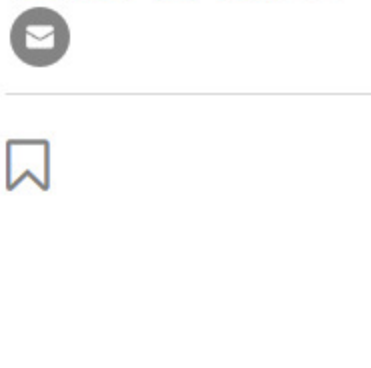


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The charm and nostalgia of Banda Hilir

COMMUNITY
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By M.Veera Pandiyan



The Chapel of Assumption, built in the late 1800s, used to be at the edge of the sea before the land in Melaka Raya was reclaimed.

IT IS one of the most significant monuments of the country's independence from colonial Britain but sadly, not many people notice it.

The little triangular structure called the Merdeka Obelisk stands forlornly in the shadow of yet another crass commercial development that Malacca is fast gaining notoriety for.

The obelisk marks the spot where H. G. Hammet, the last British resident commissioner of Malacca, handed over the instrument of independence to the state's first local governor, Leong Yew Koh (later Tun) on Aug 31, 1957.

Then Chief Minister of Malacca Datuk Kurnia Jasa Osman Talib read the Proclamation of Independence after which the flags of the Federation of Malaya and state were raised.

The memorial with the letter "M" (for Merdeka) in the centre of a 11-pointed star, also indicates where Tunku Abdul Rahman first announced the date of Independence on Feb 20, 1956, after returning from his successful talks in London.



The Merdeka Obelisk marks the spot where the last British Resident Commissioner of Malacca, handed over the instrument of independence to the state's first local Governor on Aug 31, 1957.

A crowd of 50,000 welcomed his entourage at Padang Pahlawan (Warrior's Field) in Banda Hilir, the only place in town then where such a large scale gathering could be held.

The Tunku chose to announce the date of Merdeka in Malacca because it was where most of the funds raised for his delegation's trip to England came from.

But before he got there, the Malacca Alliance (the forerunner of Barisan Nasional comprising just Umno, MCA and MIC) and the coalition's headquarters were embroiled in a squabble over when it should be held.

The time was brought forward from the scheduled 2.30pm to 11am with many planned items on the agenda scrapped, much to the ire of Malacca Alliance secretary Hasnul Hadi.

Coalition secretary-general Senu Abdul Rahman (later Tan Sri) wanted to accommodate the wishes of about 10,000 people who had gone to Malacca a day earlier in cars and chartered buses.

But the earlier time turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It rained heavily from about 1pm to 4pm, causing Padang Pahlawan to be washed out.

The "padang", as my friends and I who were kids in the 1960s called it, was more than just the town's football and rugby field. It nurtured many of Malacca's sporting talents.

At the edge of it was the esplanade facing the sea where families would gather in the evenings to enjoy the breeze.



The Banda Hilir Mosque was built by Datuk Shahbudin Haji Mohd Amin, an immigrant from Cirebon, Java, in 1820.

Among the regular snack vendors was an elderly man in a "Pagoda" T-shirt and starched short khaki pants with a biscuit tin slung across his shoulders. The peanuts he sold were the tastiest.

During low tide, one could see mudskippers flipping about and sometimes even sea snakes and crabs.

Anglers hoping to catch sialap (sea perch) would walk along the esplanade with live bait hooked on a line tied to a long bamboo pole.

At the other end of the field were stalls selling mee goreng, rojak, satay, along with iced ball, ais kacang, cendol and other local desserts.

But the place for serious eating was at the other end of the esplanade aptly named "Glutton's Corner" by locals.

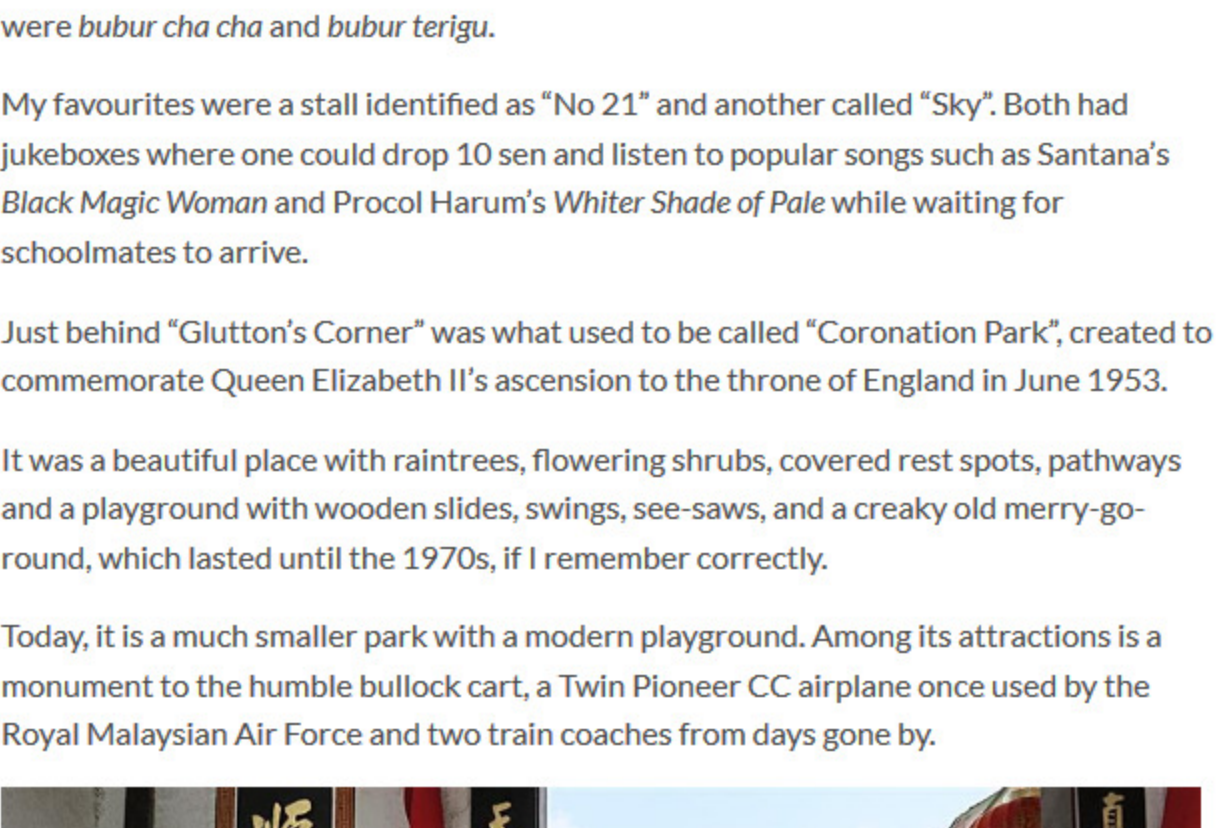
There used to be 47 stalls selling a variety of delicacies from oyster omelettes and chicken wings to nasi lemak and chicken rice. Among the popular desserts sold there were bubur cha cha and bubur terigu.

My favourites were a stall identified as "No 21" and another called "Sky". Both had jukeboxes where one could drop 10 sen and listen to popular songs such as Santana's Black Magic Woman and Procol Harum's Whiter Shade of Pale while waiting for schoolmates to arrive.

Just behind "Glutton's Corner" was what used to be called "Coronation Park", created to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II's ascension to the throne of England in June 1953.

It was a beautiful place with raintrees, flowering shrubs, covered rest spots, pathways and a playground with wooden slides, swings, see-saws, and a creaky old merry-go-round, which lasted until the 1970s, if I remember correctly.

Today, it is a much smaller park with a modern playground. Among its attractions is a monument to the famous bullock cart, a Twin Pioneer CC airplane once used by the Royal Malaysian Air Force and two train coaches from the days of the railway.



The Yong Chuan Tian is famous because of the rare Wangkang Festival.

Thankfully, many of the magnificent raintrees remain, along with old cannons and the City Cross, which marks the spot where St Francis Xavier first set foot in Malacca. The original wooden cross was replaced by an iron one in 1954.

According to local legend, when the area was covered by sea, the rock always stood out, even during high tide.

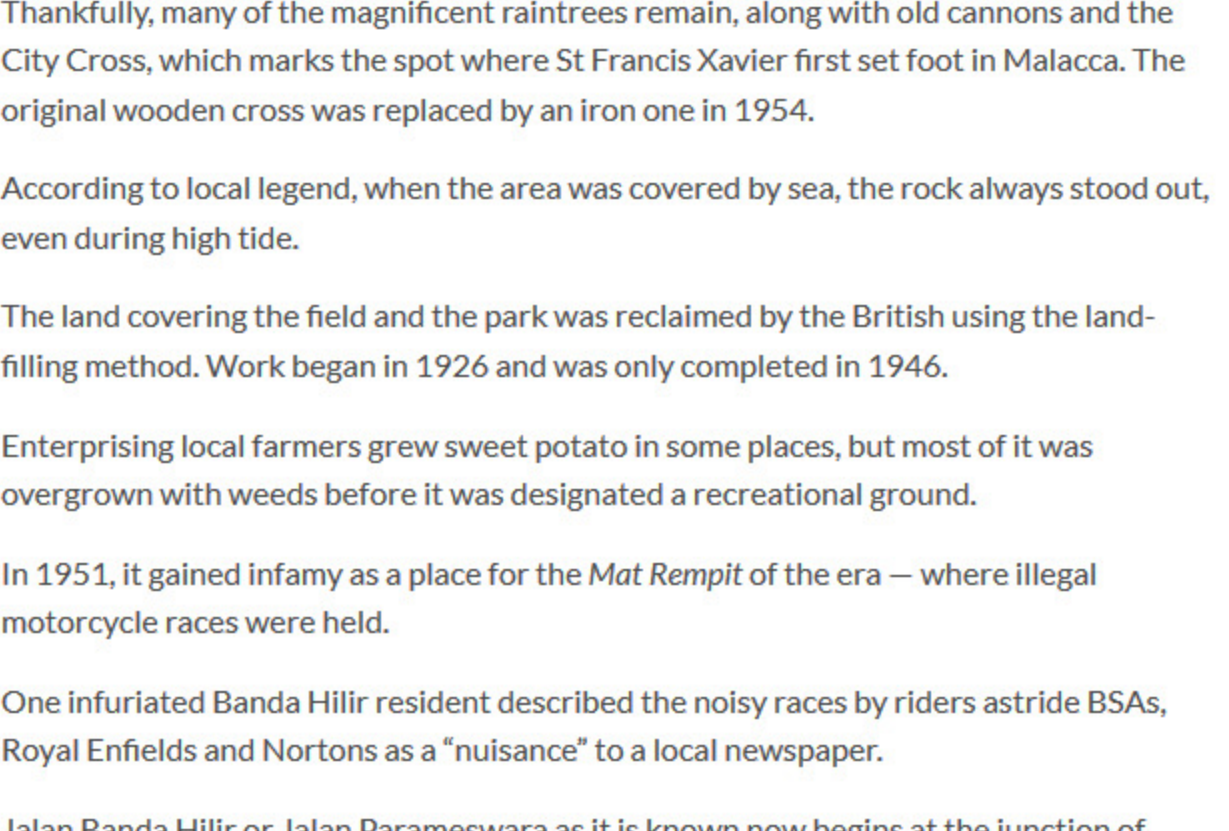
The land covering the field and the park was reclaimed by the British using the land-filling method. Work began in 1926 and was only completed in 1946.

Enterprising local farmers grew sweet potato in some places, but most of it was overgrown with weeds before it was designated a recreational ground.

In 1951, it gained infamy as a place for the Mat Rempit of the era — where illegal motorcycle races were held.

One infuriated Banda Hilir resident described the noisy races by riders astride BSAs, Royal Enfields and Nortons as a "nuisance" to a local newspaper.

Jalan Banda Hilir or Jalan Parameswara as it is known now begins at the junction of Jalan Kota and the field, now taken over by Dataran Pahlawan.



The City Cross, which marks the spot where St Francis Xavier first set foot on Malacca.

At the edge of it stands the Santiago gate of the A Famosa, Malacca's most famous landmark and the first notable building in the Proclamation of Independence Memorial.

The former premises of the Malacca Club, built in 1911, houses an exhibition that traces the history of the nation's road to independence.

The road is lined with the history of education too. Most of Malacca's early schools are still located along its stretch — Sacred Heart Convent (SK Sacred Heart), my old alma mater, the Banda Hilir English school (SK Banda Hilir), St Francis Institution (SM St Francis), CHU (SM Holy Infant Jesus) and (SK Convent Infant Jesus).

Three famous religious places, a Chinese temple, a chapel and a mosque, are also in Banda Hilir.

The Yong Chuan Tian (Court of Perfect Bravery), a temple honouring the deity Tee Ong Yah, at the junction of Praya Lane, is where devotees throng to seek cures for ailments. Grand celebrations are held during festival days including the birthday anniversary of the deity.

The temple is also famous because of the rare Wangkang Festival, which is held only when a medium at the temple gets the command from the gods to do so.

The Wangkang Festival involves the "capturing of evil spirits" and confining them in a specially built wooden barge that is burnt on the fifteenth day of the Chinese New Year.

The festival was first held in another temple in Kangand in 1854, and until 1880, took place between every five and eight years until 1691 when a cholera outbreak killed many. After that, it was held once every 14 years until 1933.

It was largely forgotten until 2001 when the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic stoked worldwide fears. The latest Wangkang Festival, held last year, attracted tens of thousands of tourists to Malacca.

Taking the road into Praya Lane where the popular Saturday Ice Cafe is at the entrance, would lead one to the Chapel of Assumption.

The chapel, built in the late 1800s, used to be at the edge of the sea before the land in Melaka Raya was reclaimed.

During the Feast of Assumption in August, local Catholics bring stalks of sugar cane, those are blessed, cut and distributed along with bunga rampai (scented dried flowers) to those in attendance.

The tradition could be traced to the 154-year Dutch occupation of Malacca when Catholics were persecuted for their religious beliefs.

According to locals, there was a large sugar cane plantation in Banda Hilir and Praya Lane during the old days, and the cane was used as an offering as well for decoration.

At the middle stretch of Jalan Parameswara is the Banda Hilir Mosque, now known as Masjid An-Nur. It was built by Datuk Shahbudin Haji Mohd Amin, an immigrant from Cirebon, Java, in 1820, from what was originally a family home.

The mosque was renovated recently with some of its old features changed. It is one of the most popular mosques in Malacca for Friday prayers and is also a tourist attraction.

The grave of the founder is in the Muslim burial ground of my old kampung off Jalan Panjang (now Jalan Laksamana Cheng Ho) about 3km away.

At the end of Banda Hilir where the road turns into Jalan Melaka Raya and Jalan Bukit Senjuang is one of Malacca's once dreaded places although it looks nice and welcoming these days.

The H.M. (His Majesty's) Jail, built in 1960, has seen thousands of inmates pass through its iron gates. It was also a place where condemned prisoners were hanged, the last being two Japanese officers found guilty of a massacre of civilians on Pulau Besar during World War II.

It later evolved into a detention centre for juvenile delinquents and is now a yet-to-be officially opened Prisons Department museum.

Outside, there is a souvenir centre selling items made by inmates and a relic from Kuala Lumpur's infamous Pudu Jail — a fountain made out of a metal water container from which prisoners took their baths.

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