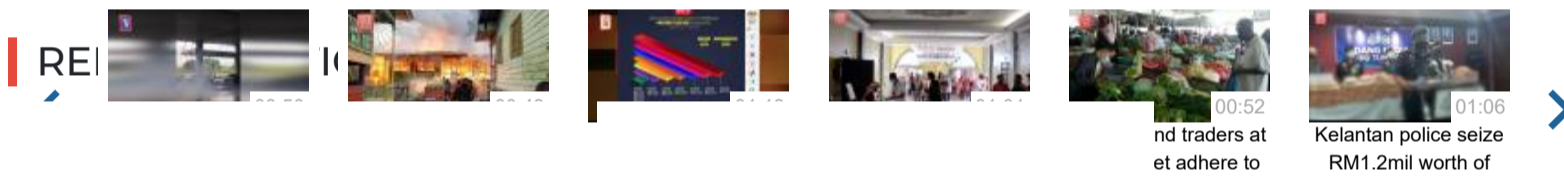
Coupled with resettlement efforts, Merdeka in 1957 and the subsequent mass citizenship award for those qualified, the tide quickly turned against the communists and the Malayan Emergency came to an end in July 1960.

Although our nation's railway has witnessed other unfortunate incidences since those tumultuous early formative days but, thanks to true human determination and the unwavering will to strive for nothing but the best, our rail transportation system has not only managed to overcome all obstacles encountered, but has also successfully taken things in its stride and emerged stronger each time.

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