

**CHRONOLOGICAL BIOGRAPHY OF  
ARTHUR CHARLES ALFRED NORMAN**



Article published in the Journal of Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society,

Vol. LXX Part 1 June 1997 pg. 21-29

by

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**Sultan Abdul Samad Building, Kuala Lumpur**

## **Introduction**

Arthur Charles Alfred Norman, a senior government architect of the Public Works Department (PWD) in Malaya between 1883 and 1903, may not be well known to most Malaysians but his notable buildings in Kuala Lumpur, particularly near Merdeka Square such as the majestic Sultan Abdul Samad Building (1894-97), St. Mary's Church (1894), Selangor Club Building (1890), JKR 92 Memorial Library and Museum, formerly known as the Government Printing Office (1907-09); and others including Victoria Institution (1894) and Carcosa (1897) are significant to many including tourists. It is important to know not only the history of these buildings but the architect who designed them. This is because the buildings have historical and architectural values in which some of them, under the Antiquities Act of 1976, are given protection and encouragement to be conserved and preserved. Some of A.C.A. Norman's buildings have become important landmarks of Kuala Lumpur.

Like most of the British colonial buildings, A.C.A. Norman's buildings are essentially hybrids. Moorish influence, Tudor, Neo-Classical and Neo-Gothic are examples of architectural styles introduced by many British architects including A.C.A. Norman. As it was common practice in the PWD in those days, architects were responsible for the design of building plans and elevations (even though they were assisted and supervised by engineers), and thus much of the credit for the design of the buildings was given to A.C.A. Norman. For example, in the design of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, it is likely that there were others including Charles Edwin Spooner as the State Engineer and Director of the PWD; and those who worked under A.C.A. Norman such as R.A.J. Bidwell and A.B. Hubback who had contributed their design ideas, suggestions and even carried out the detail drawings. Whilst many periodicals and books have described his buildings, it is the main purpose of this article to highlight the chronology of his biography. This article is based upon various accounts collected from books, periodicals and information from the British Architectural Library and the Royal Institute of British Architects, London.

## **Biographical Record**

**1858** Born in England (based on the address of 2 Seymour Terrace, Plymouth, England).

1874-1878 Received his professional education from his father, Mr. Alfred Norman F.R.I.B.A. (Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects) who owned an architectural firm. A.C.A. Norman also worked as a surveyor under Mr. G.D. Bellamy of Consulting Engineer Corporation, Plymouth until the age of 20.

**1879** Worked as an inspector of buildings and chief draughtsman, and a surveyor to the Borough Engineer, Plymouth.

**1881** Became the Associate of the R.I.B.A. at the age of 23.

**1883** Sent to Selangor in the Federated Malay States to work as an architect-cum-Assistant Superintendent to civil engineer H.F. Bellamy (brother of G.D. Bellamy) in the PWD.

**1884** Still in service with the PWD.

**1890** At the age of 32, he held the specialist post of the Government Architect.

**1894** On 6 October, the Sultan Abdul Samad Building was constructed under the supervision of Charles Edwin Spooner, the State Engineer and Norman as the architect. Norman was also assisted by R.A.J. Bidwell.

St. Mary's Church, located near the Merdeka Square, which was designed by Norman was constructed.

**1896** On 27 March, Norman signed a statement to become a Fellow of the R.I.B.A. On 28 March, in the Proposer's Separate Statement, James Hine of Plymouth F.R.I.B.A., a colleague of Norman's father, supported Norman's nomination as Fellow to the President and Council of the R.I.B.A. in which he stated Norman's professional education and work. On 30 March, in a Candidate's Separate Statement to the Council of the R.I.B.A., Norman has listed a few of the principal buildings including costs on which he had been engaged in as an architect. The list included:

#### **Court of Justice \$ 13,500**

The Court was constructed on Weld Hill (Bukit Mahkamah) near Central Police Station on Pudu Road in the 1880's (Figure 1). Later in 1909, the Court was moved to a newly completed building, the Supreme Court which was also designed by Norman, on the corner of Jalan Raja. The old Court of Justice was then extended with annex blocks to become the Police Court. The Police Court stood on the Weld Hill until 1940. The building was then left dilapidated and in 1982 it was demolished to give way for the present Maybank Tower.

#### **Church (St. Mary's Church) \$ 11,500**

The Anglican St. Mary's Church was built in 1894 at the north side of Merdeka Square, on land originally occupied by the stables of the nearby Selangor Club (Figure 2). The church was designed in the early Gothic style that features flying buttresses on the outside of the octagonal nave, stained glass tracery windows, pinnacles, pointed arches and crenellated parapet. In the old days, the church was the second social centre for the Anglican community in Kuala Lumpur after the Club.

#### **Govt. Offices (1884) \$ 33,000**

The offices were strategically located on the Bluff area (near Bukit Aman), a hill site that faces the Selangor Club and Merdeka Square (Figure 3). These offices and other buildings on the site including the old police offices and barracks were replaced by the present national police headquarters. It is believed that some of these offices were then moved to the Sultan Abdul Samad Building upon its completion in 1897.

### Govt. Offices \$152,000

The Sultan Abdul Samad Building (named after the then Sultan of Selangor) was built in 1894-97, stretching 400 feet along Jalan Raja (Figure 4). The building was originally constructed to house the Secretariat offices of Selangor. Later, it was occupied by the Selangor State Government Treasury, the Accountant-General's Office and the Marriage Registry. It is currently used by the Justice Department to house both the Federal and High Courts.

### Gaol (Pudu Gaol) \$320,000

The Pudu Gaol or Kuala Lumpur Gaol was built in 1895 at the corner of Jalan Hang Tuah and Jalan Pudu, sprawling over 8.9 hectares (Figure 5). The 'X' shape prison consists of three storeys and 240 cells with six-inch thick walls of cement, steel and bricks. The prison complex was initially built to accommodate 950 prisoners. It is believed that Spooner contrived to give an Islamic flavour to the main entrance.

### Market \$ 48,000

In 1885-86, two identical blocks of wet market were built to replace Yap Ah Loy's market at Medan Pasar. The blocks were constructed on a more spacious site near the present Kuala Lumpur Central Market on Jalan Hang Kasturi. It was typical in those days to build a market of one-storey high with jack roofs, big openings, louvered shading devices, brick or pre-cast galvanised iron pillars (see old markets of Taiping and Georgetown). In the 1930's, the market was eventually replaced by the present building.

### Police Offices \$ 9,750

The police offices or Police Depot was sited on the Bluff area (Bukit Aman) where the national police headquarters stands today (Figure 6). The Depot was constructed on a hill overlooking Merdeka Square and the Kuala Lumpur skyline.

### Residency \$ 34,000

In 1880, when Bloomfield Douglas, Selangor's second British Resident, moved the state capital from Klang to Kuala Lumpur, the Resident's house was brought over from Klang and erected on a hill near the present compound of the Prime Minister's Department (Figure 7). However, in 1888 the house was replaced by a more stately bungalow built in the style of the European wooden house. The two-storey building was built with high ceilings, spacious verandahs, balconies and big windows.

### Victoria Institution \$ 16,000

The original building of Victoria Institution was built in the 1890's on High Street or Jalan Bandar, near the present Jalan Kinabalu's roundabout (Figure 8). In 1929, when the school moved to its present quarters on Jalan Shaw, the two-storey building was then taken over by Kuala Lumpur Technical College. The old building of Victoria Institution was later demolished to give way for modern development.

### Carcosa \$ 25,000

The building was built in 1896-97 on a hill overlooking an area which was later developed into the Lake Gardens. The two-storey building was constructed to accommodate Sir Frank Swettenham, the then Resident-General of the Federated Malay States. In 1901, Frank Swettenham named it Carcosa, a name derived from Cassilda's song in Act 1, Scene 2 of Robert W. Chambers' book called *The King in*

*Yellow* (1895). With the eclectic fusion of Neo-Gothic and Tudor styles, the residence has more than eight bedrooms including master bedroom and guest rooms; and eleven bathrooms.

On 6 July 1896, the Council of the R.I.B.A. confirmed Norman's nomination to become a Fellow.

On 18 September, Norman's nomination as a Fellow of the R.I.B.A. was approved. He signed a Declaration Statement in the presence of architect A.B. Hubback.

**1897** The Sultan Abdul Samad Building in Kuala Lumpur was completed. It was the largest building to be built at that time, stretching 400 feet along Jalan Raja with a central clock tower of 135 feet in height.

**1901** Submitted a list of buildings erected by the PWD in his time in support of his application for promotion to the Resident H.C. Belfield but was unsuccessful.

**1903** On the grounds of inefficiency, Norman was compulsorily retired at the age of 45.

**1904** He left for England and worked with Boulton and Paul Ltd. in Norwich until 1907.

**1908** He returned to Plymouth, England.

**1928** At the age of 70, Norman was elected as the President of Devon Architectural Society.

**1944** On 17 October, Norman died in England at the age of 86.

## Conclusions

Much of A.C.A. Norman's early architectural experience was received from his father, besides working as a surveyor and building inspector in Plymouth, England. This helped him in gaining confidence in professional practice before leaving for Malaya in 1883.

It is believed that the design of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, which is of the Moorish architectural style, was very much influenced by the State Engineer Charles Edwin Spooner who had working experience in Ceylon. It was Spooner who suggested that Norman and Bidwell should change the early elevations of the Building from Classic Renaissance to the adaptations of Mahometan style. However, Norman's other buildings in Kuala Lumpur such as the St. Mary's Church, Selangor Club Building and the JKR 92 Memorial Library and Museum have architectural styles which are similar to that of his homeland England.

Norman successfully designed his buildings with adaptations to climatic conditions, local building materials and building details. The use of high ceilings, verandahs, wide overhangs and canopies, big windows and louvered panels are some examples of common architectural features which appeared in his buildings. In addition, he used building materials including bricks, roof clay tiles, timber and metal products which were available locally.

Even though Norman's buildings represent a relatively small part of the Malaysian building heritage, their characters and styles have to some extent influenced other new buildings especially commercial buildings, offices and houses. For building conservation, it is important that not only historic buildings should be preserved and conserved but all historical facts about the buildings including the architects should be well documented.

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