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A FIELD TRIP TO FORT CANNING

LAM KHEE HUN

To many pupils, history in the classroom has lost its attraction. This state of affairs has in part arisen from the popular notion among pupils that the study of the past has nothing of relevance to offer them in their present situations. Also, many history teachers tend to encourage rote learning and use dictation methods, both of which can deaden pupils' interest in the subject.

It can be argued that the study of local history can help us to appreciate our own cultural heritage. Unravelling the secrets of our past helps us to discover our 'roots'. We then develop a sense of belonging and learn to identify with our nation.

But if this is to be one of the teacher's aims of teaching history, more stimulating approaches to the teaching of this subject should be used. One such method is through field trips conducted to places of historical interest in Singapore. If pupils are able to see and touch what they have learnt through textbooks, then a whole new dimension would be created in their perception of historical events that would make history come alive.

Singapore, small as it is, offers several historical sites for such consideration, namely:

- Fort Canning,
- Sentosa (Maritime Museum, Wax Museum and Fort Siloso), and
- Changi (Changi Prison, Selarang Barracks and Changi Murals).

The focus of discussion in this article is on Fort Canning. Fort Canning Park, within which the fort is located, is today the "repository" of several historical sites that include:

- The old Christian Cemetery.
- The gateway to Old Fort Canning.
- The site of Raffles' Government House.
- The site of the old Fort Canning Lighthouse.

- The remains of the Fort.
- The shrine of Iskandar Shah.

Any historical field trip would be most inadequate and unfulfilling without a proper background briefing and understanding of the place of visit. For Fort Canning, this was achieved through a pre-field-trip discussion of the various historical sites to be visited, using the "Fort Canning Story" information sheet distributed together with a "Fort Canning Park" map. Pupils were also given a set of worksheets complete with corresponding photographs of sites concerned to work on during the trip. (Examples are given at the end of this article).

During the briefing, mention was made of interesting anecdotes or myths that surrounded the hill, for example, the many stories of ghosts or spirits of dead rulers who used to rule Tumasek (old Malay name for Singapore) from atop the hill. The fact that it was once called "Bukit Larangan" or "Forbidden Hill" should be enough to conjure up an aura of mystery. Such stories should stimulate the pupils' interest and create the desire to learn more about the Fort.

In the briefing session, the present geographical location of the Fort was explained to them. They were told that Fort Canning Park, which is situated on a hill, can be reached from several points in the city. For example, from River Valley Road, Hill Street and Fort Canning Rise, there are several footpaths leading to the top, while from Fort Canning Rise itself, a road named Cox Terrace leads almost all the way up to the highest point. This should give the students a good idea of not only the unique location of this strategic hill that nestles right in the heart of this bustling metropolis, but also how to gain access to it.

At the same time, the class was divided into various groups, each with a leader, so that various fieldwork tasks like the taking of photographs or slides, sketching and information collection could be allocated among the students. The assignment of tasks should preferably be based on students' aptitude or keenness for a particular task.

On the day of the field trip, a slide presentation on the history of Fort Canning was arranged at the National Museum, which provides an educational service for schoolchildren and staff that is little publicised. At the end of the slide show, a brief tour of

the Museum was arranged for the students to view relevant exhibits like the gold jewellery that was discovered on the hill around 1928 and which was said to be proof of the existence of a former Malay kingdom there in the pre-Raffles era.

The first stop on the way to the hilltop is the old Christian Cemetery. This Cemetery represents the burial ground of many of the early British pioneers who had contributed to the establishment and progress of old Singapore. Tombstones like those of George Coleman, the first Superintendent of Public Works in Singapore, and Captain William Scott, Harbour Master and one of the most respected residents of his time, can be found here. Two Gothic arches stand as silent sentinels at the two main approaches to the Cemetery. Questions related to the historical significance of the Cemetery, such as those contained in the worksheets could then be asked of the students, who are expected to rely on known historical facts as well as on logical inference and intelligent thinking for the less obvious answers to questions.

Upon reaching the fort remains, the students can be asked to observe the existence of stone walls that have long been weathered by time and the elements and much of which today lies half buried in moss and turf. Upon the walls can still be seen tombstones with engravings of names on them. The pupils can be asked to identify any prominent names of local pioneers they may already have studied in class.

Their attention in particular should be drawn to the main gateway of the fort, which is presently covered by creepers. Beside the gate a small, partly-hidden passageway winds to the top of the structure. The curiosity of the students can be aroused by asking them to locate the "secret" passageway on their own. At the top can be seen emplacements for cannons that presumably were erected there for purposes of defence. Students can be asked why these cannons had been placed there.

On the southern side of the hill stands a lookout point, near the present site, of an imposing Telecoms tower. This point commands an excellent panoramic view of not only Singapore Harbour but also the numerous commercial buildings and skyscrapers that have mushroomed along the waterfront. In days gone by, this site presumably offered scope for the defence of the harbour and the settlement. Here students can take part in several learning activities suggested below:

- (a) Observation of the surrounding landscape and subsequently identification of important landmarks such as the Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation building, International Plaza, Benjamin Sheares Bridge and Singapore River. While the activity may not necessarily relate strictly to historical aspects, it would enable students to contrast the new landscape dominated by impressive skyscrapers with the one that existed long ago, characterized only by rows of dingy, one-or two- storeyed buildings and godowns. The idea of change, of the tremendous socio-economic change over the last 160 years that has transformed the Singapore skyline almost beyond recognition, should enable students to better appreciate the early nation-building contributions of our forefathers.
- (b) Taking of photos or slides of the harbour, etc. This can be done by the group of students concerned.
- (c) Use of the oil painting reprints featuring scenes of the Singapore waterfront in the 19th Century. Students will be asked to note the view of the harbour then and to compare it with the present with the help of questions such as:
 - Why was the hill chosen as the site for a fort?
 - How was the building of the fort conducive to human settlement and to the maintenance of a water supply?

Near the lookout point is the former site of the residence of Singapore's founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, and of subsequent British governors of the colony. Again, the students can be asked to refer to their worksheets to answer relevant questions, based on what they have already learnt and upon their own thinking and reasoning.

The site for the old lighthouse that used to stand guard over Singapore Harbour will then be indicated. (This is somewhere near the base of the present Telecoms Tower). A brief account can then be made of the contributions of this lighthouse in guiding ships that approached Singapore from the east and west safely into the harbour.

Finally, at the Iskandar Shah Shrine, the students can also be asked questions such as those contained in the worksheets

concerning the historical background of this famous man, Sultan Iskandar Shah, who was the last Malay Sultan to rule Tumasek.

The fascinating story of early Singapore is therefore one that can be told through exciting, on-the-spot discovery tours, rather than through the pages of the history textbook. In this way, field trips serve as an indispensable means of enabling pupils to demolish whatever existing misconceptions they may have about the study of the past, and of making history meaningful and relevant to them.

(NOTE: Copies of the reprints of the old Singapore waterfront may be bought at the foyer of the National Museum).



FORT CANNING PARK (GENERAL)

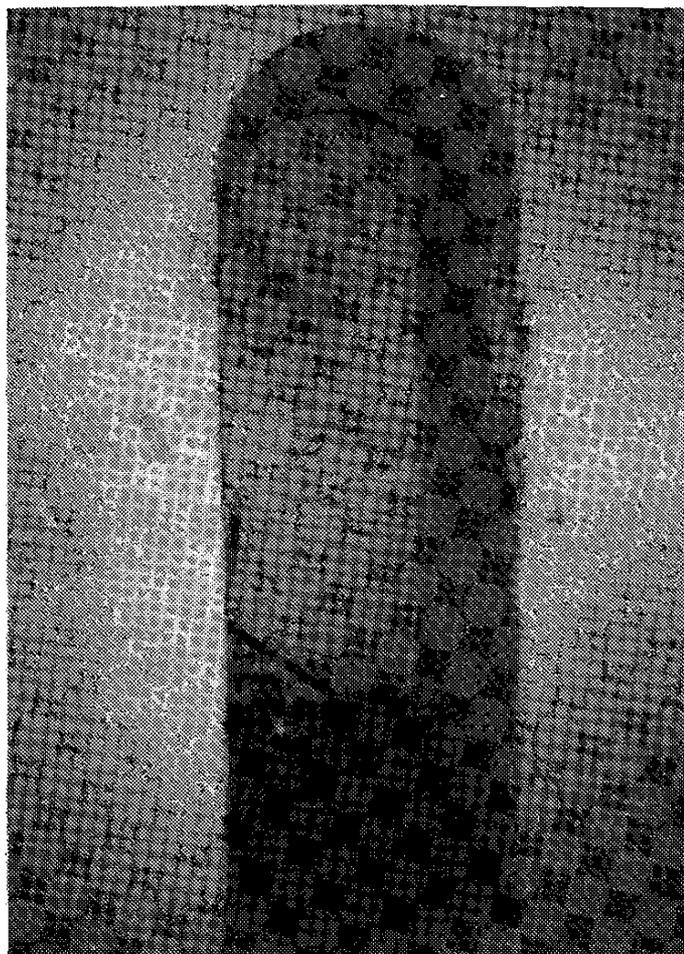
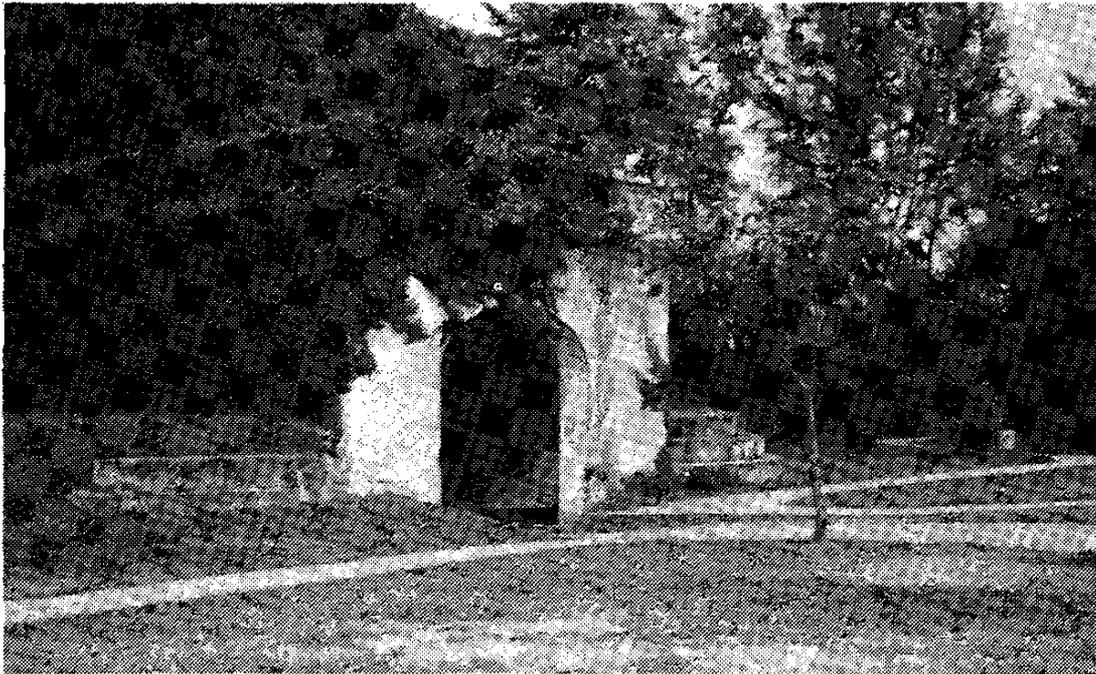
1. Describe the location of Fort Canning Park in Singapore.

2. Why do you think a fort had been built here?

3. Why was it called Fort Canning?

4. Can you name other forts built by the British in Singapore?

FORT GATEWAY



FORT GATEWAY

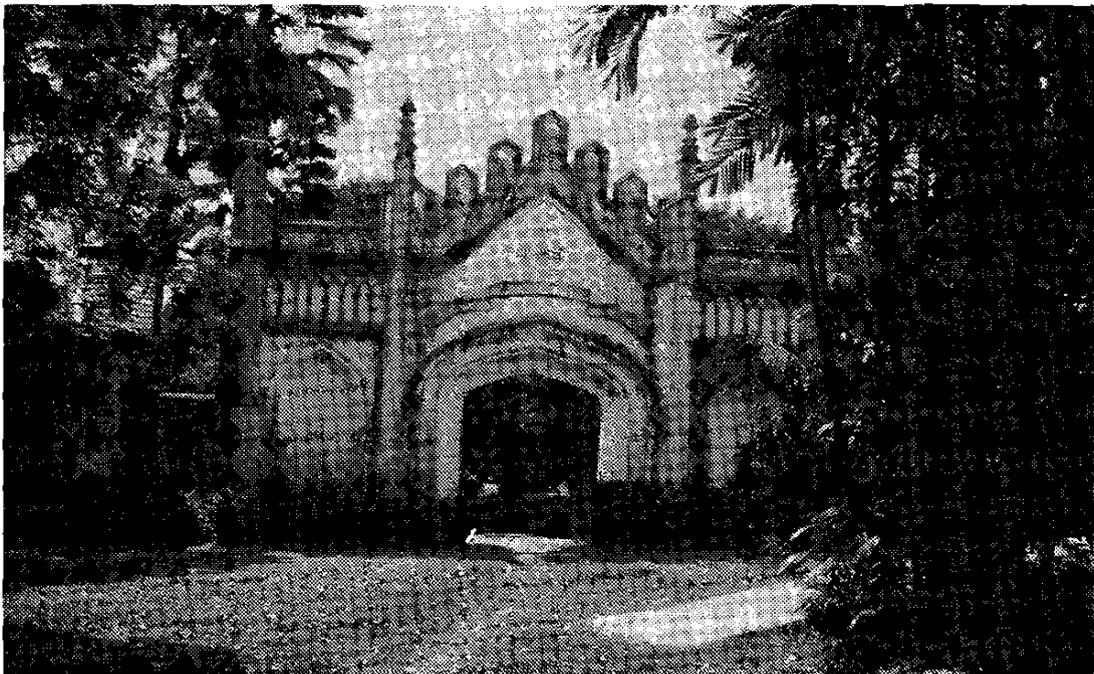
1. Locate the position of this Fort Gateway on the given map.

2. Describe the physical appearance of this Gateway. Why do you think the Gateway had such thick doors and heavy bolts?

3. Can you locate a secret passageway somewhere in the area?

4. At the top of this Gateway, you can see rectangular holes along the wall. Why do you think provision had been made for those holes?

OLD CHRISTIAN CEMETERY



OLD CHRISTIAN CEMETERY

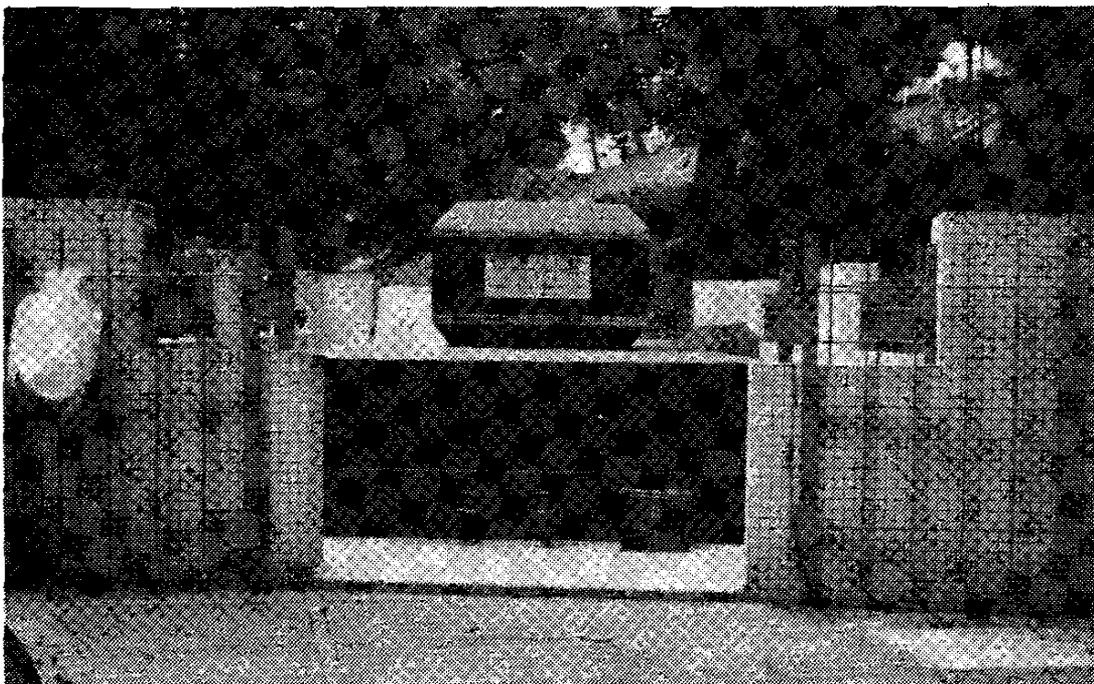
1. What are these rectangular objects embedded in the fort walls?

2. A study of the tombstones shows that many died young. Suggest reasons for this.

3. What was the purpose of this Gothic Gateway?

4. What do the cross and the letters I.H.S. symbolize?

KERAMAT ISKANDAR SHAH



KERAMAT ISKANDAR SHAH

1. Who was Iskandar Shah?

2. What does the Malay word 'keramat' mean?

3. What does the star and crescent moon symbol at the side of the shrine tell you?

4. Find out from the caretaker why he has been loyally guarding the shrine day and night.
