

How KL's streets got their names

By [Alan Teh Leam Seng](#) - October 21, 2019 @ 12:35pm

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The Market Square in Kuala Lumpur during the British colonial era. The road passing through the area is now called Lebuhraya Pasar Besar.

DRIVING at leisure along the streets of Kuala Lumpur just before the break of dawn on a weekend and slowly bearing witness to the capital coming alive as the first few rays of the sun start to pierce through the ebbing darkness present the perfect opportunity to picture what this metropolis was probably like during its formative years when it was no more than just a name in a crowded field of mining towns in Selangor.

More than a century ago these streets were illuminated by coconut oil lamps.

The primary means of transportation then were jinrickshaws, bullock carts and elephants, which travelled on dusty tracks that turned into rivers of mud whenever it rained.

The names given to those few pioneer roads were largely evocative of the way life that was prevalent those days when motorised vehicles were as much a distant dream as flying cars are to people who call the city home now.

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Today, the scores of bullock carts that used to line the entire length of Cattle Shed Road (now Jalan Padang Belia) have all but disappeared into the annals of history save for the cattle-themed murals on the walls of a hostel whose name brings to mind memories of those useful

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multipurpose wagons or yore.

At the same time, early street names also drew inspiration from landmarks that dotted the growing settlement. Market Road (now Lebuhraya Pasar Besar) derived its name from a shed that served as a place for locals to purchase fresh produce and other daily necessities during the second half of the 19th century.

That period marked the construction of Petaling Street which, until now, is still referred to by its Chinese name, Chee Cheong Kai, which means Tapioca Factory Street. The roadside stalls that sell goods today have taken over the site where a tapioca mill belonging to Kapitan Yap Ah Loy once stood.

Built in 1870, the factory was a hive of activity, receiving a constant supply of tubers from the Chinese community leader's farms in the surrounding areas and grinding them into flour.

In 1881, Kuala Lumpur was beset by a double calamity of a huge fire and massive flood that decimated the town's wooden and thatched structures. The demand for bricks and tiles rose almost overnight when British resident Frank Swettenham required future buildings to use sturdier construction materials that were less susceptible to the elements.

Seizing the opportunity, brick manufacturers began setting up shop at a road located south of the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station, which soon became known as Brickfields. The materials they produced were mostly taken to Jalan Raja for the construction of new government offices.



The embankment area beside Sungai Ampang in 1970.

The road which today houses structures that feature the best of Kuala Lumpur's colonial era architecture like the Sultan Abdul Samad Building was named after the prestigious Raja School, which was built in 1890 for children from the royal household, as well as high-ranking palace officials and nobles.

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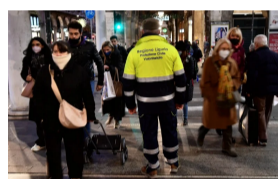
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A network of public roads began taking shape in the two decades leading to the dawn of the new century. These included Venning Road (now Jalan Perdana), which led to the Lake Gardens, and Java Street (now Jalan Tun Perak) that pointed the direction to a Boyanese village. Klyne Street (now Jalan Hang Lekiu), laid out in 1884, was named after one of the Klyne brothers, who were Melaka-born Eurasians of Dutch descent.

John F. Klyne, a Straits Settlements surveyor by profession, was involved in the proper planning of early central Kuala Lumpur, as well as the construction of Damansara Road. A leading member of Kuala Lumpur's Eurasian Roman Catholic community, he is remembered as one of the Selangor Museum founders and owner of a 24.4ha coconut estate that comprised the land between Jalan Yap Kwan Seng, Jalan Ampang and Circular Road (now Jalan Tun Razak).

The vagueness in historical records lead historians to speculate that the road, which used to be dotted with gambling farms, was named to either commemorate John Klyne's public contributions or after his brother, F.C. Klyne, who was an apothecary and chemist that operated a pharmacy at High Street (now Jalan Tun H.S. Lee) and Klyne Street.

In 1901, work on Campbell Road (now Jalan Dang Wangi) began. It linked Batu Road (now Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman) with Jalan Ampang and provided access to the Kampung Baru Malay Agricultural Settlement that was opened under the direction of Douglas Graham Campbell.

The noticeably heavier mid-morning traffic flow along Jalan Yap Kwan Seng towards Stadium Negara brings to mind the fact that the number of roads increased and their quality improved in tandem with the introduction of cars in Kuala Lumpur, the first of which arrived some time in 1902.

The number of motorised vehicles continued to rise at a steady rate when the economic blow from the coffee industry's failure a few years later was softened by the boom in rubber prices.

By then, the world was clamouring for pneumatic rubber tyres as motor vehicles were fast replacing horse-drawn carriages as a more reliable and faster mode of transportation.

By 1906, British capitalists were seizing the opportunity to make fortunes by investing in Malayan rubber plantations. The London-based Kuala Lumpur Rubber Company was incorporated on May 19, 1906, and began planting rubber trees around Kuala Lumpur.

Among its first board members were Edouard Bunge and Alfred Grisar. The estate they owned was Bungsar Estate. The nomenclature was derived from a contraction of their joint names and was adopted by Bungsar Road (now Jalan Bangsar) when it was built in 1912.

The first decade after the introduction of cars was a period of adjustment for many who were eager to get behind the wheel. The lack of experience on the part of early drivers made roads dangerous to themselves and other users. Mishaps were so common that Wong Loke Yew, who was then the richest Chinese tycoon in Kuala Lumpur, decided not to take any chances and hired a professional driver from England to take him and his family around town.

Wong's tale of rags to riches is well known. Starting off as a penniless shop assistant, he saved every possible cent and made sound investments that compounded his fortunes many times over.



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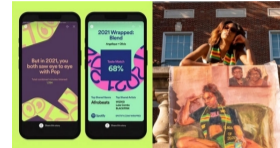
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The immense wealth brought him fame and high social standing.

As result of his close friendship with the British and other Europeans in Kuala Lumpur, Wong enjoyed the extremely rare distinction of having a road named after him in his lifetime.

Even those who enjoyed the favour of the British, thanks to their close connection to Wong, were bestowed with streets bearing their names. Choo Kia Peng, after whom a road was named in 1923, worked for the tycoon and was an enthusiastic member of the Selangor Club. Thamboosamy Pillai was his business partner, while Loke Chow Thye and Lee Kong Lam served as mining manager and secretary, respectively.

Eventually, the street honour situation got out of hand and it became a common perception that such an honour could be easily acquired if the right connections were made. Things came to a head in 1923 when David Freeman moved an amendment to make it “undesirable” to name roads after people who were still in public life during a meeting that was held to bestow the honour to Khoo Keng Hooi, a Sanitary Board member and committee member of the Chinese Maternity Hospital. During that same year, a sub-committee was formed to look into the naming and renaming of roads.

The Japanese Occupation brought great hardship to the people of Kuala Lumpur and understandably no Japanese street names survived after World War 2 ended. The period of rebuilding, quest for independence and the communist terrorist threat gave existing street names a reprieve, albeit a brief one, from potential changes.

Between 1959 and 1963, although there are official announcements made to rename English street names in the national language, not much changes had actually happened. Neither then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj nor members of the first Malayan cabinet were keen on making those symbolic changes, especially when the existing names were, in their opinion, intimately linked to the early history of Kuala Lumpur.



Vehicles plying Batu Road in the early 1950s. Today, it is called Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman.

Tunku did, however, make an exception. In 1963, he fulfilled his promise to honour the memory of Dato Sir Onn Jaafar. It resulted in Brockman Road giving way to Jalan Dato Onn.

After 1969, renaming efforts were revived to reflect upon Kuala Lumpur's new spirit and aspirations. In 1971, the then sultan of Selangor announced that foreign names of roads and places would be changed to those of local personalities who had rendered invaluable services to the country. The royal sentiment was echoed three years later by the then prime minister Tun Abdul Razak.

As a result, the names of roads bearing early European pioneers were gradually phased out. Lornie Road became Jalan Syed Putra and Treacher Road gave way to Jalan Sultan Ismail. The five legendary heroes of Melaka took pride of place in the form of Jalan Hang Tuah, Jalan Hang Lekir, Jalan Hang Lekiu, Jalan Hang Kasturi and Jalan Hang Jebat.

Despite the changes, the general pre-war practice to avoid naming roads after living persons was still observed with a measure of strictness. In 1962, Victory Avenue, which was formerly part of Jalan Damansara, was renamed Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin following the Selangor sultan's death on Sept 1, 1960.

In 1982, Jalan Parry was posthumously renamed in the memory of P. Ramlee, who is considered by many as Malaysia's greatest singer, producer, director and silver screen idol.

Four years later, Jalan Brickfields gave way to a road named after former minister Tun V.T. Sambanthan.

In November 1988, Jalan Bandar became Jalan Tun H.S. Lee. The change was described by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was then serving his first term as prime minister, as an appropriate gesture in memory of a man who was a versatile national leader and well respected by society.

In the same year, Jalan Henry Gurney was renamed Jalan Semarak when the road became the venue where Dr Mahathir launched the final phase of his Semarak or "Meet The People" campaign in Kuala Lumpur. Today, the road is known as Jalan Sultan Yahya Petra.

In modern history, the only exceptions to the practice of posthumous tribute were reserved for leaders who had made truly outstanding contributions to nation building.

Tunku Abdul Rahman was given the rare honour following his retirement in the early 1970s. Similarly, Jalan Clifford, which had been changed to Jalan Tamingsari, was renamed Jalan Sultan Salahuddin on the occasion of the Selangor sultan's silver jubilee celebrations in 1985.

Sight of a popular nasi briyani restaurant and the yearning for a well-earned brunch call time on a most exhilarating morning spent exploring Kuala Lumpur roads and finding out the stories behind their names.

Amid the regeneration and redevelopment done in the relentless pursuit of progress, unavoidable changes to street names will continue to happen in Kuala Lumpur.

Whether the street names are old or new, the fact remains that the names of the main thoroughfares and those of the lesser known side streets will forever remain an integral part of the growing city's inviolable urban heritage.

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