

# COMMUNITIES OF QUEEN, WATERLOO AND BENCOOLEN STREETS

Home to a diverse range of communities, Queen, Waterloo and Bencoolen streets were originally slated to be a European quarter according to the Raffles Town Plan in the 1820s. Its early European character was apparent in the churches, schools, businesses and residences established in the area, as well as the streets that were named after Queen Victoria (Queen Street and Victoria Street), the British victory at the 1815 Battle of Waterloo (Waterloo Street), and the British colony of Bencoolen in Sumatra (Bencoolen Street).

However, by the mid-1800s, significant numbers of Eurasians, Chinese, Indians, Jews, Malays as well as other communities had settled in the area and brought with them new cultures and traditions. Drawn by the proximity of Cathedral of the Good Shepherd and Saint Joseph's Church as well as schools such as Saint Joseph's Institution, Eurasians bought homes on Queen, Waterloo and Bencoolen streets, and along Bras Basah Road. Eurasian families including the

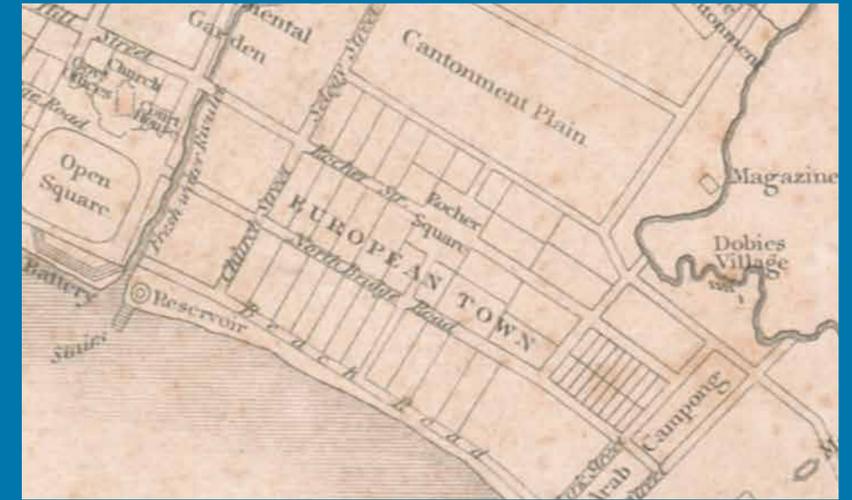
Tessensohns, Bogaars, Mosbergens and Clarks served in the churches, ran businesses and enlivened the social and cultural life of the precinct.

Likewise, other communities were also drawn to the social and religious institutions in the area. For instance, Maghain Aboth Synagogue on Queen Street served as a hub for the Jewish community, which referred to the area as "the mahallah" ("neighbourhood" in Arabic). The presence of the Japanese community was evident in the "10-cent" discount shops, hotels and schools that were located near Middle Road, while the Chinese and Indian communities established Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple and Sri Krishnan Temple in the 19th century.

The colloquial names of these streets further point to the diversity here. For example, some in the Chinese community may know Queen, Waterloo and Bencoolen streets as Sa Beh Lor, Si Beh Lor and Gor

Beh Lor respectively, which translates to "Third Horse Road", "Fourth Horse Road" and "Fifth Horse Road" in Hokkien (the term "horse road" refers to main carriage roads). The Chinese also knew Queen Street as Sek A Ni Koi ("Serani Street", referencing the Eurasian population), rendering the Malay word for Eurasians in Hokkien.

Today, these streets are part of the Bras Basah Bugis arts and heritage precinct, and the residences of yesteryears have been converted into venues housing performing arts groups, museums and restaurants. Nevertheless, devotees and parishioners still worship in the churches, temples and mosques, and the tight-knit relationships that were forged over time continue to allow communities to coexist peacefully.



The Singapore Town Plan, showing Queen, Waterloo and Bencoolen streets to be part of a "European Town", late-19th century. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

**HARMONY WALKS**  
QUEEN, WATERLOO AND BENCOOLEN STREETS

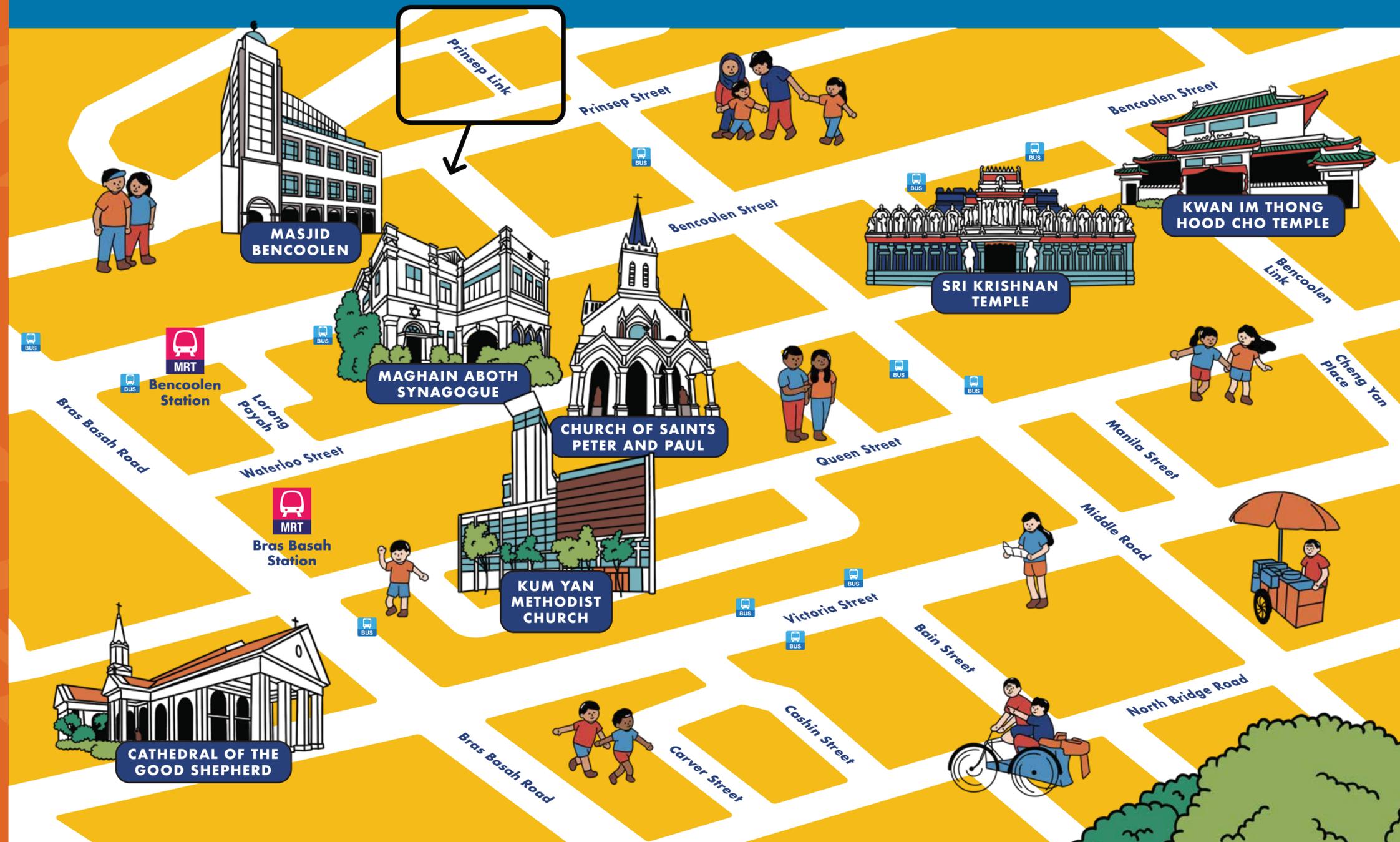
Harmony Walks comprises a series of trails developed by the National Heritage Board that celebrates Singapore's religious and racial harmony, and explores the commonalities shared by diverse communities in the areas of religion, culture and built heritage. These common threads have helped to strengthen social bonds among Singaporeans and cultivated values of understanding and openness that have enabled our communities to live side by side in harmony over the centuries.



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# COEXISTENCE, COOPERATION AND COMMONALITIES

The peaceful coexistence of the diverse communities and religious institutions at Queen, Waterloo and Bencoolen streets serves as a good example of the unique religious and racial harmony found in Singapore. Through harmonious coexistence and cooperation as well as similar practices, these communities and

institutions have forged strong relationships, and are united in their commitment to preserve and promote Singapore's racial and religious harmony. Listed in this brochure are some commonalities shared by the different communities and religious institutions in this area.

## COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS

Everyday interactions between different cultures have helped cultivate a better understanding and acceptance of social and cultural differences among the communities in the area. Out of these organic relationships built over the years, sometimes surprising and often uplifting stories emerge. The temples, churches and mosques in the area also conduct inter-religious visits and dialogue sessions, and participate in each other's festivals to show support and reach out to other communities.

At Maghain Aboth, non-Jews including a Hindu Indian family have worked as cooks and custodians, thereby helping to preserve Jewish culture and tradition through their mastery of *kosher* cuisine as well as knowledge of festivals such as Sukkot (the Feast of the Tabernacles, commemorating the Biblical Exodus).

Likewise, worshippers at the Hindu Sri Krishnan Temple and the Taoist-Buddhist Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple visit and offer prayers to sets of deities housed in both temples. By doing so, new cross-cultural practices have emerged including the use of Chinese-style joss sticks and praying in the direction of the sky - largely a Chinese practice - in front of the Hindu temple.



### Kum Yan Methodist Church 1 Queen Street

Founded in 1918, this church was originally located at the former Yeung Ching School on Club Street and was known as Cantonese Methodist Church. The founding members of the church were Cantonese-speaking Christians from China who were teaching in Singapore during the time, and had wanted to reach out to the Cantonese community. In 1946, the community acquired the church's present site at Queen Street, and the building was later consecrated in December 1957. Today, the church caters to a variety of language groups among its 1,000 worshippers, and services are held in Cantonese, English and Mandarin.



### Maghain Aboth Synagogue 24/26 Waterloo Street

*(The synagogue is closed to walk-in visitors. Please write to the Jewish Welfare Board for permission to enter.)*

Consecrated in 1878, Maghain Aboth is Singapore's oldest synagogue. Bearing a name which means "shield of our fathers" in Hebrew, the synagogue, which is a Greek word that means "assembly", was first constructed as a single-storey building for about 100 congregants. Maghain Aboth was then expanded and restored several times over its history, and is presently a two-storey building built in the Neo-Classical style. Today, the synagogue caters to some 200 worshippers, including a sizable number of Jewish expatriates.



## COMMON PRACTICES

While distinct in spiritual and cultural traditions, commonalities can be found across different religious practices. The use of water is a common denominator for several religions, serving as ritual purification for Muslims (*wudu*) and Orthodox Jews (*netilat yadayim*) before prayers, and as a sacramental element in Christianity. Incense of various types is used among Arabic, Jewish, Indian, Chinese and other communities, and forms part of liturgies and rituals in Christianity, Hinduism and in the everyday worship of Taoists.

The Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam also share several common threads in religious observances. Ahead of the period of Lent, Christians practise fasting, abstinence and almsgiving, as do Muslims during the month of Ramadan, and Jews during Yom Kippur, Tisha B'Av and other Jewish holidays.

Within a diverse society such as Singapore, religious messages also pass through different language mediums to reach out to a range of communities, with institutions offering services in various languages to meet the evolving needs of their congregations. The institutions in this area have longstanding traditions in this respect, and they include the Church of Saints Peter and Paul and Kum Yan Methodist Church, both of which still conduct services in Cantonese.



### Masjid Bencoolen 51 Bencoolen Street

Established sometime between 1825 and 1828, Masjid Bencoolen is the second oldest mosque in Singapore. The mosque was founded by settlers from Bencoolen in Indonesia (now Bengkulu), and was also known as Bengali Mosque because of the high number of Indian Muslim congregants. First constructed as an attap-roofed mosque, Masjid Bencoolen was rebuilt in brick and concrete in 1845 by Arab merchant and philanthropist Syed Omar Aljunied. In the early 2000s, the mosque and surrounding lots were redeveloped into a mixed commercial and residential development, with the mosque housed within. In 2019, the mosque announced that it will undergo further upgrading to expand its prayer spaces and improve amenities.



## CROSS-CULTURAL MOTIFS

At times, the interactions and shared practices of different communities have taken physical form through architecture and design. For example, the Neo-Gothic Church of Saints Peter and Paul features distinctly Chinese motifs, such as lotus-shaped plasterwork and the Chinese characters *lian zhu tang* ("House of God" in Mandarin) above its entrance. The same lotus motif, which symbolises purity and enlightenment in Chinese culture, can also be found on the perimeter wall of Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple.

Animals are commonly used for their symbolic qualities across several religions here. Stone lions flank the entrances of Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple as they are regarded as guardians in Buddhism and Taoism, while the lion motif can also be found in Sri Krishnan Temple as they are associated with the deity Narasimha. The Christian tradition also employs animal motifs, including the eagle to represent Saint John the Evangelist, as seen on the lectern in the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, as well as the dove to represent God.

Festivals are also occasions to generate goodwill between communities and help facilitate the fusion of different cultural elements. For years, Sri Krishnan Temple has hung Chinese-style lanterns and decorations during the Lunar New Year, helping their Chinese devotees feel at home and providing the visually striking juxtaposition of Chinese designs against traditional Hindu temple architecture.



### Sri Krishnan Temple 152 Waterloo Street

Sri Krishnan Temple traces its roots to a shrine established under a banyan tree in 1870s, which evolved into a gathering place and eventually a temple for Hindus in the area. The presiding deity of the temple is Krishna, an avatar of the supreme deity Vishnu. Other deities enshrined in the temple's sanctums include Anjaneyar, Vishnu Durgai, Gurusvaayurappan, Sudarsana, Mahalakshmi, Suryan, Narasimha, Balaji, Padmavathy and the 108 Divya Desams.



### Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple 178 Waterloo Street

Established in 1884, Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple was founded by Li Nan Shan, a migrant from Jieyang county in Guangdong, China. The Buddhist-Taoist temple is dedicated to Guanyin, who is known to the Chinese community as the Goddess of Mercy. Inside the temple are shrines dedicated to various Buddhist-Taoist deities, including Guanyin, the Buddha, Bodhidharma and Hua Tuo, a famous Chinese physician in China who after his death was made the patron saint of medicine.



### Cathedral of the Good Shepherd A Queen Street

Established in 1832 by missionaries from the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), the present church building of the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd was completed in 1847 and is Singapore's oldest standing Roman Catholic church. The church holds the status of a cathedral as it is the seat of the Archbishop of Singapore, and its dedication to the Good Shepherd (a symbol of Jesus Christ) is attributed to the martyrdom of MEP Bishop Laurent Lambert and two other French priests in Korea in the 1830s.



### Church of Saints Peter and Paul 225A Queen Street

The Church of Saints Peter and Paul was established in 1870 by the MEP's Chinese Catholic Mission to serve the Chinese and Indian Catholic communities in Singapore. The Chinese Catholic community's decades-long efforts to raise funds for the building is commemorated through a wall plaque inscribed in Chinese characters inside the church, as well as inscriptions on the five vibrant stained glass panels behind the altar, which depict Saint Joseph, Saint Peter, the Blessed Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Lourdes, Saint Paul and the Sacred Heart of Jesus.



## COMING TOGETHER TO DO GOOD

Charity work and reaching out to the less fortunate have always been fundamental values shared by the different religions in Singapore. From the earliest days of their foundations, the temples, churches, mosques and synagogues in this area have been concerned with the welfare of the vulnerable and the marginalised.

Operating from Maghain Aboth's premises, the Jewish Welfare Board used rental income from shophouses to support lower-income families during the colonial era. Kum Yan Methodist Church reaches out to elderly residents of the Crawford Street area and collaborates with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to supply groceries to lower-income families under the M. Y. Manna programme.

The various institutions here have also worked together in charitable efforts, reaching out to help the lower-income and the elderly from all communities, migrant workers as well as other disadvantaged groups. Inter-faith activities, including visits to learn more about the different faiths and participation in each other's festivals, have also helped foster greater understanding across communities.

