




# Changi Prison Complex


by *Lim, Fiona*

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Completed in 1936, Changi Prison (historically also referred to as “Changi Gaol/Jail”) was the last prison built by the British colonial government. It is known for being an internment camp during the Second World War. The original premises were demolished to make way for the new Changi Prison Complex, which was unveiled in two phases in 2004 and 2010. Capital punishment by hanging as well as judicial caning are carried out at the Changi Prison Complex.

## Establishment

By the early 1930s, [Pearl’s Hill Prison](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1742\\_2010-12-17.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1742_2010-12-17.html)) , Singapore’s only penal facility at the time, had become overcrowded and was bereft of any proper segregation in the prisoner population. In January 1933, the Legislative Council, worried about the situation, approved the construction of a new convict jail in [Changi](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_245\\_2004-12-15.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_245_2004-12-15.html)) . The new jail aimed to ease the congestion at Pearl’s Hill Prison and to provide a modern and more secure penal facility, one that could accommodate the segregation of prisoners in order to prevent recidivism.<sup>1</sup> Construction of Changi Prison began later that year, undertaken by local construction firm, Woh Hup.<sup>2</sup>

Though gazetted as a prison on 24 December 1936, the prison was only operational from 4 January 1937.<sup>3</sup>

## Description

The old Changi Prison was built to accommodate 600 prisoners. The original complex had two main four-storey buildings, each comprising two blocks. Work rooms were on the ground floor, while cells were located above. There was a separate block that could hold 24 European prisoners, a hospital block as well as punishment cells and cells for recalcitrant offenders.<sup>4</sup> The prison was also fitted with a modern sewerage system, a central laundry as well as a kitchen with modern cooking equipment.<sup>5</sup>

Being a maximum-security prison, Changi was equipped with an extensive alarm system. Each cell also had an electric light and a latrine with flush, and prisoners could take showers at designated areas surrounding the exercise yards. A six-metre-tall wall surrounded the prison, while four turrets at each corner served as watchtowers.<sup>6</sup>

In 1948, the Prisons Department reported that Changi Prison had 597 cells and could accommodate 1,000 inmates comfortably.<sup>7</sup>

## Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45)

Shortly after the fall of Singapore to the invading Japanese during the Second World War, Western<sup>8</sup> civilians, including men, women and children, were rounded up and interned at Changi Prison. Though only equipped with a capacity for 600 prisoners, the jail had about 2,800<sup>9</sup> civilian internees by August 1945 and this figure continued to grow over the span of the occupation. In 1945, there were about 4,500 civilian internees, although this group were interned at [Sime Road Camp](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1769\\_2011-02-14.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1769_2011-02-14.html)) by then.<sup>10</sup> Allied prisoners-of-war (POWs), on the other hand, were held at former British military barracks – such as [Selarang](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1219\\_2008-12-10.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1219_2008-12-10.html)) , Roberts and Kitchener – also located in Changi, further east from the jail.<sup>11</sup>

At the start of the civilian internment in the prison premises, there were 359 women, 61 children and 2,200 men.<sup>12</sup> Men and women were clustered in separate blocks, and were not allowed to meet each other. However, the detainees eventually devised ways to pass letters and messages to each other.<sup>13</sup> The internal organisation of the camp was largely left to the detainees themselves, with each block electing its own leader, and the detainees were responsible for the maintenance of the camp.<sup>14</sup>

In order to pass the time and improve morale among the prisoners, both the men’s and women’s blocks organised entertainment and leisure programmes. The women held piano recitals, theatre productions, comedy, lectures and even circus shows.<sup>15</sup> They also published a newspaper called *POW WOW*, led by former *Malaya Tribune* journalist Freddy Bloom. The objectives of *POW WOW* were to provide entertainment, intellectual stimulation and social cohesion among the female detainees. Its first issue was released on 1 April 1942 and ran for almost 19 months until its last edition on 15 October 1943. The newspaper set out ground rules, disseminated information and discussed a variety of issues.<sup>16</sup> The male civilians also published a newspaper called *Changi Guardian*.<sup>17</sup>

In May 1944, all the POWs from the various POW camps in Changi were moved into Changi Prison, while the civilian internees were transferred to Sime Road Camp.<sup>18</sup> The move also included the Roman Catholic chapel that had been built at the Sime Road Camp.<sup>19</sup> Altogether, there were about 12,000 POWs packed into the prison complex after the relocation.<sup>20</sup> Conditions for the POWs there were worse than what they were used to in the barracks because of overcrowding in the prison as well as a more authoritarian style of administration by the Japanese.<sup>21</sup>

~ Recommendations ~

## Singapore Prison Service

The Singapore Prison Service (SPS) is a government agency under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Headquartered at 407 Upper ... [eresources.nlb.gov.sg%2Finfopecia%2Farticles%2FSIP\\_2010-12-17\\_135549.html](#)

## Outram Prison (Pearl’s Hill Prison)

One of Singapore’s earliest prisons was located at the foot of Pearl’s Hill in Outram. The original civil jail at the ... [weetbutton&via=nlb\)](#)

## Pulau Senang

Pulau Senang is one of Singapore’s southern islands. Its land area is about 81.7 ha, and it is located 24 km from the ...

## Bras Basah convict jail

The convict jail at Bras Basah was established in response to the increasing number of convicts who were transported ...

## Said Zahari

Said Zahari (b. 18 May 1928, Singapore–d. 12 April 2016, Malaysia) was a writer, journalist and former political detainee. ...

## Singapore Criminal Prison breakout

On 13 February 1875, the Singapore Criminal Prison located between Stamford Road and Bras Basah Road was the site of ...

First	Previous	Next	Last
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Nonetheless, the POWs still did not give up on their means of entertainment for boosting their morale. In September 1944, the POWs opened Playhouse Theatre, a makeshift venue where theatrical performances could be held.<sup>22</sup>

Following the [formal surrender of the Japanese](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_123_2005-02-03.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_123\\_2005-02-03.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_123_2005-02-03.html)) on 2 September 1945, the POWs held at Changi Prison were liberated a few days later.<sup>23</sup> The prison was then used to detain Japanese war criminals and suspects, and was where most of the executions – either by hanging or firing squad – were carried out for those convicted with a death sentence.<sup>24</sup>

Administered by the British Military Administration after the war, Changi Prison was handed back to the Prisons Department on 15 October 1947. Subsequently, long-sentence prisoners at Pearl's Hill Prison were transferred back to Changi.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Significant developments**

##### **Rehabilitation by agricultural work**

Changi Prison was the first prison to implement agricultural farming as there had not been sufficient land for this purpose at the earlier prisons, which were located in town.<sup>26</sup> The subject of having an agricultural plot of land had been discussed at the outset when Changi was being considered as the location for the new prison.<sup>27</sup> Finally, in July 1949, a 30-acre farm maintained by prisoners was started with the aim of cultivating vegetables for the prisoners' meals. By the end of 1949, with a third of the allotted land cleared of *alang*, 13,870 lbs (6,291 kg) of vegetables had been harvested.<sup>28</sup> The farm went into full production in 1950, and the prison's fresh vegetable supply became largely self-sustainable. Buoyed by the success, a pig farm was begun that same year. In 1951, a chicken section was added, and fresh eggs were sent daily to patients at the prison hospital.<sup>29</sup> Two years later, cattle was added to the farm.<sup>30</sup>

Prisoners deemed to be of good conduct were sent to work at the farm, which was located beyond the prison walls, with light supervision. Then-Acting Commissioner of Prisons Andrew W. Clow reported that allowing the prisoners to be outdoors with fresh air and doing agricultural work improved their morale.<sup>31</sup>

There were some escapes by those working at the farm.<sup>32</sup> In 1970, following four escapes via the prison farm within two weeks, it was suggested that the prison farm be closed down. However, the prison authorities stood by the efficacy and importance of having the agricultural work as a means of rehabilitation.<sup>33</sup>

##### **Prisoners' earning scheme**

Following the recommendations put forth by the Prison Enquiry Commission of 1948, an earning scheme for prison labour was implemented in 1950. The scheme had three grades when it was introduced:<sup>34</sup>

Grade A: Prison labourers earned 15 cents per working day or part thereof. They could be promoted to this grade based on "exemplary behaviour and progress in conduct and work", or to recognise them for a "special meritorious act".  
Grade B: Prison labourers earned 10 cents per working day or part thereof. Offenders could be promoted to this grade based on "exemplary behaviour and progress in conduct and work".  
Grade C: Prison labourers earned 8 cents per working day or part thereof. Offenders were placed in this category after serving six months of their sentence.

##### **Corrective training and preventive detention**

Changi Prison saw the introduction of two new penal categories in 1955: corrective training and preventive detention. Singapore was reportedly the first to implement these types of reform in Southeast Asia. A block within the prison complex was converted for corrective training and preventive detention.<sup>35</sup>

Prisoners sent for corrective training were young offenders sentenced to more than a year's imprisonment, and they received vocational training. Those placed under preventive detention were older recidivists.<sup>36</sup>

##### **Political detentions**

The old prison is also significant for being the site where many trade unionists, suspected communists and political prisoners were held in the 1950s and 60s, following a series of riots and civil unrest in the decade leading to Singapore's independence. Many detainees swept up during Operation Cold Store in 1963 were also held at Changi Prison.<sup>37</sup> Among the prominent political figures who had once been detained at Changi Prison were [Lim Chin Siong](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1462_2009-02-18.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1462\\_2009-02-18.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1462_2009-02-18.html)),<sup>38</sup> [Fong Swee Suan](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-07-29_173512.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2013-07-29\\_173512.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-07-29_173512.html)),<sup>39</sup> [Lim Hock Siew](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-11-27_174645.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2014-11-27\\_174645.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-11-27_174645.html)),<sup>40</sup> [James Puthuchear](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1471_2009-02-24.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1471\\_2009-02-24.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1471_2009-02-24.html)), Poh Soo Kai – former [People's Action Party](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2015-02-04_103701.html) (PAP) members who later formed [Barisan Sosialis](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1148_2008-11-30.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1148\\_2008-11-30.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1148_2008-11-30.html)) – journalist [Said Zahari](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1864_2012-01-09.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1864\\_2012-01-09.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1864_2012-01-09.html)) and [Devan Nair](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_594_2004-12-23.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_594\\_2004-12-23.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_594_2004-12-23.html)),<sup>41</sup> a PAP member who later became the [president of Singapore](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_808_2004-12-28.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_808\\_2004-12-28.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_808_2004-12-28.html)).<sup>42</sup>

##### **Upgrading and centralisation of prisons**

Changi Prison was upgraded between the late 1970s and early 80s to alleviate overcrowding. Two new five-storey blocks were erected for holding prisoners, among the addition of other features such as automatic gates and amenities like a squash court for prison officers.<sup>43</sup>

By the late 1990s, the government had surfaced plans to build a new Changi Prison on the site of the old prison grounds. The new mega-prison complex would have

“world-class facilities and security features”. The various prisons in Singapore would be centralised there for a more cost-effective and efficient prison administration, and at the same time also free up land for commercial and residential development.<sup>44</sup> Prisoners from other carceral facilities located all over the island would be centralised at the same complex.<sup>45</sup>

However, the redevelopment plan was met with much resistance from heritage advocates, former POWs and Australian politicians, because of the historical significance of the prison as a primary internment camp during the Second World War.<sup>46</sup> As a compromise, the Singapore authorities preserved a 180-metre stretch of wall, two turrets and its entrance gate. The demolition was carried out in 2004.<sup>47</sup>

#### **Changi Prison Complex**

In August 2004, Cluster A of Changi Prison Complex was officially unveiled, equipped with the “latest computerised security and monitoring features”. There was constant surveillance via closed-circuit televisions, communications and other security systems. All corridors in Cluster A were fitted with electronically monitored doors and gates, while perimeter security was also improved.<sup>48</sup> The prison system in Singapore was henceforth organised into clusters – a system that allows for an integrated security system.<sup>49</sup> Cluster A comprises inmates from the former Changi Prison, Moon Crescent Prison, Jalan Awan Prison and the Changi Reformatory Training Centre.<sup>50</sup>

Cluster B, the other component of Changi Prison Complex, was officially opened in January 2010. Inmates from five separate institutions – Queenstown Remand Prison, Sembawang Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC), Khalsa Crescent DRC, Selarang Park DRC and Tanah Merah Prison – were moved into Cluster B.<sup>51</sup> Cluster B had 1,800 cells among five prisons, each installed with up-to-date technology. These include electronically operated locks and an intelligent video motion system for detecting intrusions. With the completion of Cluster B, Changi Prison Complex could accommodate 11,000 prisoners.<sup>52</sup>

In October 2017, Changi Women’s Prison was moved into Cluster A.<sup>53</sup> Previously grouped under the Cluster C correctional facilities, the women’s prison had not been part of the Changi Prison Complex.<sup>54</sup>

#### **Capital punishment and caning**

Capital punishment by hanging is carried out at the Changi Prison Complex, where death row inmates are also held. Judicial caning is also conducted at the prison complex.<sup>55</sup>

#### **National monument**

On 15 February 2016, the 74th anniversary of Singapore’s surrender to the Japanese during the Second World War, the remaining parts of the old Changi Prison – the 180-metre stretch of wall, two turrets and its entrance gate – were gazetted as Singapore’s 72nd national monument.<sup>56</sup>

#### **Recent developments**

In 2018, the Singapore Prison Service announced that Changi Prison Complex, using technology, was moving towards the concept of a “prison without guards”. Trials conducted at the prison include automated muster checks, where facial recognition technology is used for verification of the inmates, as well as a surveillance system capable of detecting fights.<sup>57</sup>

#### **Timeline**

**1933:** Construction of prison begins.

**1936:** Construction completed.

**24 Dec 1936:** Changi Gaol is gazetted.

**15 Feb 1942:** Britain surrenders Singapore to the Japanese.

**17 Feb 1942:** Western civilians are rounded up and interned at Changi Prison.

**May 1944:** Civilian internees at Changi Prison are transferred to Sime Road Camp, while Allied POWs are moved into the prison complex.

**Sep 1945:** Liberation of POWs at Changi Prison.

**15 Oct 1947:** British Military Administration hands back Changi Prison to the Prisons Department.

**1955:** Corrective training and preventive detention introduced as new categories of prisoners. A block within the compound is designated to hold these groups of offenders.

**1958:** Changi Camp becomes a reformatory training centre for young offenders.

**1960:** [National Library](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_708_2005-01-19.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_708\\_2005-01-19.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_708_2005-01-19.html)) begins supplying books in all languages to Changi Prison.<sup>58</sup>

**31 Dec 1999:** Groundbreaking ceremony for new 48-hectare Changi Prison Complex.<sup>59</sup>

**2004:** Old Changi Prison is demolished, except for two corner turrets, a 180-metre stretch of wall and its entrance gate.

**2004:** Cluster A of the new Changi Prison Complex is opened, comprising five eight-storey blocks.

**2010:** Cluster B is opened, increasing the capacity of Changi Prison Complex to 11,000.

**2016:** Remnants of the old prison – the two turrets, wall and gate – are gazetted as a national monument.

**2017:** Changi Women’s Prison is moved into Cluster A.

**2018:** Launch of high-tech trials for moving Changi Prison towards becoming a “prison without guards”.

#### **Author**

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