



1869—1874 The Johore Wooden Railway: A revised history

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History of the Malaysian railways: Chapter 2 of 6

by Mahen Bala

On 24 July, 1869 *The Daily Times*¹ reported that the Maharaja Abu Bakar of Johore “inaugurated the Johore Railway by turning the first sod of the line at New Johore in the presence of a small gathering of Europeans and Natives. The first section will be an experimental one of 18 miles in the direction of Gunung Pulai.” By 1873², the tracks made out of Johore teak were “laid for about 6 miles.”

On 4 April 1874, a correspondent for the *Straits Times Overland Journal*³ writes of his ride on the railway, as his trolley was “propelled by two coolies who stood on the platform, and by turning a wheel trundled us forward at the rate of 6 miles an hour. By then the first 10 miles of road had been completed, out of the 20 needed to reach the foothill of Gunung Pulai. Construction cost was \$2000 per mile, with sleepers and rail cut from the jungle as they pass. The construction was in the hands of James Meldrum, who had by then been in Johore for fourteen years and ran the Johore Steam Saw Mill.”

Existing papers mention of there being no further updates after 1874, until 1879 when *Singapore Daily Times* published Thomas Heslop Hill’s⁴ “Report on Johore”⁵ where it was mentioned that the tracks were no longer in use and in its place was a dirt road leading up to Gunung Pulai. The most famously quoted finale to the railways would appear in a travel journal by Florence Caddy in 1899⁶, where the author was informed by Mr. Swan, an engineer, on what supposedly happened:

‘That’s the old railway-station,’ says Mr. Swan, our cicerone in these Malayan regions.

‘Was there ever a railway here?’

‘Yes, but it was eaten up by the white ants. They ran the engine on till it came to a place where there were a good many of these ants; the engine fell into the hole, and they left it there. That was the trial trip, and they were timber sleepers.’

Florence Caddy, To Siam and Malaya in the Duke of Gutherland’s Yatch ‘sans Peur’ (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1889, p.232)

An unfortunate, almost comedic, end to a grand ambition. But did it really happen? Was it possible for the tracks, made out of Johore teak, be destroyed by white ants while the line was still being worked on? Surely Mr. Meldrum, purveyor of the finest timber in all of Asia, and a close associate of the Maharajah, would have ensured only the best wood be made available for the project. Also, a locomotive was expensive then, as it still is today, making it hard to imagine the Maharaja simply shrugging at the sight of his prized locomotive lying in a ditch, and walking away.

Scholars have long concluded that it was a good first experiment, and that the Maharaja's ambition would only be realised later with the Muar State Railway. In my opinion, both of these railways could not be any more different in purpose and impact. While the wooden railway was planned for the pleasure of himself and his guests, the M.S.R. was a light railway built for the people of Muar, with a dream of eventually connecting the royal town with Batu Pahat, and later Johor Bahru. These coastal towns were the most important ones in Johor after all. At the time the interior of Johor was virgin jungle, and clearing it for whatever purpose would have been prohibitively expensive.

This is what really happened to the Maharaja's line.

In 1875, he organised a farewell banquet in honour of Sir Andrew Clarke who was leaving Singapore to take up a position in India. The *Straits Times*' article⁷ included complete speeches by dignitaries, which is as tiresome at it sounds, while saving the best bit for last.



In the K.L. Railway Workshop. The Locomotive "Lady Clarke" bought from the Sultan of Johor, under repairs. Kuala Lumpur, Malaya (1880-1900)

"At about eleven o'clock a.m. On Friday, preparations for the ceremony having been completed, a large concourse gathered at the Terminus of the line, which is about 500 yards to the westward of the Palace, and presently, the Maharajah accompanied by Sir Andrew and Lady Clarke and the other guests of the palace, drove up and were received with all honors, the Band playing God save the Queen. The locomotive was waiting with steam up, gaily festooned with wreaths of ferns and flowers, ready to receive its name and commission from the hands of Lady Clarke. The Maharajah, Sir Andrew and Lady Clarke, and a few others, stepped into the driving box, – a bottle of champagne was broken over the "interesting little stranger", steam turned on and away sped the pioneer of the future railway system of the peninsula bearing the happy name "Lady Clarke"⁸. Two or three trips were made so as to give all present an opportunity of voyaging on the iron horse. The rails are at present completed for a distance of about a mile only, but the progress now will be very rapid, and

before very long, the neighborhood of Gunong Pulai will be reached. Mr. Vacher, C.E. has been entrusted with the entire control and management of the line, and certainly has so far accomplished a wonderful success.”

And only a few months later it was reported that the new Governor, Sir William Jervois, paid a visit⁹ to the Maharaja and again rode on the line. By now, we know that the construction had been partially completed¹⁰. Construction must have halted sometime between October 1876, and May 1877, as reported here:

“The project of establishing a railway in Johore is, I regret to hear, given up, at least for the present, on account of the great difficulties experienced in its construction. Most of the European employees have either returned home or taken to other work, and the engine which was got out from home at considerable expense is allowed to remain idle under an iron shed.”

A TRIP TO JOHORE.

Straits Times Overland Journal, 12 May 1877, Page 9

In an article¹¹ comparing Johore and Perak, the writer contends that the failure was due to the warping of the timber. In February 1879,¹² Thomas Heslop Hill wrote of a road being cut from Johor Bahru to Gunung Pulai, in place of the railway line. From this we can infer that the project had been abandoned for some years, and whatever length of tracks already constructed were removed, and the cleared path continued to function as a road.

The prized engine, ‘Lady Clarke’, was later sold off to be used on the construction of the Selangor State Railway. The question remains as to why did Abu Bakar feel the irresistible itch to build a railway line to seemingly nowhere? There was very little to ‘open up’ between Johor Bahru and Gunong Pulai, and plans to open a sanatorium and a hill resort would have benefitted only himself and those within his circle of influence.

I would argue that the goal was never to have a functioning railway line, but to simply demonstrate to the British that he had the vision, willingness, and resources to embark on such an ambitious project. By that time, the Maharaja was very travelled¹³, and was well received by the countries he visited. He was a master in diplomacy, hospitality, and showmanship, and he would have known very well where this project would have placed him in the eyes of the British. Consider how he officiated the railways (even before it was completed) in the presence of Sir Andrew Clarke, and only a few months later, the new Governor was invited for a ride. He wanted the Empire (and the world) to know of him and his kingdom, and such news would have been picked up by various newspapers around the world.

It is interesting to note how the timeline of the wooden railway is bookended with him assuming the title of Maharaja, and later being acknowledged as Sultan. The wooden railways was simply one of many other events in a long public relations campaign towards a secured throne, one that could only have been envisioned by someone as strategic and ambitious as the Maharaja. He was singled out as a civilised man of good taste, culture, and authority, a marked contrast from how the British described the Malay natives (including their rulers) as backward and un-civilised. Being seen as an equal (or almost one) was instrumental in Abu Bakar retaining the independence of his rule from British political interference. As soon as Abu Bakar received the acknowledgement that he was after, he simply lost interest in expending more resources for a line that would undoubtedly serve very little practical purposes for himself or the state.

Temenggong Tun
Daeng Ibrahim
(b. 1810, r. 1825–62)

Temenggong Sri
Maharaja Wan AbuBakar
(b. 1833, r. 1862–95)

Wooden railway

- 1824 Sultan Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman sign a treaty with the EIC, giving up Singapore.
- 1836 Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim agrees to cooperate with Bonham (the Acting Governor of Singapore) in suppressing piracy.
- 1844 An overcrowded Singapore results in Chinese planters relocating to Johor to open up new farms under Ibrahim's authority.
- 1855 Sultan Ali cedes all claim on Johor in return for title of Sultan and a pension.
- 1862 Abu Bakar rules Johor.
- 1866 Abu Bakar tours Europe.
- 1868 Abu Bakar is acknowledged as Maharaja.
- 1875 Abu Bakar continues travelling the world.
- 1885 The Maharaja is acknowledged as Sultan.
- 1895 Sultan Ibrahim takes over.

The history of Johor Bahru is dotted with one kampung after another shifting to different locations due to development. One such village is Kampung Tarom, which Sahgudin Dirhan¹⁴ traces back its origins to Kampung Kereta Asap which was originally located at the corner between the kebun bunga and the zoo opposite Masjid Abu Bakar. This was the site of the first train station or at the time called 'kereta asap'. Due to development of the Johor Bahru – Gunung Pulai railways, villagers were ordered to move to the present site.

Patricia Lim¹⁵ also mentions the existence of a Kampung Asap which was a "kampung for the railway workers" around the terminus because the train was then known as kereta asap. She contends that steam machinery was used for crushing the rocks needed for laying the railway line. But the Gunong Pulai line did not use rocks as ballasts and instead the sleepers were buried in the ground.

If the villagers were ordered to move before the construction of Abu Bakar's train station had even begun, then the village could not have been named Kereta Asap. The name had to have come about after the appearance of a kereta asap, not necessarily related to Abu Bakar's wooden railway project.

An article¹⁶ in 1875 mentions two railway lines, an early abandoned one of five miles by Mr. Meldrum, and the halted construction of Abu Bakar's line. Prior to Abu Bakar building his own line, Meldrum had already constructed a simple wooden railway in his sawmill to facilitate the movement of timber from the river mouth, which was floated down from the interior, into the sawmill. A photograph¹⁷ of Meldrum's sawmill reveals a curious vehicle parked at the river mouth, being operated by labourers. This simple steam engine would have been the original kereta asap, and the Kampung Kereta Asap was home to the sawmill workers. This is consistent with the use of steam engines in Europe at the time, when it began replacing horses in pulling cargo (mainly timber and coal) carts on wooden tracks. This same engine would have been used later in the construction of the Maharaja's line, before the arrival of the steam locomotive purchased from India.

The Johore Wooden Railway (J.W.R.) deserves its place in our history books as the first railway line on the peninsula. The current accepted 'first' line between Taiping and Port Weld (1885) is the first British-built commercial line. If the currently accepted conclusion thus far is that the wooden railway was a failed project, then the evidence presented above is hopefully convincing enough to prove that the line was indeed operational, even if it was only for the pleasure of the Maharaja and his guests. Subsequent railway developments in Johor should not be considered a direct successor of the JWR, but new initiatives based on very different agendas. What is important here is the simple act of being the first, what more a project initiated by a Malay ruler, forces us to reconsider events that were excluded from the colonial narrative.

1 *The Straits Times*, Saturday 24th July 1869

2 "The Rails are Johore Teak or Ballow scantling, 10' by 5" by 4", set on edge and keyed in the slots on the sleepers by two wedges driven against each other...The permanent way is laid for about 6 miles; two more are nearly nished." Fortnight's Summary. Monday, 16th June, *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 30 June 1873, p.12

3 *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 16 May 1874, p.8. Extracted from an article dated 4th April 1874, by Revd. Wm. Dean, in the *Siam Advertiser*.

4 M.A. Fawzi Bakri, *Sejarah Keretapi Di Malaysia*, 1985

5 Thomas Heslop Hill was a coffee planter from Ceylon. He would later form a partnership with Rathborne to form Hill & Rathborne. The company would be contracted to build roads, and supply wooden sleepers for the construction of the Selangor State Railway in 1883, and was involved in the construction of the Sungei Ujong Railway. Hill would go on to write *Camping and Tramping in Malaya*.

6 Florence Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya in the Duke of Gutherland's Yatch 'sans Peur'* (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1889, p.232)

7 The Johore Banquet. *The Straits Times*, 29 May 1875, p. 1

8 This locomotive was purchased second-hand from India by the Maharaja of Johore. After the wooden railway project was abandoned, it was sold off to the Selangor Government Railway where it hauled the inaugural passenger train from Klang to Kuala Lumpur on 15th September 1885. It was withdrawn in 1893 following a collision but must have been repaired as it went on to become FMSR No 2 in 1901 and survived until scrapping in December 1912. Gullick J.M. gives the following account in *Old Kuala Lumpur* (Oxford University Press):

"A small locomotive had been bought second-hand from Johore, where a railway project had been abandoned, and was named the 'Lady Clarke'. A few wooden railway coaches had been built locally; they were rather cramped and stuffy but they would do." p.16

"There was only one head-on collision on 11 August 1893 in which thirteen people were injured, one fatally. This disaster also marked the end of the Lady Clarke, which was badly damaged." p. 58

9 "In the afternoon, the Governor and party drove to the Railway depot and had a ride of some miles by rail..." "The Governor's Visit to Johore" *The Straits Times*, 2 October 1875, p.1

10 "Calmly indeed, after his walk home along the line now constructing does the speculative mind of the Panglimah look forward to the days when tickets will be issued at Johore terminus for Gunong Pulai".

"Gunong Pulai" from *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 30 September 1876, p.5

11 "By the way, can any one tell us why the wooden railway, to be made of the teak which abounds in Johore, fell through? We suppose the cause of the failure was the liabilities of the timber to warp." "Johore and Perak." from *The Daily Times*, 25th November, published in *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 28 November 1878, p. 4

12 "the Maharajah is cutting a road from Johor Bahru to the 'Pulai'a range. From where we landed, we walked along a path which I estimate at 10 miles in length, which brought us to the foot of the range." Thomas Heslop Hill, "Report on the Johore Country and the advantages it offers to Planters." from the *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 15 February 1879, p. 4

13 In 1866 he traveled to Europe, 1875 he visited Calcutta to meet the Prince of Wales, in 1881 he toured Java. 1883 he visited Hong Kong, Shanghai, Peking, and Japan. On his 1885 visit to London, the British Government at last recognised him as Sultan, freeing him and his successors from any burden of fending off criticism and claims to the throne by Sultan Ali's descendants. In 1891 he was invited to dine and stay at the Castle. He sat at the right hand of the Queen. This close relationship with the Queen was to last until his death, while on a trip to London in 1895. Winstedt, *A History of Johor*, p. 136

14 Sahgudin Dirhan, *Asal-usul nama tempat dan jalan serta bangunan di Johor Bahru*, p. 31

15 Patricia Lim Pui Huen, *Johor, 1855–1957, Local History, Local Landscapes*, (Straits Times Press, 2009), p. 84

16 “Un nished buildings; an abandoned railway and another at a stand still in its construction from one cause or another.... The railways had been a woeful waste of money. First Mr. Meldrum’s line was constructed for about ve miles and then abandoned. It was pulled to pieces to assist in making another line which some clever projector hit upon to run 20 miles to Gunong Pulie (Pulai), where a sanitarium was to be established and by which the Maharaja was to make no end of money. About four miles out of the 20 have been accomplished and Lady Clarke before she left baptised a locomotive and now we believe the work is stopped. Those who wish to go to Gunong Pulie can’t get there by railway. Had the money wasted on these lines been spent on making good bullock carts throughout the country for the conveyance of Johore produce to the port, the people and treasury would have benefited and the Maharaja lled his place, but it was not so spent...” *Straits Observer* (Singapore), 21 September 1875, p.2

17 Photograph by Peter Lee, published in *Johor: Local History, Local Landscapes 1855 to 1957*, Patricia Lim Pui Huen. (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2009).

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