

MEDIA RELEASE

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**DIVE INTO THE NAVAL HISTORY AND STORIES OF THE DIVERSE COMMUNITIES OF
SEMBAWANG WITH A NEW HERITAGE TRAIL OF THE COASTAL TOWN**





(L-R) Naval officers at Beaulieu Jetty saluting the aircraft carrier HMS Albion, 1965, Courtesy of Clive Menary; Beaulieu Jetty overlooking the Johor Strait, 2021, Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Singapore, 13 July 2021 – Did you know that Sembawang used to be home to an important naval base for the British Empire? Or that it was once populated by rubber plantations owned by prominent pioneers such as Lim Chong Pang? Sembawang, which derived its name from the *Mesua ferruginea* or the Sembawang tree, has also been home to people from all walks of life – from seafaring villagers who dwelt in *kampongs*; Asian dockyard workers from Kerala and Hongkong who lived at quarters along Canberra Road; to British naval officers who stayed in black-and-white houses – adding to the area’s rich history and cultural diversity.

2 These lesser-known stories of Sembawang’s naval history and diverse communities will be showcased in the National Heritage Board’s (NHB) new *Sembawang Heritage Trail*. The trail features 31 trail sites and nine heritage trail markers, which invite trail-goers to explore Singapore’s northern coastal town from when it was first mentioned in maps in the early-1800s, to the decades before and after World War II.

Discover vignettes of a former naval base

3 Formerly a major rubber growing area in the early 20th century, Sembawang was later developed into an important naval facility for Britain’s Far East Fleet during the pre- and post-World War II decades. Many landmarks of the former naval base still exist today and they include the stately black-and-white houses that line Admiralty Road East; the elegant Beaulieu House at Sembawang Park; and the grand Former Admiralty House at Bukit Canberra, which is a National Monument. Sembawang has also retained its maritime heritage in the form of Sembawang Shipyard, known today as Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard, which took over the naval base’s dockyard from 1968. For more information about sites that showcase Sembawang’s naval heritage, please refer to the table below:

 <p><i>Naval officers at Beaulieu Jetty saluting the aircraft carrier HMS Albion, 1965</i></p> <p><i>Courtesy of Clive Menary</i></p>	<p>Beaulieu House was built in the 1910s by businessman Joseph Brooke David, when it was first used as a holiday retreat. It was later taken over by the British navy and served as a home to several military officials, before becoming the residence of the Chief-of-Staff of the Far East Fleet in the 1960s. During this time, the Chief-of-Staff and his team would greet warships heading for the naval base with a salute from a jetty in front of the house.</p>
 <p><i>The front facade of the Former Admiralty House</i></p> <p><i>Courtesy of National Heritage Board</i></p>	<p>Gazetted as a National Monument in 2002, the Former Admiralty House constructed between 1939 and 1940 by the British Royal Navy. It was built to house the most senior officer at the former Sembawang Naval Base, and was originally known as Navy House or Canberra House (after the nearby Canberra Road). After the war, the building served as the residence of the Flag Officer, Malaya; the Commander-in-Chief of Britain’s Far East Fleet; and the commander of ANZUK forces (a tripartite force of Australia, New</p>

	<p>Zealand and United Kingdom troops) in Singapore, before being transferred to the Singapore government in 1974. In 2019, the building was renamed Canberra House and will be part of an integrated community hub for Sembawang called Bukit Canberra.</p>
 <p><i>Sembawang Shipyard, 1971</i></p> <p><i>Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore</i></p>	<p>In 1967, Britain announced that it would withdraw its military forces from Singapore by the mid-1970s. As part of this process, the naval base's dockyard was transferred to the Singapore government in 1968. The government established a new company, Sembawang Shipyard, to operate the dockyard as a commercial enterprise.</p>
 <p><i>Pre-war workshop buildings at Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard, 2021</i></p> <p><i>Courtesy of National Heritage Board</i></p>	<p>Sembawang Shipyard was renamed Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard in 2015. Currently, the shipyard has five dry docks in Sembawang, but is expected to move to Tuas in the mid-2020s.</p>


Contributions from members of Sembawang's diverse communities

4 The *Sembawang Heritage Trail* incorporates contributions from 29 past and present Sembawang residents in the form of memories, stories and photographs, along with four contributions from three Facebook open calls for memories which reached out to over 300,000

users and attracted more than 300 comments. These accounts from the community transport trail-goers back to the past and invite them to imagine the area as a bustling naval base, with rows of bars and shops frequented by visiting sailors, and quaint coastal *kampongs*.

5 The trail also tells the stories of the many communities who settled in the area through the decades, including its earliest known inhabitants – the Orang Seletar; planters and boatmen who grew gambier and ferried passengers and goods; villagers of coastal *kampongs* like Kampong Tanjong Irau, Kampong Tengah and Kampong Wak Hassan; as well as the British naval officers and dockyard workers from Singapore, Malaya, India and Hong Kong.

6 These early residents established schools, associations and religious institutions such as the Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple, the former Masjid Naval Base (now replaced by Masjid Assyafaah) and Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang that continue to serve the members of their communities today. For examples of former *kampongs* and long-established community institutions in Sembawang, please refer to the table below:

	<p>Apart from inland villages at Jalan Mata Ayer and Jalan Kemuning, Sembawang also had <i>kampongs</i> along the northern coast since the early 20th century. Some of the longest surviving coastal <i>kampongs</i> included Kampong Tanjong Irau, Kampong Wak Hassan and Kampong Tengah.</p>
<p><i>A seaside kampong house near the 15th milestone of Sembawang Road, 1960s</i> <i>Courtesy of Tony Dyer and Sofea Abdul Rahman</i></p>	



Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple at its original location at Canberra Road, 1993

Courtesy of Loh Koah Fong

Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple traces its origins to 1962, when P. Karupiah, a dockyard worker, dreamt of Lord Murugan and a golden cobra under an *elantha* (jujube) tree. He then found the tree of his dream near Canberra Road and set up an altar beneath it. Hindu dockyard workers began to pray at the altar and later built a wooden shed to house the shrine. In 1964, the shrine was registered as Punithamaram Sree Balasubramaniam Temple. Devotees later raised funds to build a proper temple, which was consecrated in 1971.



The former Masjid Naval Base, which was located at the junction of Canberra Road and the former Delhi Road, 1986

Courtesy of Loh Koah Fong

The Masjid Naval Base at the former Delhi Road opened in 1968, the result of efforts by Muslims in the base's police force. This was demolished in the 2000s after the completion of Masjid Assyafaah, which was built to accommodate the growing Muslim community in Sembawang. Designed by Tan Kok Hiang of Forum Architects, Masjid Assyafaah stands out as a mosque that integrates Islamic symbols with contemporary architecture. Instead of a traditional minaret, the mosque has a 33-metre high steel tower bearing a star and crescent moon. Inside, the prayer rooms are naturally lit by skylights in the roof and framed by screens with rich arabesque patterns (an Islamic art form).



Masjid Assyafaah

Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang, 2021

Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Opened in 1963, Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang was built by the residents of Kampong Tengah, and is the only surviving landmark of the former village today. The mosque also served the Muslim community in the nearby villages of Kampong Wak Hassan and Kampong Tanjong Irau.

Explore Singapore's northern coast at your leisure

7 To explore the multi-faceted history of Sembawang, trail-goers can embark on three thematic, bite-sized routes according to their interests and in their own time. These routes are:

- **Historical Landmarks of Sembawang** (2 hours on foot and with public transport), 7km
This route takes trail-goers to sites that recall major milestones in Sembawang's past.
- **Communities of Sembawang** (3 hours on foot and with public transport), 8km
This route explores former neighbourhoods in Sembawang, including coastal villages and homes around the former naval base.
- **From Dockyard to Shipyard** (2.5 hours on foot and with public transport), 5km
This route takes trail-goers to various landmarks that were part of the former naval base.

8 Mr Alvin Tan, Deputy Chief Executive (Policy & Community), NHB, said: "We hope that the new Sembawang Heritage Trail will serve as a springboard for Singaporeans to enjoy this coastal town's rich naval history, and its surviving landmarks such as the Sembawang Hot Spring, the Sembawang Strip, the Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang etc.. We also hope that during

this period of travel restrictions, more Singaporeans will venture out and rediscover different parts of Singapore through all of NHB's heritage trails.”

9 The *Sembawang Heritage Trail's* companion guide and map (the map is available in four languages) can be downloaded from NHB's heritage portal, Roots.gov.sg. Printed copies of the guide will also be available for a limited period at Sembawang Community Club, Sembawang Town Council and Canberra Community Club.

10 For more information, please refer to:

- **Annex A:** Thematic trail routes of *Sembawang Heritage Trail*
- **Annex B:** List of heritage sites in the *Sembawang Heritage Trail* and information on heritage markers
- **Annex C:** Five things you may not know about Sembawang
- **Annex D:** List of heritage trails developed by NHB

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About the National Heritage Board

The National Heritage Board (NHB) was formed on 1 August 1993. As the custodian of Singapore's heritage, NHB is responsible for telling the Singapore story, sharing the Singaporean experience and imparting our Singapore spirit.

NHB's mission is to preserve and celebrate the shared heritage of our diverse communities, for the purpose of education, nation-building and cultural understanding. It manages the national museums and heritage institutions, and sets policies relating to heritage sites, monuments and the national collection. Through the national collection, NHB curates heritage programmes and



presents exhibitions to connect the past, present and future generations of Singaporeans. NHB is a statutory board under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Please visit www.nhb.gov.sg for more information.

SEMBAWANG HERITAGE TRAIL – THREE THEMATIC TRAIL ROUTES

The *Sembawang Heritage Trail* features three thematic trail routes of varying distances, which the public can embark on at their own time.

1. **Historical landmarks of Sembawang** (2 hours on foot and with public transport)

Sembawang houses many historical landmarks established by the British and local communities, and is home to the only natural hot spring park in Singapore. This trail introduces you to these sites that tell of major milestones in Sembawang's past.

- Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple (Recommended starting point)
- Sembawang Strip
- Former homes in the naval base
- Former Sembawang Shipyard
- Sembawang Shopping Centre
- Sembawang Hot Spring Park

2. **Communities of Sembawang** (3 hours on foot and with public transport)

Since the 19th century, Sembawang has been home to many communities, from coastal villages to British families based at the former naval base. This trail brings you through these former neighbourhoods and highlights buildings that were once part of these northern communities. Stops include:

- Former Admiralty House (Recommended starting point)
- Former homes in the naval base
- Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang
- Former Kampong Tengah Holiday Camp (now PAssion WaVe @ Sembawang)
- Sembawang Strip

3. **From Dockyard to Shipyard** (2 hours 30 mins on foot and with public transport)

Sembawang Naval Base, which opened in 1938 and closed in 1971, occupied much of Sembawang's northern coast. The base included HM Dockyard, Singapore, a ship repair facility which was transferred to the Singapore government in 1968, when it became

known as Sembawang Shipyard. This trail takes you to various landmarks that were part of the former naval base.

- Former Admiralty House (Recommended starting point)
- Masjid Assyafaah
- Former Aggie Weston's Royal Sailors' Rest
- Former Sembawang Shipyard
- Former Sembawang Fire Station (within Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard)
- Former homes in the naval base
- Sembawang Park and Beach
- Beaulieu House and Beaulieu Jetty

SEMBAWANG HERITAGE TRAIL SITES AND MARKERS

1. Sungei Sembawang
2. Sungei Simpang Kiri
3. Former rubber estates in Sembawang (now Sembawang Garden Arcade and Sembawang Springs Estates residential areas)
4. Former kampongs in Sembawang: Kampong Jalan Mata Ayer, Jalan Kemuning, Kampong Wak Hassan, Kampong Tanjong Irau, Kampong Tengah, Sembawang Village and Chong Pang Village
- 5. Sembawang Hot Spring Park***
6. Former Seletar Pier
7. Former Kampong Tengah Holiday Camp (now PAssion WaVe @ Sembawang)
- 8. Beaulieu House and Beaulieu Jetty***
9. **HM Naval Base Singapore** (the dockyard later became Sembawang Shipyard and now Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard)*
- 10. Former Sembawang Fire Station (within Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard)***
11. HMS Terror (within Sembawang Camp)
12. Red House (within Sembawang Camp)
13. Former Aggie Weston's Royal Sailors' Rest
14. Sree Narayana Mission and the Never Fear Marker
- 15. Former Admiralty House (National Monument)***
- 16. Former homes in the naval base***
17. Sembawang Air Base
- 18. Sembawang Strip***
19. St Peter's Dockyard Church (now Yishun Christian Church)
20. Sembawang Tamil Methodist Church
- 21. Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple***
22. Sembawang Sikh Temple (now Gurdwara Sahib Yishun)

23. Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang*

24. Masjid Assyafaah*

25. Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea

26. Sembawang Tian Ho Kong

27. Hua Poh Siang Tng and Chin Kong Religion Fook Poon Tong (housed in Chong Pang Combined Temple)

28. Sembawang Presbyterian Church

29. Sembawang Shopping Centre

30. Sembawang Park and Beach

31. Bukit Canberra

* *Heritage sites with markers*

Total: 31 sites

Heritage sites featured inside trail markers are in **BOLD** (note that multiple sites can be featured within the same marker as some of these sites are located in close proximity)

SIX THINGS YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT SEMBAWANG

1. **The residence of the highest-ranking naval officer in colonial Singapore was located in Sembawang.** The grandest building in the former naval base is the Former Admiralty House, which was built in 1939-40 as Navy House or Canberra House, where the top naval officer in Singapore stayed. It was redesignated as Admiralty House when the Commander-in-Chief of Britain's Far East Fleet, who held the rank of Vice-Admiral, resided there from 1958. The Former Admiralty House was gazetted as a National Monument in 2002.
2. **Sembawang boasted the world's largest dry dock in the 1930s.** The centrepiece of the naval base, King George VI Dry Dock, was completed in 1937 and declared open on 14 February 1938. Named after the then-monarch of Britain, the 305-metre-long dock was the world's largest dry dock then and could fit the Royal Navy's largest battleships. After a ship enters the dock, the enclosure is sealed and water is pumped out so that the ship can be repaired while dry.
3. **During the Japanese Occupation, the Japanese converted the Sembawang Hot Spring area into a sanatorium with tiled thermal baths for their naval forces.** The land nearby was also used by the Japanese navy to grow vegetables and fruit. During the 1950s, the hot spring's marshy pools then attracted people who cooked eggs or soaked in the water to relieve muscle pains. It also drew punters who believed that bathing in its waters during the horseracing season would bring them luck.
4. **Sembawang played a key role in the introduction of rubber to Singapore and Malaya.** Henry Nicholas Ridley, who became Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens in 1888, strongly believed that rubber would become a valuable commodity and planted 1,095 young rubber trees in Sembawang Forest Reserve. These saplings, the first rubber trees to be established in Sembawang, produced rubber that was tapped for sale, as well as seeds that Ridley distributed to planters.
5. **Sembawang's earliest known inhabitants were the Orang Seletar.** The origins of this maritime community are unclear: some believe they descended from seafaring Orang Laut ("Sea People"), while others suspect that the Orang Seletar were forest-dwellers who adapted to life in tidal creeks. In the early 20th century, many Orang Seletar frequented the waters around Pulau Seletar (an island east of Tanjong Irau), where they had a *bente* (temporary village). They only moved further away when the land nearby was acquired in the 1920s for the British naval and air bases.

6. **Former national football player Quah Kim Song** used to live in one of Sembawang's coastal kampongs, Kampong Tanjong Irau. He used to play football with the dockyard workers at the open field at Deptford Road.

List of Heritage Trails Developed by the National Heritage Board

1. Bukit Timah Heritage Trail
2. Yishun-Sembawang Heritage Trail (To be refreshed as Yishun Heritage Trail at a later date)
3. Ang Mo Kio Heritage Trail
4. Balestier Heritage Trail
5. Jalan Besar Heritage Trail
6. Kampong Glam Heritage Trail
7. World War II Heritage Trail
8. Tiong Bahru Heritage Trail
9. Queenstown Heritage Trail
10. Resilience Trails
11. Toa Payoh Heritage Trail
12. Jurong Heritage Trail
13. Singapore River Walk
14. Jubilee Walk
15. Bedok Heritage Trail
16. Little India Heritage Trail
17. Tampines Heritage Trail
18. Orchard Heritage Trail
19. Pasir Ris Heritage Trail
20. Hougang Heritage Trail
21. Sembawang Heritage Trail

For more information, please visit <https://www.roots.gov.sg/nhb/trails>.