» DISCOVER OUR SHARED HERITAGE

TOA PAYOH HERITAGE TRAIL

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INTRODUCTION

On the surface of things, Toa Payoh seems an entirely typical Singapore town. What differentiates it from nearby Ang Mo Kio, or Tampines to the east?

Indeed, as the first town designed and developed entirely by the Housing & Development Board (HDB), Toa Payoh is the archetypical granddaddy of all public housing towns in Singapore. Providing a proving ground for the budding culture and social architecture of public housing from the 1960s, as well as the community institutions that have since become ubiquitous, Toa Payoh may well be the quintessential modern Singapore town.

Fittingly, the list of Singapore 'firsts' pioneered in Toa Payoh is a long one: first Residents' Association (a ground-up effort that preceded the Residents' Committees of today), first town to employ the neighbourhood police post system, first cooperative supermarket in Singapore (NTUC Welcome, the forerunner of today's NTUC Fairprice), first Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station to be built and first mosque to be constructed under the Mosque Building Fund (MBF), among other firsts.

Beneath the veneers of recent history and the lists of institutional milestones however, the stories of life in Toa Payoh run deep. From the earliest settlers, plantation owners and workers in the 19th century struggling to clear vast swathes of swampland, to the *kampong* residents who followed in their wake and later the first generation of flat dwellers, the theme has been one of pioneer lives and hardworking occupations.

This trail booklet explores the history of Toa Payoh as well as sites of significant heritage interest that can be enjoyed today. At the back of the booklet, you will find a trail map that marks nine sites with storied heritages and the numerous community memories associated with it. The map provides an accessible way of touring Toa Payoh, and the trail text also suggests additional places of interest. Enjoy exploring Toa Payoh through this heritage trail!

TOA PAYOH IN THE 19TH CENTURY

BIG SWAMPS AND SMALLER RELATIONS: NAMING TOA PAYOH

The name Toa Payoh has long been accepted to mean 'big swamp', from the words *toa* (big in the Hokkien and Teochew dialects) and *payoh* (a loanword from the Malay word for swamp, *paya*).

Writing in the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1889*, H. T. Haughton noted this particular origin of the name and it has been the most commonly cited one since. As early as 1848, an article by Seah Eu Chin in the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* established that the word *payo* was used by the Chinese to describe swampy or marshy land.

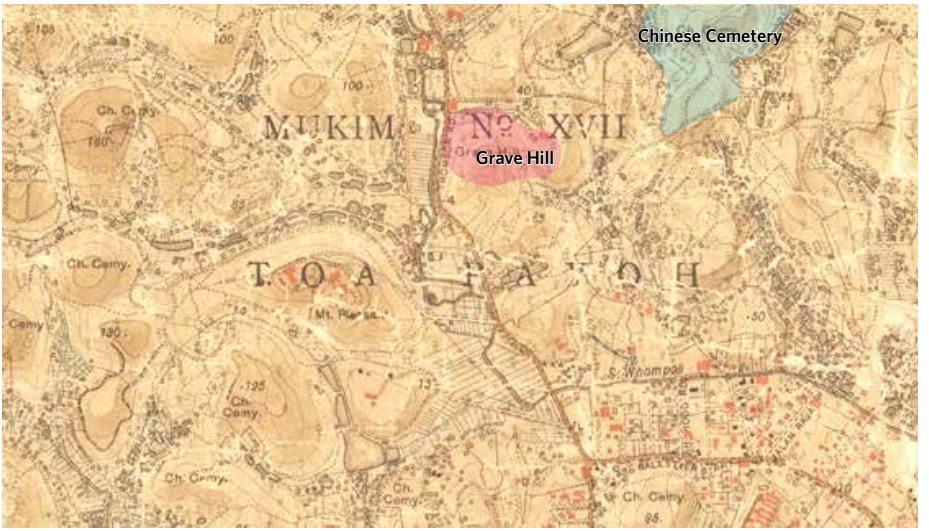
A 1849 article from *The Singapore Free Press* newspaper sheds more light on the name of Toa Payoh. It stated:

"In marshy or muddy places, where the erection of a regular path would be impossible or very expensive, the Chinese cut large trees which they throw into the marsh or mud in order to form an imperfect path. Such a path is then called Pyoh, to which the word Toah, long or large, or Kyjah or Soeh, small or little, is put to distinguish it from others situated in the same district."

The article goes on to mention Toah Pyoh Penkang, an area near Jurong, and Toah Pyoh Lye Pandang, in present-day Bukit Timah.

EARLY HISTORY & MAPPING

Plan of Singapore Town by John Turnbull Thomson, 1846. Toa Payoh is labelled 'District of Toah Pyoh Chui Kow', and 'Toah Pyoh Lye' is to its west.



This map of Singapore from 1924 shows inhabited areas, burial grounds and hills in Toa Payoh, including Grave Hill.

In the first few decades after Sir Stamford Raffles' landing in 1819, development was largely concentrated around Singapore city and the coastal areas. The interior of the island, of which Toa Payoh was considered a part, remained mostly forest, swampland and hills until opened up by plantation expansion.

On a 1842 map of Singapore, Toa Payoh is still mainly forest and swamp, with a few scattered plots of cleared land (likely plantations) in the north and south of the district. The area, spelt Toah Pyoh, covers a much greater expanse than present-day Toa Payoh, stretching into what is now Bishan in the north, Caldecott and Bukit Brown in the west, Potong Pasir and Bidadari in the east and right up to Novena in the south.

The area to the west, present-day Bukit Timah, is labelled Toah Pyoh Lye for its proximity to Toa Payoh, *lye* being the Hokkien word for 'come'. Another map, from 1846 names the district Toah Pyoh Chui Kow, and shows large tracts of forest where Toa Payoh Town Park and the northern part of Balestier now are.

John Turnbull Thomson (b. 21 August 1821, Glororum Farm, Northumberland – d. 16 October 1884, Invercargill, New Zealand)

The first major road to run through Toa Payoh, neatly bisecting the district in the 19th century, was Thomson Road. Completed by colonial engineer and surveyor John Turnbull Thomson in 1853 and named after him, Thomson Road is today the western boundary of Toa Payoh. In the past, the road was known colloquially by these names:

Chia chui kang *(Hokkien: freshwater stream, a possible reference to the nearby Kallang River)*

Thanir pilei sadakku *(Tamil: water pipe street, a possible reference to the MacRitchie Reservoir)*

Ang kio tau *(Hokkien: head of the red bridge, a reference to the bridge connecting Thomson Road and Kampong Java Road),*

Hai nan sua *(Hokkien: Hainan Hill, the old Hainanese burial ground at the 5th milestone of Thomson Road)*

Mi sua keng *(Hokkien: vermicelli buildings)*

Pek san teng *(Cantonese: a reference to the Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng cemetery)*

As government surveyor and chief engineer for the Straits Settlements between 1841 and 1853, Thomson oversaw the expansion of the road network into Singapore's interior, greatly facilitating the opening up of the island's forested, undeveloped core.

Growing up in the United Kingdom, Thomson was roused by the tales of his schoolmates, the sons of British planters who owned large estates in Penang. After completing a course in mathematics at Aberdeen University, the 16-year-old Thomson headed for Penang to survey the estates of Brown, Scott & Co. There he learnt Malay and Hindi, and at the age of 20 was appointed government surveyor to Singapore.

During his 12-year career in Singapore, Thomson oversaw the construction of buildings (including the tower and spire of St Andrew's Cathedral, the original Tan Tock Seng Hospital on Pearl's Hill and Horsburgh Lighthouse), bridges (including Kallang Bridge and Kandang Kerbau Bridge) and roads (including the Jurong, Changi and Bukit Timah Roads).

Surveying Singapore's interior and surrounding islands on horseback, Thomson encountered tigers in the jungles, mutinous gunboat crews and worker riots during the construction of Horsburgh Lighthouse. Beyond surveying and engineering, he was also a painter and sketcher as well as author of two books on life in Malaya and a translation of the Hikayat Abdullah.

After his health deteriorated likely due to malaria, Thomson left for the United Kingdom in 1853 and eventually settled in New Zealand, later becoming the first Surveyor-General of New Zealand. On his departure from Singapore, he said: "It was with mixed feelings of deep regret that I was forced away from so beautiful and pleasant a Settlement as Singapore, where I passed the best part of my life, and to which I was bound by many ties of friendship."

Early maps and property indentures show that a number of prominent personalities owned land in Toa Payoh in the 19th century. They include Teochew merchant and community leader Seah Eu Chin (b. 1805 – d. 1883), Seah's brother-in-law and Municipal Commissioner Tan Seng Poh (b. 1830 – d. 1879) and Wee Kim Yam (b. 1855 – d. 1914), the eldest son of Teochew plantation owner Wee Ah Hood. Wee Bin (b. 1823 – d. 1868), the trader and owner of a fleet of steamships, also owned land in the district and his family's legacy remains in the form of Boon Teck Road, named after Wee Bin's son Boon Teck.

One European with holdings in Toa Payoh was Abraham Logan (b. 1816 – d. 1873), lawyer and owner and editor of *The Singapore Free Press*, while Elizabeth George (b. 1797 – d. 1858), the Eurasian daughter of William Farquhar, the first Resident of colonial Singapore, owned more than 180 acres of land in Toa Payoh.

Most of the privately held land in Toa Payoh in the 19th century was cultivated for plantations, primarily gambier and pepper. An 1855 report by the Municipal Committee showed that there were 15 clearings in Toa Payoh at the time, on which were planted 355,000 gambier trees, 38,800 pepper vines and 2,190 nutmeg trees.

An illustration of a pepper plantation, 1855.

Workers on a gambier plantation, 1921.

Gambier manufacturing.

The report also listed 127 coolies working on the plantations. The local yield in that period was 1,290 piculs (a old unit of weight that varied from region to region and traditionally referred to the load a man could carry on a shoulder pole) of gambier, 485 piculs of pepper and a small amount of indigo, one of the sources of indigo dye. Gambier was used in the tanning and dyeing businesses in Asia and Europe, as well as chewed as a food in parts of Asia.

Singapore's 'king of pepper and gambier' at the time was the Guangdong-born Seah Eu Chin, his fortunes having risen in tandem with a gambier boom in the mid-1800s. Seah's plantations ranged from along Thomson Road to River Valley. One of his plantations in Toa Payoh, named Chin Choon, cultivated gambier in the 19th century and rubber in the early 20th century, and included a large bungalow named E-Choon.

LIFE ON THE PLANTATIONS

Seah's article in the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* in 1848 includes some of the earliest documented observations by a Chinese author of the community, and provides an insight into the lives of plantation workers in the mid-19th century.

Each gambier and pepper plantation employed between nine to 13 labourers, with each labourer receiving between $3 and $4 a month. Those involved in the cutting of the gambier leaves and boiling the gambier received a little more.

The actual amount that the workers received rose and fell in proportion with the price of gambier – if a picul of gambier brought in $1.50, the monthly pay of the worker would be about $3, while if the price per picul rose to $2, the worker's wage would be $4.

Seah also wrote of the dwellings of those who laboured in the plantations of Singapore's interior (*attap* walls and roofs with wood pillars) and the outfits they usually wore at work (short jackets and trousers of "coarse Nankeen" cloth, bamboo hats and no shoes). He further observed that:

"The Chinese in the jungle, having daily to work very hard, are much oppressed by the heat in hot weather and affected with colds in cold weather. Those who plant gambier, in consequence of their having to constantly split wood, get their legs and feet hurt with splinters, the broken skin being disregarded, large ulcers are formed."

While most of these labourers had arrived from China in the hope of making enough money to return to their homeland within three years, only one or two in ten were able to do so in that time span as many became addicted to opium, a state of affairs that Seah lamented.

SMALLHOLDER PLANTATIONS AND FARMS

Besides Chin Choon and plantations owned by prominent landowners, there were also smallholder plantations and small plots of farmland in Toa Payoh. In 1848, Joseph Balestier, the American consul to Singapore and sugar plantation owner, described some of the practices of the Chinese smallholder planters from a western perspective.

A number of the owners of small plantations, he wrote, were Chinese immigrant labourers who had completed their initial work contracts. Striking deals with merchants in town for capital and provisions, they ventured into the interior to set up small gambier and pepper plantations, frequently without government license.

A significant portion of the yields from these plantations went to the merchant capitalists, and the smallholder planter moved on to fresh ground after two to three years of cultivation that left the soil exhausted. Balestier was condemnatory of this practice, which was one of the driving forces behind the clearance of forested areas and the development of Toa Payoh in the 19th century:

"As the cultivator is not the proprietor, but a squatter, and as he has abundance of fresh ground at hand, and believing it to be more for his interest to begin a new plantation than to be at the expense of procuring manure to keep the old one in good order, it is not a matter of wonder that he should remove from place to place, and, as the locust, leave a tract of desolation behind him."

On the small farms in Toa Payoh were planted vegetables and *sirih* (betel leaves, chewed across Asia as a mild stimulant). Seah wrote that those who laboured on these farms did not work at midday for fear of being afflicted with dropsy (oedema, an abnormal accumulation of fluid in the body). Dropsy was at the time believed to result from the effluvia or discharge from rotting matter in marshy areas, of which Toa Payoh had no shortage.

BURIAL GROUNDS IN TOA PAYOH

In 1876, Seah, one of the founders of the Teochew Ngee Ann Kongsi, applied to the municipal authorities to turn 83 acres of land

he owned in Toa Payoh into a cemetery for the Teochew community, as the community's cemetery Tai Shan Ting (on Orchard Road) was at full capacity.

These plans eventually fell through, but Seah and a number of his relations were buried in the family burial ground on his plantation grounds. The rediscovery of Seah's grave in 2013 places the location of this burial ground on Grave Hill, in the vicinity of Toa Payoh West (see p.58 on Grave Hill). A number of other landowners in Toa Payoh, including Wee Kim Yam, also used part of their land for private burial grounds.

From the early 1900s, a Chinese cemetery was located around the Braddell Road area, having been established on former swampland. A Singapore Improvement Trust report in 1955 noted however that the cemetery had not seen new interments in "many years".

There were a number of Chinese cemeteries just outside the boundaries of the area we consider as Toa Payoh today, but in the past fell within the district's boundaries. These include:

Lao Yi Shan: A Hainanese burial ground, 29 acres, established in 1862 at the 5th milestone of Thomson Road (around today's Marymount area).

Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng (also known as Bi Shan Ting): A Cantonese burial ground that has lent its name to the modern housing estate of Bishan. Opened in 1870, it was located at Kampong San Teng off Thomson Road.

Xing Wang Shan (also known as Tai Yuan Shan): A burial ground for the Hokkien Seh Ong clan, and opened in 1872. The cemetery spanned 221 acres and was located at Adam Road near the junction of Kheam Hock Road.

Lao Shan: A public Hokkien burial ground, 98 acres. It was located off Kheam Hock Road.

Xin Yi Shan: A public Hainanese burial ground built in 1891 as an extension of Lao Yi Shan.

Guang En Shan: A public Teochew burial ground at Kampong Chia Heng, between the Balestier and Thomson Roads.

Kopi Sua (also known as Coffee Hill and Ka Fei Shan): A public Hokkien cemetery spanning 50 acres and located between the Mount Pleasant and Whitley Roads.

Bukit Brown Chinese Cemetery: A municipal cemetery measuring 213 acres, opened 1922 and at the junction of Kheam Hock Road and Sime Road.

TEMPLES AND VILLAGES: THE KAMPONG ERA

Farmer working on a vegetable farm, 1911.

The advance of the plantations in the 19th century had driven the clearance of primary forest and swampland in Toa Payoh, but by the early 1900s a number had moved on to more fertile soil elsewhere. Some plantations remained, including Seah Eu Chin's, and converted to planting rubber, the price of which had risen sharply.

In the wake of the plantations, settlers arrived and organised themselves into villages. The more fertile soil in what is now Potong Pasir (but was then considered part of Toa Payoh) was seeded with vegetable farms, while in Toa Payoh proper, settlers constructed *attap* or zinc-roofed and wooden plank houses and started a variety of cottage industries. To give an idea of land prices around the turn of the 20th century, a three-acre plot of freehold agricultural land was auctioned off for $1,150 in 1904.

Those not involved in trades made their living as plantation and factory workers, labourers, drivers and trishaw riders. To supplement their income, many reared pigs and chickens for sale, planted fruit trees and made soy bean curd, a trade that involved the whole family and was particularly widespread in Toa Payoh.

Shuang Lin Monastery, 1905.

A 1906 map shows the north of Toa Payoh (what is today the Braddell Road area) and its eastern flank still covered by swampland, right up to the boundaries of the Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery. Shuang Lin, the first major landmark in Toa Payoh, had been built on land contributed by Hokkien community leader Low Kim Pong and was complete by 1908, making it Singapore's oldest Buddhist monastery. By 1924, much of the swampland had been reclaimed, and a Chinese cemetery sat on former marshland in the north.

Among the *attap* and zinc-roofed huts in Toa Payoh, a number had been set up to house *sin keh* (new immigrants from China) who lodged at these huts upon arrival in Singapore and while looking for jobs.

These houses were usually organised by and for kinsmen with the same surname, usually meaning that they hailed from the same village in China, and set up on a *kongsi* (cooperative) basis. When employers or contractors required labourers, plantation or farm workers, they would visit the *sin keh* houses and leave with a worker, paying him around 60 cents a day.

Maps and oral histories from the first half of the 20th century record that the two most densely populated areas were Jalan Rajah and Boon Teck Road, both of which appear on maps as two 'fingers' dotted with huts and stretching deep into Toa Payoh. Both roads are now confined to the Balestier area, but in the past were two of the main thoroughfares into Toa Payoh. For example, Boon Teck Road ran from the Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sin Sia temple in Balestier right through to present-day Toa Payoh Lorong 8.

Other roads leading into Toa Payoh included Ah Hood Road, Braddell Road and Kim Keat Road. There were also scattered dwellings around the cemetery as well as around Grave Hill, the site of Seah Eu Chin's family burial ground.

The *kampongs* (villages) in Toa Payoh were predominantly Chinese, but there were areas with concentrations of Malays. These included the Balestier section of Boon Teck Road and

Kampong Pasiran, near Kampong Chia Heng in the Novena area.

These areas are outside the boundaries of today's Toa Payoh, but in the past were considered part of wider Toa Payoh. Many of the Malays who lived at Boon Teck Road were employed by the Shaw Brothers film studio, which built low-rise houses for its actors and employees near its studio at Jalan Ampas .

A village market, 1950s.

Haji Buang bin Haji Siraj (b.1917), who moved from Kampong Pasiran to Jalan Datoh off Balestier Road in 1937, recalled: "Before Toa Payoh (Constituency) existed, I was already in Toa Payoh. Those (Malays) who came to stay later, they were all new in Toa Payoh. They considered me to be the first Malay to be in Toa Payoh Constituency." Haji Buang, a former president of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), later moved to the Housing & Development Board (HDB) estate in Toa Payoh and was an adviser to the Toa Payoh Muslim Benevolent Society.

Ng Giak Hai (b.1949), who grew up in the *kampong* areas of Toa Payoh's interior, further elaborated: "In the 1950s, most of the *kampong* villagers were Chinese. There were some Malays living on Boon Teck Road, as well as a few Indians. There were more Indians living in Potong Pasir where they herded their cattle, and they would come to Toa Payoh to sell their milk, which was very fresh."

A Toa Payoh kampong, 1963.

The Chinese *kampongs* were largely organised along dialect lines, each with a temple acting as a nucleus around which village social life revolved.

Kampong Puay Teng Keng (see p.11), on Boon Teck Road and the most populated village, was named after the Chee Tian Keng temple that used to stand where Block 34 along Lorong 5 is today. Puay Teng Keng's villagers were largely Hokkien, although its proportion of other dialect groups including Teochews and Cantonese increased after the Japanese Occupation.

The villages with predominantly Teochew populations included Hup Choon Hng, near where the Seu Teck Sean Tong temple is today, and Ann Siang Sua (Ann Siang Hill) in Kim Keat. The Hainanese *kampong*, along with the Zhao Ying Ci temple, was located in the area known as Or Kio (black bridge) between Ah Hood Road and Jalan Rajah.

Each *kampong* housed several hundred households, and a number of them had schools opened by the temples. In the post-*kampong* era, five of these former village temples came together to form the United Temple (see section on United Temple on p.46).

Kampong Puay Teng Keng

Kampong Puay Teng Keng was established around a temple formerly known by the same name, which in Hokkien means 'Flying (from) Above Temple'. The name was inspired by a local tale that the deity Tua Pek Kong flew to the area, landing at the site where the temple was eventually built.

Later, to ensure that the deity remained in situ, the temple was renamed Chee Tian Keng, with the word chee (in Mandarin, 聚) meaning a gathering. Chee Tian Keng is today part of the United Temple along Lorong 8A.

In the memories of Ng Giak Hai, born in Puay Teng Keng and a third-generation Toa Payoh resident, most of the villagers in his area were of Hokkien extraction. The temple was the social heart of the village and functioned as a community centre – there, villagers distributed wedding invitations, received help for funerals and attended *wayangs* (street operas) and religious festivals.

Near the temple, there was the Chee Hwa village school established by the temple management in 1943. By the 1950s, the school had an enrolment of between 700-800 students, divided into morning and afternoon sessions.

There was also a large, bustling market, with some 30 stalls and where vegetables from Potong Pasir and pigs and chickens from the surrounding dwellings were sold, as well as a village fire station with a 21m-high tower.

The Puay Teng Keng firefighting team kept a close eye on the wooden houses in the area, and even helped fight the great Bukit Ho Swee fire of 1961. Also serving the people of the village were about 10 grocery shops, seven or eight coffeeshops and six barbers.

Many of the people in Puay Teng Keng had the surname Ng and hailed from the district of Tong'an in Xiamen, China. Ng remembered:

"People with the surname Ng were from the same village and many from that village came to Puay Teng Keng. At the time, it was all about such relations, if you didn't have relatives, then you come here sure die. You wouldn't have a place to live, wouldn't have a job. It wasn't easy to get hired, you needed a friend to recommend you. When I was young, I did odd jobs and earned about $10 a month. In those days, $10 could last very long, a 15-cent plate of curry rice could fill you up and noodles were 20 cents."

The Puay Teng Keng firefighting team, early 1960s.

Courtesy of Chee Tian Keng Temple

The 21m-high watch tower that was part of the village fire post at Puay Teng Keng, early 1960s.

COTTAGE INDUSTRIES IN TOA PAYOH

Reports by the Singapore Improvement Trust in the 1950s noted that the villagers were not making their living solely from poultry and vegetable farming, but rather supplementing their income from other jobs with these activities.

The same applied to the production of soy bean curd, for which Toa Payoh was well known before the clearance of the *kampongs*. A 1961 survey of cottage industries in the area showed that of 101 small manufacturers surveyed, 55 were involved in making soy bean curd.

Ng Giak Hai, whose grandfather immigrated to Singapore from Tong'An in China in the early 1900s, believes that the tradition of soy bean curd making in Toa Payoh can be traced from the villages of Tong'An.

In Toa Payoh, the villagers made *tau hu* (bean curd in Hokkien), *tau– kwa* (a more firm version of the bean curd) and *tau kee* (dried bean curd skin). In the *kampongs*, the manufacture of soy bean curd was a labourious job that extended across the family. Ng recalled:

"In those days, the process of making tau kwa was very strenuous. To make one batch of tau kwa, we needed to steam about 25 kati (one kati is around 600g) of beans. That batch would take four to five hours to grind, wrap and press. Each household could make two or three batches at most, to make three batches would mean they had to work from morning till night. Children would help to wrap the tau kwa.

"Now, tau kwa is made with machines, but at the time the tau kwa had to be wrapped and pressed piece by piece. Tau kwa was very cheap, two pieces were five cents and it was hard to make a profit. To earn this money, the whole family had to work, and after making the tau kwa someone still had to ride a bicycle out to sell it. But I have to say in the past the tau kwa wrapped one by one, by hand, was very tasty."

Entrepreneurs also opened small factories and workshops in Toa Payoh, turning out a diverse range of products including soy sauce, wooden toys, clogs, rattan and cane goods and pottery.

A number of these factories, especially the heavier industries, were located along Jalan Rajah and Tai Gin Road, now part of the Balestier area but then considered part of Toa Payoh.

A report by the Housing & Development Board (HDB) in 1961 listed the following cottage industries operating in Toa Payoh:

Bean sprout making
Glass factory
Rattan/cane factory
Playing card making
Sauce factory
Scrap iron smelting
Soy bean curd making
Chwee kuay (rice cake) making
Kuay teow (noodles) making
Paper bag making
Rice pudding making
Wooden toys
Clog making
Cloth weaving
Bakery
Sawing factory
Milling factory
Lime box making
Joss factory
Pottery
Rope making
Attap making

KAMPONG LIFE

The life in Puay Teng Keng and other *kampongs* was not an undemanding one. As a child growing up in Ann Siang Sua in the 1950s, Tan Siew Mong had to juggle school and helping his family take care of between 20 to 30 pigs, a number that most pig-rearing households in the area possessed.

"Rearing pigs and chickens was tedious work. Since young, we had to go out and gather banana tree branches for firewood to cook for the pigs, and we

also had to go look for duckweed from the ponds more than half an hour away to feed the pigs. My father rode his trishaw to coffeeshops in town and brought back buckets of leftover rice and bread crusts to feed the pigs and chickens."

– Former traditional Chinese medicine physician Tan Siew Mong (b.1949)

And while pigs and chickens were to be found all around, pork, chicken and other meats were rare treats for the mostly poor villagers. The pigs and poultry were reared for sale and for eggs, and many in Toa Payoh only got to eat meat during religious celebrations and festivals like Chinese New Year.

The environment was not for the delicate. Ng, whose family owned a grocery shop and made bean curd, described the insanitary surroundings vividly:

"Every day when you went out, you would step on pig dung, chicken droppings, dog droppings, all kinds of dung and droppings. People from last time were not afraid of dung, (unlike people) now... now, wah, people see already will vomit. When you passed motion, the entire bucket would be full of worms, roundworms and all kinds of things, (we were) not scared, (we were) used to it and didn't find it smelly. "

– Retiree Ng Giak Hai

Before its redevelopment, the majority of the roads in Toa Payoh were made of laterite, a clay-like material. Whenever the rains exceeded a passing shower, the roads would be flooded and rendered impassable. Former provision shop owner Tiah Teo Song (b.1925) recalled:

"In the old days...it took me more than an hour to get from Balestier Road to Toa Payoh, even when riding on a lorry. The terrain, especially the hill behind Siong Lim Temple (Shuang Lin Monastery) made travelling difficult."

In the *kampongs*, a few hundred households often had to rely on a single public standpipe for potable water. In the 1930s, Leong Weng Kee (b.1932) recalled long queues around the standpipe almost around the clock, with waits lasting from 20 minutes to over an hour. As a result, the buckets of water hauled home were precious indeed, and used mainly for cooking and the washing of faces.

"My father didn't bathe fully, he would use a wet cloth to clean himself – if everybody wanted to bathe fully, my brother and I would have had to carry many buckets back!"

– Former educationist Leong Weng Kee

With the standpipe in such demand, quarrels over access to it were not uncommon. At times, the village children would run to shower at the standpipe close to midnight, when the queues had dissipated. Former clerk Kartar Singh (b.1915) remembered:

"Where there were standpipes, there was trouble because you had to fight for water."

Women at a standpipe at a kampong in Toa Payoh, 1960s.

Toa Payoh during the Japanese Occupation

During the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), Toa Payoh's population increased as many from the city and other parts of Singapore sought refuge in the area, perceived to be safer due to its rural nature. Many continued staying in Toa Payoh after the Occupation.

After the invading Japanese military had taken control of Singapore, large tracts of farmland in Toa Payoh were requisitioned for Japanese use. Civil servants and others from all over Singapore were recruited to farm these areas, and only allowed to sell their produce to the Japanese. As a young man, Letchumanan Masillamani (b.1931) worked on one of these farm plots during the Occupation. He describes Toa Payoh then:

"Toa Payoh was cordoned off and controlled by the Japanese. The area was mostly tapioca plantations, vegetable plantations and pig sties, and there were fish ponds where people grew water lilies to feed the pigs. The Japanese controlled the food production exclusively for themselves, they provided the feed for the chicken and the farmers could not sell to anybody else.

"There were rambutan, chiku and guava trees around, and many *musangs* (civet cats) that could (fight with and) eat snakes. The farmers were afraid of the *musangs*, so they kept dogs. The chickens were running free, unlike today where they are in cages, and they would lay their eggs in boxes provided by the farmers.

"Around Toa Payoh Rise, there were the ponds with water lilies, which were already there before the Japanese came. The ponds were mainly used to plant the water lilies for the pigs, but there were also fishes like arowana, toman and flat fish which were caught and eaten by people.

"The vegetable farms grew *sawi* (mustard greens), *bayam* (spinach), brinjal, sweet potatoes, long beans, French beans and tapioca. All the food from the area would be taken by the Japanese. The locals were starving, and could never get anything like fresh meat and vegetables. (Even if) they walked the whole of Toa Payoh they could not buy anything there."

GANGS OF TOA PAYOH

Secret societies carved out their turfs across Toa Payoh, and remained embedded in the area well after its development as a new town in the 1960s and 1970s. While Toa Payoh remained a rural district, secret societies had plenty of latitude for gang hideouts and crude distilleries, turning out strong moonshine (illegally distilled liquor) that left knees weak and bellies swelling.

There was little doubt as to whose turf Toa Payoh was: Ng Giak Hai remembered his father telling him that police cars seldom dared to venture into the villages, afraid that their tyres would be shot out and the police officers left stranded in hostile territory. Lim Eng Meng (b.1927) recalled:

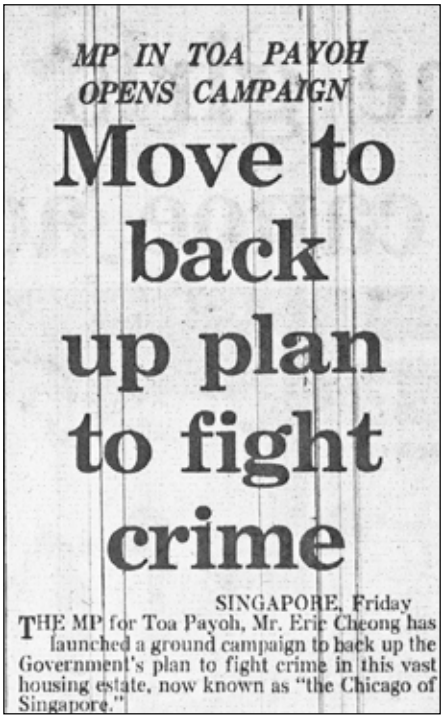
"I don't think you could have gotten a taxi in town to bring you to Toa Payoh after dark. Taxi drivers wouldn't even come near the Siong Lim Temple (Shuang Lin Monastery) in Jalan Toa Payoh. The drivers would persuade their passengers to drop at Lorong Limau (in the Balestier area). Kim Keat Road was the most notorious road... gang fights were rampant. Whenever a fight started in a coffeeshop, it was the poor owner who always lost. His furniture and showcases would be smashed."

– Former finance manager Lim Eng Meng

Protection money rackets were an important source of revenue for the secret societies, and clashes occurred when a gang demanded protection money from a shop deemed to be within the turf of another gang. Wong Shou Jui (b. 1933) remembered in an oral history account:

"At that time secret society activities were very aggressive. Opposite my house, at today's Kim Keat Avenue market, (there was) a big plot of grassland. Rival secret societies had their fights there, and we could see from our window that the fights were very intense. (The gangs) would agree on a time and place to battle it out, (and they had) very fierce battles, so everyone shut their doors to let them fight."

– Grassroots leader Wong Shou Jui



MP IN TOA PAYOH OPENS CAMPAIGN

Move to back up plan to fight crime

SINGAPORE, Friday

THE MP for Toa Payoh, Mr. Eric Cheong has launched a ground campaign to back up the Government's plan to fight crime in this vast housing estate, now known as "the Chicago of Singapore."

THE STRAITS TIMES, SATURDAY, MARCH 27, 1976

Gangs' reign of terror plan for Toa Payoh

By PAUL WEE

POLICE have barred a clandestine plot by three secret society "tongs" to gain "control" of Toa Payoh and unleash a reign of terror in the teeming town.

Twenty youths have been arrested, and a "Tong" smashed. Members of two other "Tongs" are now on the run.

Teenagers

The police action came, according to sources, as those arrested were poised to begin "gang rule" in Toa Payoh which was one dubbed the "Chicago" of Singapore for its high crime rate.

According to informed sources yesterday, the young thugs, some only

20 held, 'tong' smashed in swoop

Branch following information of renewed gangsterism in the area.

The arrests are said to have broken up at least one secret society — the Soo Kiah Tong — which is believed to have been formed only four months ago.

Most of those arrested are teenagers who, according to police sources, are members of this "Tong," a related gang of the notorious 18 secret society group.

Sources said the Bukit Merah police operation, spearheaded by CID men from the Chinese Investigation Branch led by Acting Asst. Supt. Tan Ngo Chew, started following reports that thugs had gone "underground" in their activities.

avoided meeting or congregating in large numbers at public places like coffee-shops and foodstalls which had been favourite venues for secret society thugs to plan a crime or settle a dispute.

Gang members, according to the sources, now operate in groups of two or three, and would only gather together in the event of a show-down with rival gangs.

And it was underworld rivalry that brought about their downfall.

Sources said that for several months, CID men had been stumped in their attempts to round up those responsible for flaws in the Toa Payoh area because there was no information that gangsters were involved.

'Underground'

It is learnt that early this month, detectives began concentrating on the area when they swooped on Toa Payoh Central to investigate the growing number of

Newspaper reports on the "Chicago of Singapore".

Clashes between groups including the infamous 18 gang, and even between factions within each gang, were part of life in the area. Such was the lawlessness and presence of organised crime that Toa Payoh was known as the 'Chicago of the East' or 'Chicago of Singapore', a notoriety that remained into the 1970s.

THE *GOTONG-ROYONG* SPIRIT

For all that the environment was unsanitary, for all the gangsters lurking and tedious labour for little reward, Toa Payoh was home to the villagers.

A Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) report in 1959 called the area an "extensive notorious squatter district". A number of the *kampong* houses had been built by private contractors catering to a post-World War II demand for housing, and were constructed without official planning approval. Much of the land had been leased out by the government for temporary use after the war however, and according to memories of some villagers, many paid rent on their land and *attap* or zinc-roofed houses. In an oral history account, Wan Fong Pau (b.1903) remembered that the government charged a monthly land rent of $2 for a typical *attap* house with space for fruit trees and vegetable patches.

Displaying a true sense of ownership in their community, the villagers of Toa Payoh forged strong social bonds. The village fire station and firefighting team at Puay Teng Keng was a clear example of the *gotong royong* (communal mutual help) spirit in action, as well was the market at the *kampong* – it was managed by the community rather than the municipal authorities or the government, and thrived for it.

There was a system of mutual trust, with the mostly poor villagers at times buying their groceries and food on credit and paying when they received their wages at the end of the month. A sense of neighbourliness pervaded, as Ng recalled:

"For example during Chinese New Year, if a family didn't have much to eat, they could just go next door and the neighbours would say, 'Hey come, come and eat.' Just drinking soft drinks and eating homemade cakes would make us happy. Very few people at Puay Teng Keng closed their doors, even at night. There was a cooperative kind of unity in the kampong. Even now, 60 years later, many of those who stayed in Puay Teng Keng return from across Singapore to get together at the Chee Tian Keng temple."

Salsabira Mahmood (b.1942) remembered the neighbourly atmosphere in 1950s Toa Payoh well:

"My husband and I moved from Sophia Road to Toa Payoh in the mid-1950s. The people who lived in the kampongs as well as the SIT flats were mostly Chinese, there weren't any Malay kampongs here. We had no problems getting along and everyone was friendly. No one was atas or sombong (arrogant). I would go to the kampong to pick vegetables and yam, my neighbours would call me nyonya (madam in Malay) most of the time and we would help take care of each other's children."

While the population of the *kampongs* in Toa Payoh was predominantly Chinese, the relationship between the Chinese and the Malays who lived mainly at the southern end of Boon Teck Road was generally one of trust and cooperation. Tan Kee Seng (b. 1926) remembered that during racial riots in Singapore in the 1960s, the two communities in Toa Payoh banded together despite the national clashes:

"The relations were very good and everybody living together was friendly. The Malays said to us, if the Chinese (from other places) attack them, we should stop them, so that there wouldn't be racial problems here. If Malays (from other places) wanted to attack the Chinese, they would take action to prevent them from doing so. There was communication and cooperation before any problems."

TWILIGHT OF THE KAMPONGS

Improvement works along Sungei Kallang at Braddell Road to reduce flooding in Potong Pasir and Toa Payoh, 1968.

In the early 1950s, Singapore was faced with a serious housing shortage. The island's population had grown from just over 220,000 in 1901 to 938,144 in 1947. The population in the 'urban *kampong*' fringe around the city, including Toa Payoh and consisting mostly of *attap* and wood houses, saw a rise from 127,000 in 1947 to 246,000 in the mid-1950s.

The Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) began acquiring land in Toa Payoh and asserting their legal rights over land owned by the colonial government in the early 1950s. The first area to be acquired was around Toa Payoh West, where Seah Eu Chin's plantation and family burial ground were formerly located.

One of the SIT's land acquisitions led to a legal challenge from a landowner who claimed compensation to the amount of $1 per square foot for a 78-acre piece of land, the SIT having paid 15 cents per square foot. The Court eventually raised the compensation to 18 cents per square foot, arriving at a price of $613,591 for the land.

By 1954, the SIT had begun building flats in the Kim Keat Road area, envisioning a new housing estate across Toa Payoh to house 65,000 people and costing $2.885 million.

An SIT report from 1955 estimated that there were around 21,000 people in Toa Payoh living in *attap* and zinc-roofed houses, the majority of them engaged in cottage industries, blue-collar work, pig and chicken rearing and farming. A town plan to transform the landscape of Toa Payoh, influenced by key tenets of British New Town planning including the usage of road circuses, was formulated by the SIT in 1958, but a significant roadblock remained in place.

The villagers of the *kampongs* remained mostly skeptical of government plans to resettle them as well the potential loss of their livelihoods and rural neighbourhood. Perhaps as importantly, they cherished the freedom afforded by the *kampong* environment to manage their land and breed their livestock, and feared that the proposed SIT flats would be out of their financial reach.

With the Lim Yew Hock government's focus on managing problems of industrial unrest, student riots and the question of independence, the SIT was unable to resolve these local issues and effectively clear Toa Payoh of what they regarded as squatter slums.

RESISTANCE AND RESOLUTION

From the mid-1950s, the worries of the villagers were taken up by associations such as the Singapore Country People's Association (SCPA) and Singapore Rural Residents' Association (SRRA). These associations, active across the island, built on the concerns of the *kampong* folk to form organised resistance against the clearance of the villages and the development of Toa Payoh.

Both the SCPA and the SRRA provided legal advice to residents, organised protests and sit-ins, urged villagers to act as a collective front and penned letters to the authorities calling for raised compensation rates. They also organised social activities, improvement schemes and education in the *kampongs*.

In letters to the government, the SCPA said it supported the development of public housing in Toa Payoh in principle, but demanded higher rates of compensation for the 20,000 farmers and settlers.

A demolition squad sent into the *kampongs* by the SIT was assaulted by residents in 1955, leading to SIT teams requiring police protection on subsequent occasions. SIT investigations showed that many of the residents had "the backing of hooligans or gangsters", part of secret societies that had long been embedded in the *kampongs* and would fiercely protect their turf.

By 1960 the only flats in Toa Payoh were at the Kim Keat area known as Temple Estate (by its proximity to the Shuang Lin Monastery), housing some 4,000 people. Most of the residents of Temple Estate had arrived from other parts of Singapore, and many were middle-income, white collar workers compared to the largely blue-collar *kampong* folk.

In 1961, the Housing & Development Board (HDB), which had succeeded the SIT, announced its plans for a new town in Toa Payoh, a more ambitious expansion of the previous public housing plan laid out by the SIT. 50,000 housing units were to rise over 600 acres in Toa Payoh, intended to house up to 300,000 people.

The majority of the flats were priced for lower-income households to buy or rent, but there were also flats with rents of between $60 and $90 per month for larger and more affluent households. The satellite town, to be larger than

the recently completed Queenstown, was to be self-contained with its own schools, hospital, community centres, employment zones and other amenities.

Singapore's housing shortage had grown acute, with ever-growing numbers of people living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, and the planned HDB estate at Toa Payoh was to be a key part of the government's strategy to tackle the housing crisis.

After a survey of the area had been completed, the HDB sought to start development in parts of Toa Payoh that were not heavily populated, with the first phase of clearance to take place in the northern Braddell Road area that housed around 187 families.

By October 1961, the Board found their efforts to clear the *kampongs* stalled by resistance from the villagers. Some residents rejected the compensation rates offered by the Ministry of National Development, while others initially rejected the government's offer of farmland in Lim Chu Kang or Sembawang and called for alternative locations. Ng Giak Hai, a third-generation resident of the *kampongs*, recalled the turmoil in the minds of the villagers:

"At the time (our incomes) and the standard of living was very low. When they wanted to relocate us, everyone thought: "we're in trouble this time". We didn't know what to do. Most people didn't have money to buy a flat, they could only rent a very small flat for $20 a month."

To resettle the estimated 2,000 to 3,000 families of Toa Payoh, the HDB initially offered them three options: cash compensation, resettlement to other farming areas such as Sembawang and Lim Chu Kang, or to be rehoused in other HDB developments.

After negotiations with the villagers revealed that many were keen to stay in Toa Payoh, the HDB began building 192 single-storey, three-room terrace houses in Kim Keat Road and prefabricated houses on Thomson Road to provide immediate accommodation for those affected by resettlement. The houses were given free to villagers who accepted the HDB's offer to move out of their *kampongs*, with rent for the land at $5 per month.

Basic terrace houses being built at Kim Keat Road, 1962.

Government authorities allotting basic terrace houses at Kim Keat Road to Toa Payoh settlers in exchange for their attap huts.

Oral history account by Quah Wee Ho (b. 1935), a grassroots leader in the 1950s and 1960s

"During the first phase of *kampong* clearance, there were about 60 families to be moved. When the bulldozers got there, there were more than a hundred old ladies, old people, women and children huddled together blocking the bulldozers, not letting them move.

"That (protest) was organised by the associations (SCPA and SRRA). I went down to speak to the villagers. They ate there, drank there, the associations brought food and drink there for them.

"We then called the HDB's chairman Lim Kim San and chief architect Teh Cheang Wan, and the two of them came down to talk to the villagers. They heard the villagers' requests, promised them that they would try to resolve the issues and that work on the site would stop for the time being.

"The HDB then started building houses (on Kim Keat Road) for the villagers and agreed that (the *kampong* areas would not be cleared) until the new houses were ready. The villagers did not want to move to other areas, they wanted to be resettled in the vicinity."

Under the Lim Yew Hock government, there had been no legislative provision for monetary compensation for farmers and settlers evicted from their *kampongs*, with only land and a free house being the compensation.

In 1960, the newly elected People's Action Party (PAP) government introduced a new policy in adding monetary compensation for resettlement. The monetary compensation was to be calculated by the amount of land occupied by each household, the type of dwelling, vegetable beds and fruit trees planted and the cottage industries carried out, among others.

A large portion of the *kampong* families accepted HDB offers between 1961 and 1962, but as late as March 1963, there were reports of attacks and sabotage of bulldozers involved in clearance work. The government attributed the attacks to the SCPA and SRRA, and said that residents had been intimidated by the associations into rejecting compensation offers.

In October 1963, the SCPA and SRRA were deregistered, with a government statement labelling them "political organisations for agitation on behalf of the Communists and (operating) as recruiting and training centres for Communist cadres in the rural areas".

The statement added: "Their concern with the welfare of rural residents is incidental to their primary objective of furthering Communist objectives and influence in the rural areas."

Vacated kampong houses that would make way for the new Toa Payoh residential estate, 1963.

Negotiations between the government and the *kampong* folk proceeded and were soon concluded, paving the way for the redevelopment of Toa Payoh. While some mourned the loss of their *kampongs*, others like resident Tan Kee Seng (b. 1926) looked forward to a different life: "With the public housing, the living environment was better compared to my *kampong* days at Ah Hood Road. I didn't have many difficulties adjusting to life in the flats."

The contestations over resettlement over, the redevelopment of Toa Payoh into Singapore's second satellite town began. By the end of 1963, the HDB had cleared some 40.5 hectares of former *kampongs* in the area, and earthworks started in early 1964.

Swampy areas were filled in and four 300m-high hills levelled, with the subsequent six million tonnes of earth used to reclaim parts of the Kallang Basin for another housing estate there. Each day, 60 lorries transported 4,000 tonnes of earth over a Bailey bridge, a temporary bridge connecting Toa Payoh and the Kallang Basin. Toa Payoh was being developed at twice the rate of Queenstown, Singapore's first satellite town, said the HDB , and *The Straits Times* hailed the new town as "representing the shape of Singapore to come".

Earth movers travelling through a Toa Payoh kampong, 1963.

Kampong dwellers moving out of their attap houses in Toa Payoh, 1963.

HOW TO BUILD A SINGAPORE TOWN

Samsui women at a construction site in Toa Payoh, 1962.

In the 21st century, over 80% of Singapore's resident population lives in Housing & Development Board (HDB) flats, and public housing estates like Toa Payoh have become one of the everyday faces of the nation. In the early 1960s when Toa Payoh was being developed however, public housing flats were almost as alien as they are ubiquitous now.

To a people hailing mainly from *kampongs* or overcrowded shophouses, Toa Payoh represented a great national experiment. Momentous social issues such as Singapore's housing crisis and political legitimacy hung over the development of the new town.

While Queenstown had been planned by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), Toa Payoh was to be the first town entirely planned and constructed by the HDB. The scale of the task facing the HDB was apparent: where SIT plans had envisioned a town housing 65,000 in Toa Payoh, the HDB's plans called for enough flats to house up to four times that number. The PAP government had promised to tackle Singapore's decades-old housing crisis, and Toa Payoh would be the first acid test of their ability to do so.

Workers on a construction site, 1960s.

The urban planning of Toa Payoh, an oral history account by HDB's first town planner Alan Choe (b. 1931)

Alan Choe Fook Cheong headed the Urban Renewal Unit set up in 1964 and the precursor of today's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). He was also the Housing & Development Board's first town planner, and was largely responsible for the planning of Toa Payoh.

"(The HDB) said look, we want to do a new town in Toa Payoh. I said where is Toa Payoh? I went down to see the site – barren land, barren and out of nowhere, (they said) plan a new town. It is a town planner's dream, to have a new town to plan singlehandedly. But to me it was a nightmare, because I had no experience. (In terms of town planning, I had only) finished two neighbourhoods in Queenstown, (after which) they said you've proven you can do it, now go plan Toa Payoh New Town.

"I liked the (Shuang Lin temple). I used the temple as the focus – the roads would start from there, and from there I set the pattern (of the town). Having done Queenstown where we had five neighbourhoods, I began to apply the same thing in Toa Payoh. Each neighbourhood, to suit our local context, must have a neighbourhood centre where you have your market, your convenience shops and everything else. And then your town centre (would) be designed to cater for the whole town.

"I was tinkering with (planning for) about 100 persons per acre, but HDB told me no no no, you have to plan for 500 persons per acre. I nearly fell off my chair. I had never been trained to (plan a town) that dense. At one stage, I was going to tell them I'm not going to do it because I didn't want to design something that people (would criticise me for). I didn't dare to tell Mr Lim (Kim San, the chairman of HDB) and Mr Howe (Yoon Chong, the HDB's CEO), but in my heart I said this is ridiculous...(I didn't want) to be associated with designing a future slum. I was on the point of quitting.

"(But) both Mr Lim and Mr Howe (were) terrific leaders: dynamic, forceful, decisive and (they) back you all the way. They were inspirational, and that got me going. The message was drummed into me that there is a bigger meaning behind (public) housing. There was an important decision to eradicate the poor housing conditions...the consolation to me was: although my training told me that (a densely planned town was) tantamount to a slum, having seen the slums (in 1960s Singapore) when I walked around, (Toa Payoh would be) many, many times better. That gave the inspiration to do my best, and that's how we did Toa Payoh New Town. (After we did the town), we became suddenly, world leaders in public housing."

Near the end of 1964, the construction of the first blocks of flats started, and by August 1966, the area around Lorong 5 had become the first part of the new Toa Payoh to be built up. Block 52 was the first to rise, while Block 68 housed the first market to be completed in the new town.

At the first balloting ceremony for the new flats in October 1966, 720 units of two and three-room flats across six blocks were offered for $6,000 and $7,500 respectively. The sale of the Toa Payoh flats were also restricted to Singapore citizens whose individual incomes did not exceed $800 per month, and whose family incomes were not over $1,000 per month.

A Housing & Development Board (HDB) estate under construction in Toa Payoh, 1965.

Aerial view of Toa Payoh, 1967.

A balloting exercise for new flats in Toa Payoh, 1967.

Families viewing new HDB flats in Toa Payoh, 1967.

Courtesy of Jerome Lim

A young Jerome and his family in front of their residence at Block 53, 1969.

Toa Payoh in the 1960s and 1970s: the memories of **naval architect** and **heritage blogger Jerome Lim**, **accountant Noraizah Jani** and **medic Keith Jeremy Beins**.

Jerome Lim (b. 1964)

"My family moved into Toa Payoh in 1967, and we stayed at Block 53. My earliest memories of Toa Payoh revolve around meeting the neighbours – at the time life revolved around the community, and people made it a point to greet each other and get to know each other. It was a gentler world.

"Many of the residents formerly lived in *kampongs*, and few wanted to live on the higher floors. In fact, my unit was one of the last to be sold in the block. Those who stayed on the ground floor grew vegetables and plants like pandan, limes and chilli, and I think some even kept chickens.

"Many people kept the doors to their flats open, and there would be a steady stream of food vendors coming and going throughout the day. There was the *tock tock mee* (noodles that the seller announced with a 'tock tock' sound) seller with his pushcart, a lady selling *pulot hitam* (a glutinous rice dessert) from Jacobs biscuit tins she carried on a pole together with a stove and a huge Indian man with polyvinyl chloride (PVC) bags full of curry puffs. Around the Lorong 4 market, there would be itinerant Nepali street traders who laid out their goods like semi-precious gems, leather products and other trinkets.

"I used to look forward to going to watch the *wayangs* (street operas) with my grandmother, as I would usually get a toy from the street stalls around. I also remember the Royal Circus of India setting up their shows in a field right across from where I lived, with their caravans and their tigers, lions and the cross-bred ligers. The circus was very popular with Toa Payoh residents, and it cost a few dollars for a ticket. There were also frequent trade fairs, which were basically an excuse to sell things, and these would have game stalls and electric cars that children could ride."

Noraizah Jani (b. 1969)
"My family moved to Toa Payoh in 1967, when it still had the reputation of being a gangster town. There was some hesitancy on my great grandmother's part to move from MacKenzie Road, but we've never looked back. I was born in a home birth in a Toa Payoh flat, and since then I've lived in Lorong 5 and Lorong 4. When people ask me which *kampong* I grew up in, I say my *kampong* is Toa Payoh.

"With Toa Payoh, it's all the simple pleasures – visiting the many textile shops in Toa Payoh Central with my mother, the library and the kiddy rides in front of the fountain there, Sunday morning breakfasts of the famous *mee rebus* at Lorong 7.

"My family used to visit Toa Payoh Park often as well, and I would climb the Lookout Tower, get halfway up before being told by my parents not to go too high. There were also the expos, fairs and *pasar malams* (night markets) where pineapple drinks and rojak were treats, boxing matches that my parents weren't too keen on but we still watched.

"I also remember talking with my friends about the celebrities who lived in Toa Payoh – the actress Rahimah Rahim, the late footballer Dollah Kassim and Rex Goh, the guitarist who has played with Air Supply, Savage Garden and other bands."

Keith Beins (b. 1964)
"I moved to Toa Payoh from Jalan Bahagia in 1969. I lived in Block 96 and unlike today, where HDB addresses begin with the floor you're on, my unit was 42F. On my floor, 90% of my neighbours were Chinese, but I do remember some Malays living on the lower floors.

"Everyday there would be the smells from the shophouses at our block – coffee being roasted, *otah* being grilled. The doors of each flat were never closed and the kids would be playing in each other's houses, along the corridors or at the playground, at least until the mothers started shouting for them to come home.

"Parents were never shy to discipline their child in front of other families. Sometimes you would have a kid running away from his mother holding a cane or a feather-duster, and the kid would run into his friend's house. If the friend helped hide him, then you would have two mothers screaming for them to come out and in the end both kids would get caned.

"My family's flat had concrete floors that we would paint near Christmas time, usually a sky-blue colour. We didn't have a television, so a neighbour that had a black and white television became my best friend! I would rush there to watch cartoons.

"As a kid, after playing with my friends, I would often be asked to stay for dinner at their houses. That's how I became familiar with Chinese customs. At the time, it was a *kampong* atmosphere in a concrete jungle. There were no barriers – I would often go along with my friend's family on visits to places like Haw Par Villa, so you would see a Chinese family with one dark-skinned boy.

"At the playground or at the football field, nobody would be left alone. Even if you didn't know anybody, you would be called to join the kids playing football or catching tadpoles after the rain. After football, we would send somebody to go to a Malay family's home and buy *air batu* – frozen tubes of ice with flavourings such as lemon or *sng buay* (preserved plum). Or we would buy syrup-flavoured ice balls from the Indian seller. Sometimes, when you didn't have enough money, you would ask for an ice ball without any flavouring for five cents. The seller would take pity on you and give you just a single teaspoon of syrup, and you would be so grateful."

A lion dance performance at a new HDB estate in Toa Payoh, 1966.

INDUSTRY IN TOA PAYOH

With Toa Payoh rising as the first satellite town planned entirely by the HDB, government planners had the opportunity to carve out industrial estates and factory sites within the town to provide employment opportunities for the incoming populace in the 1960s.

From the cottage-scale manufacturing of noodles, clogs, rattan and soya sauce during Toa Payoh's *kampong* days to transistors, toys and consumer electronics from the late 1960s, the evolution of industry in Toa Payoh mirrored that of the wider national story.

Singapore's industrialisation after independence in 1965 took in the growth of the electronics industry, with multinational companies attracted by pro-business policies. Among the companies to set up factories in Toa Payoh in the late 1960s were Societa General Semiconduttori (SGS, now part of STMicroelectronics), Fairchild Semiconductor and Philips.

SGS's two-storey, S$12 million factory on a four acre site opened in Toa Payoh in 1970, manufacturing silicon transistors and integrated circuits. By 1972, the factory was employing around 750 workers across two shifts, with 85% of their workforce consisting of women aged between 18 and 20.

Fairchild's factory at Lorong 3 was established in 1969 and produced more than a million integrated circuits each week, thanks to their workforce of more than 1,000 that included a number of homemakers working part-time. The company operated on three shifts around the clock, with most of the homemakers working the 11pm – 7am shift before visiting the markets of Toa Payoh to buy groceries.

The number of jobs provided by companies like Fairchild and SGS rose and fell with the economic tides over the years, but they were lauded by then-Minister for Finance Hon Sui Sen in 1975 for "(putting) Singapore on the map as a profitable location for international manufacturing companies".

Other than the semiconductor industry, companies producing toys (Johnson Electric, Blue Box Toy Factory), consumer electronics (General Electric), biscuits (Siong Hoe Biscuit Factory) and clothes (Cedar Garments) also operated factories in Toa Payoh.

For many, the most prominent and long-standing industrial presence in Toa Payoh has been that of Philips. The Philips factory at Lorong 1 turned out a wide range of home entertainment products, with radios, gramophones, cassette recorders, televisions, video recorders, audio systems and the like reflecting the ever-changing tastes of the public. Over the decades, the Philips facilities in Toa Payoh have also evolved from manufacturing to become higher economic value design and technical hubs.

Consultant and heritage blogger Lam Chun See (b.1952) worked for Philips in Toa Payoh the late 1970s and early 1980s:

"Initially there were only two Philips factories in Lorong 1 Toa Payoh - Video and Audio. These two factories were separated by a short road called Toa Payoh West. At that time, it was a no-through road. A pedestrian bridge joined our two factories.

"At one stage my office was facing Toa Payoh West; and every evening at 5.45 pm, when the end-of-day

The old Block 79 at Toa Payoh Central.

Courtesy of Former Employees of Fairchild Singapore

Fairchild's plant at Toa Payoh

siren went off, I was treated to an amazing sight. As the female production operators from both factories poured out into Toa Payoh West, the whole area became a sea of blue; blue being the colour of the Philips uniform.

"Coupled with the waiting buses and cars, the area was quite chaotic. But what is even more amazing was the speed with which the crowded dissipated. By 6pm, the whole area was all quiet and deserted."

As the new Toa Payoh took shape in the 1960s and 1970s, so did the places that would feature significantly in the collective social memory of Singaporeans through the decades to come. Community institutions, places of religious worship and social interaction met the diverse needs of residents, and have since become familiar sights that trace the history and evolution of the Toa Payoh that we know today.

NEIGHBOURHOODS & MEMORIES

The famous Toa Payoh tree shrine in 1971.

We begin our exploration of present-day Toa Payoh at Toa Payoh Central, which today forms the bustling heart of the town but was actually one of the last neighbourhoods to be developed in the 1970s. Sites featured include the ficus tree shrine at Block 177 and the four point blocks that housed athletes during the 1973 South East Asian Peninsular Games before being sold to the public.

TREE SHRINE AT BLOCK 177

Towering above Toa Payoh Town Mall until felled by lightning in 2013, this ficus tree has been regarded as sacred since the *kampong* days of Toa Payoh. In that era, it was one of six *shen shu* (deity trees) that were prominent landmarks among villagers.

During the redevelopment of Toa Payoh in the early 1960s, hills were levelled, villages cleared and trees cut down – but this particular tree stood steadfast. Workers operating bulldozers were said to be unable to move their vehicles in the direction of the tree, while a driver was rumoured to have collapsed at the wheel during an attempt to remove the tree. Monks were even sent in to pray for the tree to make way, to no avail.

The urban legend of the tree grew, and many from beyond the confines of Toa Payoh came to visit and pray at the tree. The seemingly immovable tree made it to the pages of newspapers, and residents whispered that the layout of the pedestrian mall was altered to accommodate the tree.

After the failed attempts to shift the tree, a monk brought a statue of Guan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy) from China to the tree and began sleeping beneath it. A shrine, named Ci Ern Ge and dedicated to Guan Yin and the Four-faced Buddha, was reportedly set up in 1969.

The tree shrine became popular with residents of Toa Payoh and visitors from other parts of Singapore, with many praying for blessings, protection and other wishes here. Some residents believe that prayers at the shrine have reaped lottery windfalls. After the death of the monk in 1975, his son Chen Zhou Rong became the caretaker of the tree shrine.

In September 2013, the six-storey-high tree was struck by lighting during a rainstorm and was felled. Through the efforts of the community and the Toa Payoh Merchants Association, the shrine was reconstructed around the remains of the tree.

1973 SEAP GAMES VILLAGE

For just over two weeks in 1973, Toa Payoh became a Southeast Asian melting pot, with more than 1,500 Singaporeans, Malaysians, Laotians, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Thais and Burmese added to its population.

The occasion was the sixth Southeast Asian Peninsular Games (SEAP Games, now known as the Southeast Asian Games), and Toa

Dr Goh Keng Swee opening the SEAP Games Village, 1973.

Toa Payoh Central, 1970s.

Payoh was home to athletes and officials from seven countries. With the SEAP Games Village installed in the heart of Toa Payoh Central, the swimming complex and stadium serving as competition and training venues and four Housing & Development Board (HDB) point blocks housing the athletes and officials, Toa Payoh presented the public face of Singapore for the first major international sporting competition hosted by the nation.

While the Games Villages of most international meets are custom-built affairs away from local population centres, the 1973 SEAP Games organisers sought to place the visiting athletes and officials right in the Singaporean way of life and encourage interaction with the locals. Toa Payoh's high-rise housing was ideally located in proximity to sporting and other facilities, while the surrounding amenities included two cinemas, an emporium, 180 shops, a supermarket, a post office, a bus interchange and hawker centres.

The Games Village included a secretariat in Toa Payoh Central, with the building later opening as the more familiar Toa Payoh Public Library, and a dining hall for 1,800, at which the food was said to be so appetising that coaches worried about their athletes putting on weight.

There was also a medical centre and a friendship hall for socialising, and the Village was run by 80 officers and personnel from the Singapore Armed Forces and the National Sports Promotion Board (the precursor to the Singapore Sports Council).

The Singapore contingent moved into the Games Village at the start of August 1973, while the foreign athletes arrived at the end of the month. The Thai and Khmer contingents shared one block of flats, the Malaysians, South Vietnamese and Laotians another, while the Singaporeans and the Burmese were housed in the point-block directly opposite the sporting facilities and female athletes had one block to themselves.

Each flat housed six athletes, and all of the 384 four-room units were sold to the public fully furnished and at premium prices after the Games. The four point blocks – Blocks 179, 175, 191 and 193 – stand today as reminders of the first major international sporting competition hosted by Singapore.

One block in particular, Block 179 adjacent to the Toa Payoh Public Library, is well-known for the games of *dam* played daily at its void deck. A carryover from Toa Payoh's *kampong* days, up

Dam players at Block 179.

to eight simultaneous games of *dam* (a local form of checkers) take place here throughout the day.

Players say the block has been a hub for *dam* games for at least 30 years, with some players travelling from other parts of Singapore. The games often draw regular watchers and curious onlookers, and – whisper it – surreptitious betting at times.

The nearby Toa Payoh Library was opened in 1974 as the second full-time branch of the National Library, and the large fountain in front of the library was a popular meeting point for many residents. The fountain was later replaced by an amphitheatre for community events.

The Toa Payoh memories of K. Malathy

Writing in The Straits Times in 1982, resident K. Malathy described the flavours of life in the town.

"My family moved to Toa Payoh in 1972. I was a child then, and Toa Payoh was young, like me. The town was raw, awkward, and its blocks of flats still held a new, whitewashed look.

"People were moving in all the time, and every Sunday, you could see lorryloads of furniture and smiling people moving to their new homes. And people made friends with their new neighbours.

"Amenities were few; the bus service was poor, and there was only one overworked post office. But since then, Toa Payoh has changed. I have watched Toa Payoh grow up with me and mature into a respectable, comfortable town.

"Toa Payoh is a town of people, busy, awake, alive. Keep-fit enthusiasts jog along its roads, fathers take their little ones to the swimming pool for a dip. Old men gather for a chat at the library fountain, and women do their shopping at Toa Payoh Central.

"Occasionally, at night, a *pasar malam* (night market) mood invades Toa Payoh Central. There are hawkers selling roasted nuts and melons, and old ladies selling fried tidbits, candy floss and colourful balloons. Children can drive battery-operated cars for 50 cents a ride, and you can buy colourful potions and pills from loud-mouthed medicine men."

Block 179, which housed athletes for three weeks during the 1973 SEAP Games.

ENTERTAINMENT IN TOA PAYOH

Wherever you find people building communities, you will also find a show of some sort going on somewhere. Entertainment in Toa Payoh has evolved across various flavours, from the *kampong* days to the new town.

Back in the village era, the shows that caught the imagination included performances held by students of the various schools and *wayangs* during religious and festive celebrations. The *wayangs* (street operas) were the highlight; with an elaborate array of actors, musicians and storylines, drawing virtually the entire village and lining the streets with food stalls, going on past midnight.

From the 1950s, entrepreneurs brought the magic of cinema to the *kampongs*, with mobile film screenings set up each weekend on fields and open spaces in Toa Payoh.

Some of these screenings required tickets of the five-cent or ten-cent variety, while others were free to the villagers, having been paid for by the businessmen who supplied generator-fed electricity to the *kampongs*. These outdoor screenings eventually gave way to the first cinemas in the new town of Toa Payoh, built in 1972.

Just across from Block 179 is the former Kong Chian Cinema, known today as 600@Toa Payoh and housing a fast food restaurant. In the 1970s and 1980s, Kong Chian Cinema and the Toa Payoh Theatre along Lorong 6 played out a fierce rivalry for the hearts and eyeballs of cinema goers after both opened in 1972. When Kong Chian screened movies dubbed in Cantonese, the Eng Wah organisation-owned Toa Payoh Theatre would show the same film in Mandarin. Both cinemas featured stall and circle seats, with tickets for circle seats (located a floor higher) costing $1 more.

Kong Chian Cinema opened its doors on 11 May 1972 with a premiere of Hong Kong film *The Loner,* with proceeds going towards the construction of the nearby Chung Hwa Medical Institution. Founded by Malaysian rubber tycoon Chew Kong Chian, the cinema was the scene of a dramatic heist worthy of the silver screen in August 1972, when three gun-wielding robbers got away with $13,000 of the cinema's weekend takings.

Toa Payoh Theatre, which opened on 29 March 1972, was the first cinema fully owned by the founder of Eng Wah Global, Goh Eng Wah (b. 1923):

"(While Toa Payoh was not fully developed in 1970), the government had shown their plans for the area with the expected number of flats and residents. So I had the confidence that there would be a sufficient number of cinema goers.

"The motivation was to have a cinema that was truly my own. The attendances were fairly good,

The former Kong Chian Cinema.

Ticket stub of the former Toa Payoh Theatre

The community centres in Toa Payoh organise various activities and entertainment for residents over the years.

beyond our expectations, and we had good results each year. That made cinema sites in the heartlands more popular with bidders. I bought films from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and my nephew helped select the films. I didn't screen English films because it was hard for a small company like ours to obtain English films from the two main distributors Shaw Organisation and Cathay, who had their own cinemas."

TOA PAYOH TOWN PARK

Junction of Toa Payoh Lorong 2 and 6

Best known for its 25m-tall Observation Tower and willow-fringed ponds, Toa Payoh Town Park occupies a significant space in the memories of many Singaporeans. Often featuring as a location for wedding photographs in the 1970s and 1980s, the park's popularity also led the HDB to provide green spaces in most of the housing estates that followed after Toa Payoh.

Known as the Toa Payoh Town Garden in the 1970s, the park spans 4.8ha of plant and tree life, manmade ponds, bridges, gazebos and trellises, pathways and pavilions. The main tree clusters here include Weeping Willows, Flames of the Forest, Angsanas and Bamboo.

The Observation Tower was built in 1972 and given conservation status by the Urban Redevelopment Authority in December 2009. It offered visitors panoramic views of Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s.

Residents also used the park for *tai chi* and other exercises, while students often studied for examinations in its quiet environs.

The park and its iconic Observation Tower.

The Toa Payoh Town Garden under construction, 1973.

Toa Payoh Town Park's popularity with visitors paved the way for the HDB to set aside sizeable plots of land within each new public housing estate to serve residents and act as regional recreational attractions, while the park's significant location in the collective social memory of Singaporeans is one of the main reasons for its conservation status.

The park also harbours a range of insect life, including butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies. Butterfly species include the Common Mime, Common Grass Yellow, Palm Bob and Peacock Royal, while you can also spot the brightly coloured Common Scarlet or the pink Crimson Dropwing dragonflies at the park.

A National Parks Board survey between 2008 and 2010 also found the Orange-faced Sprite damselfly, rarely spotted in Singapore and previously never found in an urban setting on the island. As of 2014, a total of 20 dragonfly and damselfly species have been recorded here.

The park underwent a refurbishment in December 1992, during which its former brick

The Common Scarlet dragonfly.

The Common Mime butterfly.

footpaths were replaced with interlocking tiles and the ponds lined with artificial rocks and a seating terrace.

In 1997, part of the park made way for a temporary bus interchange, but was later restored. A playground built by the HDB in the park, the predecessor of the iconic dragon playground at Lorong 6, was removed during this time.

Longtime resident **Chen Jee Keong** on Toa Payoh Town Park:

"Toa Payoh Town Park is directly opposite my block and I have witnessed both its heydays and its lonely days. The park had its best days from the 1970s to the early 1980s; children played at the dragon playground, married couples took their wedding day photos at various locations inside the park and couples spent time in their "lovers' paradise" in the park in the evenings. There used to be a seafood restaurant within the park and my family and relatives had dinner there on a few occasions. My sister's 21st birthday was celebrated there as well."

Courtesy of Pek Saw Heong

Toa Payoh resident Pek Saw Heong remembers frequently spending family time at the garden.

Built in the 1970s, Toa Payoh Town Park is one of Singapore's oldest parks located in a residential town.

HERITAGE TREES OF TOA PAYOH

The National Parks Board's Heritage Tree Scheme celebrates and promotes the conservation of mature trees in our midst. Two of the trees on the Heritage Tree Register stand tall in Toa Payoh: a Kapok tree on Braddell Road and an African Mahogany in front of Block 150 on Lorong 1.

A towering presence at the Toa Payoh North Flyover traffic island on Braddell Road, this Kapok tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) stands around 32m high. The tree had a girth of 5.8m in 2012 and may eventually reach a height of 50m. This Kapok is described as possessing a massive trunk, covered with thorns and tiered branches that form a pagoda-like crown. Kapoks are deciduous trees and in response to drought conditions, shed their leaves and before flowering and fruiting.

The fruits of the Kapok are hanging pods that split open to release black seeds wrapped in a cotton-like fibre, which was used in the past to stuff mattresses and pillows. The Braddell Road Kapok was planted in the 1970s during the construction of the flyover.

A silent sentinel in front of the checkerboard-patterned Block 150, this African Mahogany (*Khaya nyasica*) stands at about 35m tall. The straight-trunked African Mahoganys were introduced to Singapore in the late 1970s and produce white, sweet-smelling flowers.

Residents can find the woody, tennis ball-sized fruits of the African Mahogany around the foot of this tree that split open when ripe to release numerous flat, brown winged seeds.

The Kapok tree along Braddell Road.

The African Mahogany in front of Block 150.

TOA PAYOH SPORTS COMPLEX
301 Toa Payoh Lorong 6

A long queue to enter the Toa Payoh swimming pool, 1973.

Built in time for the 1973 South East Asian Peninsular Games, the Toa Payoh Sports Complex consists of a stadium, a swimming complex and a sports hall. All three facilities are used for elite athlete training and competitions, while at the same time remaining open for public use.

Since the 1973 SEAP Games, Toa Payoh's sporting venues have hosted a wide array of elite events. The Swimming Complex is a training and administration base for the Singapore Swimming Association, and was a venue for the inaugural Youth Olympic Games in 2010 and the Asian Swimming Championships in 2006.

A swimming event during the 1983 SEA Games held at Toa Payoh swimming complex.

Diving competition during the 1983 SEA Games held at Toa Payoh swimming complex.

A view of the stadium, swimming complex and sports hall.

Mother Teresa at Toa Payoh Stadium, 1987.

National Day parade at Toa Payoh Stadium, 1975.

Toa Payoh Stadium has been the home ground of football club Balestier Khalsa since 1996, and has hosted the Lion City Cup tournament, one of the first international youth tournaments in the world. The stadium also played host to a football clinic held by the Brazilian superstar Pele in 1974, as well as a talk by anti-poverty advocate and religious leader Mother Teresa in 1987.

The Sports Hall has seen elite netball, badminton and table tennis tournaments including the Women's World Cup (table tennis) and the Five Nations Netball Tournament, as well as the weightlifting and volleyball competitions during the first Youth Olympic Games.

For all of the top level sporting action that has passed through these venues, they remain accessible and widely used by the public for a variety of sporting and community activities.

STORIED NEIGHBOURHOODS

The neighbourhood around Lorong 5 was the first to be built up in the development of Toa Payoh, and can be seen both as an archetype of public housing and as a microcosm of heartland Singapore.

Today, the neighbourhood spans across the areas known as Toa Payoh Vista, Toa Payoh Palm Spring and East Payoh Palm. Beneath a façade of the everyday, this locale harbours layers of social history.

Sitting at the northern tip of Toa Payoh Vista, the 19-storey Block 53 features a prominent Y-shaped design, and remains the only block of flats in Toa Payoh with this layout. While Toa Payoh represented modern Singapore's ability to plan and carry out an effective public housing programme, Block 53 was the face of this programme.

This block has played host to a series of foreign and local dignitaries, including former Australian Prime Minister John Gorton, Queen Elizabeth, Princess Anne and Prince Phillip of the United Kingdom, former Sri Lankan Prime Minister Bandaranaike Sirimavo and former President Benjamin Sheares.

Their visits to this block and its rooftop viewing gallery have led it to be dubbed a 'VIP' block, however the viewing gallery is not open to the public at present. Block 53 also has a large cylindrical water tank at its summit, which used to carry neon advertisements including one for local television brand Setron.

Courtesy of Jerome Lim

Former Toa Payoh resident Jerome Lim and his sister at the playground in front of Block 53.

The playground in front of Block 53, 1970s.

Jerome Lim on Block 53

"The first friend I made in Toa Payoh was a boy from a Sikh family living on the 17th floor. Together with my other friends, we played games like police and thieves, cowboys and Indians as well as catching along the common corridors of my block, which were pretty wide. We played football around the lift landing – Block 53 has a central column for its lifts and the circular area around it is spacious.

Courtesy of Jerome Lim

The Queen entering Jerome Lim's flat during her visit to Toa Payoh.

"As the area was curved, you sometimes couldn't see the ball, but you knew when an opponent was dribbling towards you by the sound. The ball often went over the parapet, and the one who kicked it over would have to run downstairs to retrieve it when the rest of us leaned over the parapet to stand guard. If we saw other boys try to steal the ball, all of us would shout: 'Oii!'

"Block 53 has a rooftop viewing gallery that a number of VIPs have visited, but the gallery is not open to the public. When I was young however, I had the privilege of going up to the gallery as my Sikh neighbour was a grassroots volunteer and he accessed the gallery to hang flags, lights and banners when National Day came around. My friends and I would help him hang the items, and enjoy the view."

Courtesy of Jerome Lim

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth visiting the viewing gallery of Block 53 in 1972.

Other blocks in Toa Payoh that have been used for VIP visits, including those of former Chinese Premiers Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao, former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, former Indian President K. Narayanan and former Philippine President Gloria Arroyo, are Block 81 along Lorong 4 and Block 179 at Toa Payoh Central.

The playgrounds, markets, provision shops, Chinese medicine halls and coffee shops around Block 53 and the nearby Toa Payoh Palm Spring provide both a slice of everyday Singapore and hidden gems to uncover.

Along Lorong 3, a weathered statue of a Chinese-style dragon entwining a pillar marks an entrance into Toa Payoh Palm Spring. This dragon statue runs in the same vein of the better-known dragon fountain at Block 85 Whampoa Drive, albeit on a smaller, less elaborate scale.

At Block 94, the Lee Fun Nam Kee restaurant traces its origins to a chicken rice hawker who travelled the neighbourhood on his tricycle in the 1960s. This block also houses the Bugs Bunny barbershop, which opened in 1971 and has become one of the shops most associated with Toa Payoh.

The dragon statue in front of Toa Payoh Palm Spring.

The Lee Fun Nam Lee restaurant at Block 94.

Former British PM Harold Wilson and HDB CEO Liu Thai Ker on visit to Toa Payoh hawker centre, 1978.

The Bugs Bunny barber shop has been serving customers since 1971.

Courtesy of Toa Payoh Photography Club

Itinerant locksmith in Toa Payoh.

My Toa Payoh: the memories of **Mohammed Razali Ajmain** & **Vimala Krishnan**:

Razali Ajmain (b.1956)

Razali Ajmain is a former security guard who has lived in Toa Payoh since the 1970s. His experience of moving from a *kampong* to HDB public housing and the subsequent adjustments needed mirrors the experiences of many Singaporeans in the 1960s and 1970s.

"Before I moved to Toa Payoh in the 1970s, I stayed at Geylang Lorong 7. The *kampongs* were all cleared and I moved with my mother to Block 68 here. After I got married in 1987, I moved to Block 49.

"When I first moved here, I was not used to it. In the *kampong*, you have a lot of freedom, so moving to a HDB flat was like moving to a pigeon hole at first. In the mornings, everybody goes to work and at night they come back. My friends and I used to joke that if you work at night, then you're an owl rather than a pigeon.

"The biggest difference was that in the *kampongs*, children could run free and anywhere they want,

play with kites and other games. But after a while, I made friends, I went to the coffee shops and mixed with all races and I got used to life in the housing estate. With friends, it began to feel more like life in the *kampong*."

Vimala Krishnan (b.1938)

Vimala Krishnan is a former school teacher who is a familiar face in Toa Payoh, having lived in the area for some four decades.

"I was living in a rental flat in Selegie before I moved to Toa Payoh in the 1970s. At first, I was scared because people were saying that Toa Payoh was a dangerous place, but later I felt very happy staying here. I got a flat on the 25th floor and my mother was very concerned as it was so high but I decided to take it. My block was one of the four blocks used for the SEAP Games, block 191. I paid $19,000 for the flat, now the price has gone up so high but I will never sell it.

"Initially, Toa Payoh was not a good place to live in because just to go to the market, we needed a guy to accompany us as there were many gangsters around. The gangsters lived in the *kampongs* that had yet to be developed, they would come around and stare at you.

"My mother told me not to wear any jewellery around. I often felt threatened and frightened, as there were murders, gang fights and other crimes. We were afraid to go out after 7pm. But things changed as the police patrolled the area frequently, and the crime rate came down. Toa Payoh has developed very well and I am proud to be staying here.

"I used to go to Kong Chian Cinema to watch Tamil films and take walks in the Town Park, and along Lorong 1 and 2. There used to be a vegetarian restaurant where the Pizza Hut is now, it was buffet-style and we paid only $8 for all you can eat. It was so cheap but it later closed down, just like some stalls selling *putu piring* that are also now gone.

"I still exercise regularly and I go to Toa Payoh Stadium every morning to do *qi gong* exercise. I've been with this group of about 40 to 50 people doing *qi gong* since 1987.

"In the 1970s, my neighbour was a fisherman, and he used to catch the fish and they would sell fish at their stall. There were also some Malays living there and their father was in the clerical line. We were all very simple folks then and we were all very friendly to each other. I am very a friendly person and everyone in Block 191 knows me. The atmosphere now is different, the younger generation mixes less with their neighbours. But the older generation still gathers for activities."

An old coffee shop in Toa Payoh Central.

RELIGIOUS, COMMUNITY AND HEALTHCARE INSTITUTIONS

As the new flats went up, some of the former *kampong* villagers returned – priority for flats in Toa Payoh was given to former residents who had been resettled in other locations. Hawkers who had previously plied the streets of Toa Payoh were also promised stalls in the new hawker centres and markets.

With the population of the town in the early days rising to just over six times that of the 20,000 of the *kampong* days, that also meant an influx of people from all over the island.

With so many people coming from different *kampongs* and other parts of Singapore, social interaction was somewhat muted in the early days of the new town. By 1969 however, the new residents of the Housing & Development Board (HDB) flats had come together in a show of community reminiscent of the old days. The Toa Payoh Residents' Association, a ground-up effort that came before the now ubiquitous Residents' Committees, was formed to voice residents' concerns over availability of schools, facilities in the new town and problems with their new flats, and engage effectively with the government.

To meet the religious needs of the burgeoning population of Toa Payoh, a mosque, churches and temples were established in the new town. These religious institutions did not cater solely to their respective worshippers, but also served all in Toa Payoh with schemes such as free tuition and other educational programmes, healthcare and inter-religious initiatives. These efforts were largely community-driven and financed, helping bring unfamiliar faces and different communities together and in time rebuilding some of the old *kampong* bonds in a new town.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

MASJID MUHAJIRIN

275 Braddell Road

As the first mosque to be built with the help of the Mosque Building Fund (MBF), Masjid Muhajirin is a significant marker of community action in Singapore.

The construction of the mosque in the mid-1970s was funded through community efforts and through the MBF, which saw contributions from every Muslim employee in Singapore.

Masjid Muhajirin derives its name from the Muhajirun (Arabic for emigrant), a group of early Muslims who followed the prophet Muhammad on the *hijrah*, his journey from Mecca to Medina in the seventh century.

The mosque's roots lie in the Muslim Benevolent Society (Persatuan Kebajikan Muslim Toa Payoh) formed in Toa Payoh in the late 1960s. At the time, it was estimated that there were around 1,200 Muslim families residing in the area, and the society provided funds for funerals, assistance for disadvantaged families and held Qur'an classes at various homes. The society also reached out to other communities and non-Muslims with invitations to events such as Hari Raya celebrations.

On 31 May 1970, the Toa Payoh Mosque Building Committee was formed. Among the fundraising efforts the committee undertook were house to house fundraising and food sales, and they managed to raise more than half of the Masjid Muhajirin's eventual cost of nearly S$900,000.

Hawkers selling satay to raise funds for the construction of the Masjid Muhajirin mosque, 1971.

In December 1974, then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, then-Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok and Malay Members of Parliament met with eight leaders from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis). Mr Lee suggested creating a fund derived from the monthly Central Provident Fund contributions of workers, and directing these funds towards mosque building.

The Mosque Building Fund (MBF) was thus set up in September 1975, with 50 cents from the wages of each Muslim worker per month at the time going towards the fund. Individuals could choose to opt out of the scheme, but very few did so. In fact, many contributed more than 50 cents each month.

The MBF has since been hailed by community leaders as a fine example of the *gotong royong* spirit and community self-reliance, and has raised more than $100 million for the construction of new mosques since its inception.

Construction of the Masjid Muhajirin began on 19 October 1975 and the mosque was opened by Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok one and a half years later on 8 April 1977. The original mosque featured an onion-shaped dome of the Persian-Indian architectural style atop its minaret, and also bore influences from traditional Minangkabau design.

In 2006, the mosque was closed for renovations and as part of a plan to integrate the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) building and the Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah (religious school) to form the Singapore Islamic Hub. The redevelopment took two and a half years to complete.

The mosque you see today features a floral (arabesque motif) – a hallmark of Islamic design – on its exterior wall claddings, glass panels, aluminum grilles and indoor carpets. Other facets of the mosque inspired by architectural styles from across the Islamic world include arches incorporated into its windows and external walls, as well as arabesque geometric designs on its barricades with timber-coloured concrete roof supports. The double-tier pointed roof of the mosque also features ochre tiles, a traditional Malay style.

The mosque capacity was expanded from 1,500 to about 3,000 worshippers, with the rebuilding financed by the Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund (MBMF – formerly known as MBF) as well as public donations.

UNITED TEMPLE

177 Toa Payoh Lorong 7

The United Temple, known as Wu He Miao (Five United Temples) in Mandarin, was completed in 1974 to house five different temples founded during Toa Payoh's *kampong* era. It was the first institution in Singapore to bring together temples founded by and catering to the Hokkien, Hainanese, Teochew and Cantonese communities, as well as the different deities the temples enshrined.

The temple's signboard, inscribed with the characters Wu He Miao, literally Five United Temples.

The United Temple's establishment reflected a wider shift among the local Chinese community,

which had previously organised employment, religious worship and other socio-cultural endeavours largely along dialect lines.

The United Temple's pioneering role paved the way for another 68 united or combined temples to be established in Singapore between the 1970s and 2012. As of 2014, the United Temple houses these four temples:

Chee Tian Keng (聚天宫, known as Ju Tian Gong in Mandarin)

This temple was founded in the early 1900s by Hokkiens and Teochews, and originally located along Boon Teck Road. The temple's main deity is Tua Pek Kong (Da Bo Gong in Mandarin). Chee Tian Keng was the social and community centre of Kampong Puay Teng Keng, the largest *kampong* in Toa Payoh before its redevelopment.

Shan Zu Yuan Fu De Ci (山竹园 福德祠)

This temple was founded in 1940 by the Cantonese community, and was also originally located on Boon Teck Road. It is dedicated to Tu Di Gong (the Earth God) and his wife Tu Di Po.

Tong Xing Gang (通兴港)

This temple traces its roots to an incense holder gifted to Toa Payoh's Teochew community in 1862. The incense holder was later housed in a shrine in a nutmeg plantation near Ah Hood Road, and a temple was constructed sometime in the 1930s. Tong Xing Gang is dedicated to Emperor Gan Tian.

Zhao Ying Ci (昭应祠)

Founded in 1940 by the Hainanese community, this temple's main deities are the 108 Brother Heroes, representing a group of early Hainanese migrants. It was originally located on Jalan Rajah.

Wu Ji Gong (无极宫)

This temple's founding date and founders are unknown, and it has since moved out of the United Temple.

During the redevelopment of Toa Payoh in the 1960s, the five temples faced the prospect of their land being acquired and being compelled to move out of the area. A number of devotees at the time slept nightly on temple grounds, for fear of their being moved.

After a series of meetings between the custodians of the various temples and worshippers, it was accepted that the temples would not be able to remain in their original locations. With the cost of purchasing land a nd building new temples proving prohibitive, the five temples decided to pool the contributions of their devotees and build a temple uniting all five.

The plan was supported by the former Member of Parliament for Toa Payoh constituency Eric Cheong, and by 1970 they had raised $200,000 to purchase the land along Lorong 7.

A celebration being held at Chee Tian Keng, 1980s.

LIAN SHAN SHUANG LIN MONASTERY
184E Jalan Toa Payoh

In the early 1900s, the Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery rose as a majestic beacon in the then-rural surrounds of Toa Payoh. More than a century on, the 'Twin Grove of the Lotus Mountain' (the monastery's Mandarin name translated into English) stands as Singapore's oldest Buddhist monastery.

For their historical and architectural value, the Hall of Celestial Kings (Tian Wang Dian) and Mahavira Hall (Da Xiong Bao Dian) here were gazetted as national monuments in 1980.

One night in 1898, Hokkien merchant and community leader Low Kim Pong had an unusual dream. In his dream, a figure bathed in golden light appeared from the west, in the direction of Singapore's waterfront. When he awoke, Low

Da Xiong Bao Dian (Main Hall), 1950s.

found that his son Kay Siang had had the same dream. Thus inspired, both men hurried off to the waterfront, unsure of the meaning of the dream but believing it to be an omen.

They waited till dusk when a boat carrying 12 Buddhist monks and nuns arrived at the waterfront from the west. The group was on their way back to their hometown in Fujian, China, after a six-year pilgrimage to India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Burma (now Myanmar).

Low invited the Buddhists to stay at his home and later persuaded the group to stay in Singapore, asking them to help spread the Buddhist faith and promising to provide 50 acres of land for a monastery. Moved by his piety, they agreed and the leader of the group, Venerable Xian Hui, became the founding abbot of the monastery.

While the land in Toa Payoh and a large proportion of the funds came from Low, there were also contributions from Chinese in other parts of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Some estimates have placed the cost of the monastery's construction in the region of half a million dollars. Low however did not live to see the completion of the monastery.

The architectural styles of Fuzhou, Quanzhou and Zhangzhou in the Fujian province of China, as well as Chaozhou in the Guangdong province, are showcased here. They reflect the diverse roots of the immigrant Chinese in Singapore, the different styles united under the traditional Chinese courtyard layout concept known as He Yuan. The monastery was also modelled after the fifth-century Yi Shan Xi Chan Monastery in Fuzhou.

Among the most noteworthy features here are the Hall of Celestial Kings, the Mahavira Hall, the Dharma Hall and the bell and drum towers, as well as the seven-storey Dragon Light pagoda. The roof ridges of the Celestial and Mahavira Halls both feature *jian nian* porcelain ornamentation, while the curved main roof ridge has Minnan spirals of the traditional southern Chinese style.

Statues of the Amitabha Buddha, Sakyamuni Buddha and Healing Buddha are enshrined in the Mahavira Hall, as are those of his disciples Ananda and Mahakasyapa. The bell and drum towers are possibly only ones of their kind still existent in Singapore, and enshrine the Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and Guan Gong respectively.

Former educationist and painter Associate Professor Leong Weng Kee (b. 1932) was born in the Kim Keat area in 1932, and frequently played in the monastery as a child. In an oral history interview, he described the area in the 1930s:

"Toa Payoh at the time was (mostly) rural villages, and all around was farmland. We stayed in a zinc and wood house next to a soya sauce factory, and my father was in the rattan business. Kim Keat Road was connected to Balestier Road, and led to Shuang Lin Temple, about 250m from my house. When my brother and I were young, we often ran to the temple grounds to play, and watch the street shows there."

TOA PAYOH SEU TECK SEAN TONG TEMPLE
2 Toa Payoh Lorong 6

The Toa Payoh Seu Teck Sean Tong Temple, a grand sight along Lorong 6, had its humble beginnings in an *attap* hut in the Hup Choon Hng *kampong*.

Its establishment in 1942 was as a part of the *shan tang* (charitable and religious institutions prominent in Southern China in the 17th century) network, with the first *shan tang* in Singapore being the Seu Teck Sean Tong Yian Sin Sia opened in 1916.

As part of *shan tang* tradition, an altar dedicated to its patron saint Song Dafeng was blessed in the Seu Teck Sean Tong Yian Sin Sia before being installed in the Toa Payoh temple. The passing of the "incense fire" tradition later saw Seu Teck temples being established in Malacca and Muar in Malaysia among others.

After the Japanese Occupation, a purpose-built temple on the site of its current location was completed in 1959. Besides its religious function, the Seu Teck Sean Tong temple also carried out disaster relief and charitable activities in accordance with the *shan tang* mission.

In 1967, Seu Teck Sean Tong opened its medical section offering free medical services to all, regardless of religious affiliation. Currently the temple also houses a kidney dialysis unit operated by the National Kidney Foundation.

Patients at Seu Teck Sean Tong–NKF dialysis centre.

SRI VAIRAVIMADA KALIAMMAN TEMPLE

2001 Toa Payoh Lorong 8

The Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman Temple traces its origins to a *choultree* (rest area) existent in the Orchard area in the 1860s. Although the exact date of its founding is not known, Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman Temple is one of the oldest Hindu temples in Singapore.

The *choultree* served Indian plantation workers and *dhobis* (washer men), and evolved into a place for Hindus to pray and sing devotional songs to the goddess Kali. The lower part of Orchard Road leading to Dhoby Ghaut was also known by Indians as *vairavimadam*, or place where roads meet. The *choultree* eventually became a temple on Killiney Road, appearing on an 1893 map.

In 1921, the colonial authorities acquired the land that the Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman Temple stood on to build a railway between Tank Road and the Causeway in Woodlands. Funds for a new temple were raised by the Hindu community and a plot of land at Somerset Road spanning 10,126 square feet was purchased for 80 cents per square foot. The *balasthabanam* ceremony (a ritual held before the renovation

or building of a new Hindu temple) was held in November 1921, but the formal *Maha Kumbabishegam* (consecration ceremony) was held only in 1933.

The Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman Temple stood on Somerset Road until it was informed by the government in 1970 that its land was required for the construction of the Somerset Mass Rapid Transit station.

The Hindu Endowments Board (HEB) then acquired the temple's present site in Toa Payoh in 1977. The wedding hall was the first part of the temple to be built, as it was to host the temple's deities during the move to Toa Payoh. The *balasthabanam* was held in September 1982, with the construction of the main temple taking another three years. The *Maha Kumbabishegam* was held on 27 March 1986.

At its Toa Payoh location, the temple became the first institution in Singapore to offer kindergarten classes conducted in Tamil and English, after the HEB moved to improve the standard of the Tamil language on the island. The Saraswathy Kindergarten proved to be such a success that it moved out of the temple to its own premises in Kim Keat in 1997, where it is still known by its original name.

The temple structure includes a *raja-gopuram* (tower entrance) with an ornate statue of the goddess Kali. The temple's main sanctum is dedicated to Kali, and includes a *suthai sirpam* (large relief) of the goddess and gold-plated *kodi maram* (flag staff).

Other sanctums include those for the deities Durgaiamman, Madurai Veeran, Periyachiamman, Angalaaparameswari, Swamy Ayyapan and Guruvayurappan. The latter sanctum includes a weighing scale for the Thulabaram Ceremony, the only such scale in Singapore and used to weigh devotees against temple gifts such as sugar or coconuts.

Devotees celebrating the Navakshari Homam festival.

The Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman Temple's foremost festival is the Navakshari Homam. Observed in March or April each year, it includes *homam* (fire sacrifice) for the nine forms of the mother goddess Kaliamman. The festival culminates with the arrival of the *utsavars* (processional deities) on chariots from the Sri Mariamman, Sri Srinivasa Perumal and Sri Sivan temples, brought to bless the completion of the *homam*, along with the *varisais* (blessed traditional offerings) from all major Hindu temples in Singapore.

The temple also celebrates the Brahmothsavam festival each April or May, dedicated to its main deity Kali. A *kodiyettram* (flag hoisting) marks the start of the festival, before nine days of prayers. On the ninth day, a chariot procession travels through Toa Payoh, the festival flag is lowered the following day and the deity placed in sanctified water for the *theerthavari* ceremony. The festival then concludes with the deity bestowing blessings on devotees while seated on a swing on the 11th day.

The temple also commemorates National Day with a Santhana Kudam (pots filled with sandalwood paste) procession. The sandalwood paste, a holy substance in Hinduism and other religions, is used in the ablution of the goddess Kali, and daubed on devotees. This ceremony has become a popular ritual, with even members of other races taking part.

CHURCH OF THE RISEN CHRIST

91 Toa Payoh Central

Church of the Risen Christ, 1971.

Opened in 1971, the Church of the Risen Christ drew Catholics from not only Toa Payoh, but also surrounding areas like Braddell, Balestier and Thomson Road. Like other religious institutions in Toa Payoh, the church was an important pillar of support in the community with a number of social ventures.

In the late 1960s, the Catholic population of Toa Payoh held their religious activities at the Ho Ping Centre and later in a hall at the HDB's East Area Office. The plot of land on which the church current stands was put up for tender by the government in 1969, and the Catholic community led by its priests Fr. Pierre Abrial

and Fr. Adrian Anthony began raising funds for a church.

Some $450,000 was collected for the construction of the church building, and the Church of the Risen Christ was officially opened on 3 July 1971 by Michael Olcomendy, the first Archbishop of Singapore. Initially, the church's name was planned to be the Church of the Resurrection, but this name was thought to be too abstract, leading to the adoption of its present name as a statement of the community's faith.

Part of the new extension added to the church in 2003.

Fr. Adrian Anthony (b. 1943), the second priest at Risen Christ, remembered: "In the early days, it was often overcrowded during Mass. The church's capacity was something like 1,500, but I remember during some festive occasions like Christmas, we had crowds of over 2,000 overflowing the church and the situation could be quite chaotic!"

The church ran childcare groups and tuition classes in rented units in a nearby HDB block, with these and other activities undertaken by volunteers from the community. Neighbourhood groups organised by the church also advised parents on aspects of childcare such as nutrition and education.

Fr. Anthony, who was in charge of the church's youth groups, recalled the social role of the church:

"There were many one-room rental flats in Toa Payoh in the 1970s, and most of the parents were in blue-collar occupations such as hawkers and cleaners. Many of their children were latchkey children who were more or less locked in their flats after school.

"We organised playgroups and tuition classes for these kids, and we had volunteers like teachers offering their services. The church placed great emphasis on education, as this was the only way for these kids to break the poverty cycle. We had to do whatever we could for them, such as having a small library before the public library opened and monitoring their educational progress, so that they could change their lives.

"I have many treasured memories from my time at Risen Christ. The people of Toa Payoh were not rich folk, but they were very generous and friendly. Volunteers came forward whenever there was a need in the community, and they were always ready to help. The friendship of the people, their generosity and their kindness is something I will always cherish."

The Church of the Risen Christ's junior and senior choirs, formed during the fledgling days of the church, rose to national prominence during the 1970s and 1980s. Led by choirmaster Peter Low, the Risen Christ choir released five records and performed worldwide, including memorable concerts at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, in front of Pope John Paul II at St Peter's Square in the Vatican and in front of former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Bethlehem. In 2002, the choir moved to the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd.

TOA PAYOH METHODIST CHURCH

480 Toa Payoh Lorong 2

The Toa Payoh Methodist Church began as an evangelical outreach project by the Wesley Methodist Church and St Andrew's Cathedral in 1968. The project ran a free medical clinic at Block 109 along Lorong 1, with the first religious service being celebrated at the clinic in 1969. The Methodist congregation later moved their services to a shophouse at Block 4, Lorong 7.

The congregation began construction of a purpose-built church in 1971, and the Toa Payoh Methodist Church was completed two years later.

COMMUNITY & HEALTHCARE INSTITUTIONS

Many of the healthcare institutions that operate in Toa Payoh today are rooted in ground-up community initiatives. These institutions include the Chung Hwa Medical Institution, Mount Alvernia Hospital and the NKF-SIA Dialysis Centre, while the former Toa Payoh Hospital near Thomson Road was an early public hospital in the area.

CHUNG HWA MEDICAL INSTITUTION

640 ToaPayoh Lorong 4

Established in 1978 as a branch of the original Chung Hwa Free Clinic at Telok Ayer Street, the Chung Hwa Medical Institution at Toa Payoh is now the headquarters of the Singapore Chinese Physicians Association (SCPA). Besides providing low-cost traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) treatments to a multiracial patient base, the Chung Hwa building also houses a TCM college and research institutes for TCM drugs and acupuncture.

Founded by a group of TCM physicians in 1946, the SCPA opened the Zhong Hua Shi Zhen Suo clinic for the poor at the Chung Shan Wui Koon clan association in 1952. The clinic moved into its own premises at 202 Telok Ayer Street and was renamed the Chung Hwa Free Clinic in 1956.

In the early 1970s, the SCPA's third Chung Hwa Free Clinic in Geylang was acquired by the government and a plot of land in Toa Payoh given in exchange. The funds for the construction of the Toa Payoh clinic were raised through the efforts of a wide cross section of the community, including those of some 5,000 taxi drivers and 500 trishaw riders who donated their takings.

People came forward to offer their antiques and heirlooms for auction, while business leaders were among those who donated substantial amounts. Charity sales, musicals, dinners and performance events were also held, eventually raising more than S$5 million for the Toa Payoh clinic.

Wong Peng, a TCM physician who also served as Chung Hwa's librarian in the 1970s and 1980s, remembered: "You could see people from every section of society coming forward to contribute, from the trishaw riders to the businessmen. Chung Hwa was truly built by a community effort."

When the Toa Payoh Chung Hwa Free Clinic opened in October 1978, it drew more than 400 patients of different races on its first day. Some 90 TCM physicians staffed the clinic on a voluntary basis, treating patients across three shifts during the day. The clinic also provided free medicine and herbs, with patients paying only a token 50 cent registration fee.

Besides the headquarters of the SCPA, the Chung Hwa Medical Institution includes three TCM research institutes: the Singapore College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the Chinese Medical and Drugs Research Institute and the Chinese Acupuncture Research Institution. The institutes offer TCM education to local and international students including those from Japan and South Korea.

MOUNT ALVERNIA HOSPITAL

820 Thomson Road

Mount Alvernia Hospital stands as the legacy of a group of nuns from the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM) in Guildford, Surrey, in the United Kingdom. Traditionally, the FMDM sisters were trained in healthcare, and their first medical institution, the Mount Alvernia Nursing Home, opened in Guildford in 1935.

Three FMDM sisters – Sister Mary Angela McBrien, Sister Mary Camillus Walsh and Sister May Baptista Hennessey – arrived in Singapore in March 1949, in response to a call by the colonial government for trained nurses.

After the Japanese Occupation, a large proportion of Singapore's population was undernourished and plagued with diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and beri-beri.

Mount Alvernia Hospital, 1960.

The situation was compounded by a shortage of medical professionals. The three sisters were joined by Sister Alphonsus Gavin, Sister Mercy Roache, Sister Campion Lowe and Mater Dei Fennessy months later, and the nuns were posted to Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

The FMDM sisters first operated in Tan Tock Seng Hospital's tuberculosis ward, where they provided free treatment to an estimate 6,000 new patients each year. The sisters then managed three wards for patients with infectious diseases, grouped as a self-contained unit within Tan Tock Seng Hospital and known as the Mandalay Road Hospital.

They also worked with lepers at the Trafalgar Home in Woodbridge, binding the sores of the oft-shunned lepers, and recruited local nurses through a training school established in 1950.

By the early 1950s, the sisters were envisioning a hospital for all regardless of race, religion or social status, professionally-run and with values of compassion and dignity. They began raising funds for the hospital in November 1952, and included within these funds the salaries they received as nurses.

In October 1956, the sisters acquired some seven acres of land on what was then known as Thomson Hill. This was a relatively undeveloped area, with the Convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor, Marymount Convent and a school run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd as Mount Alvernia's neighbours. Construction of Mount Alvernia Hospital began in 1957, and was completed by 1961 after donations from the public including a large contribution from prominent community leader Lee Kong Chian.

In its early years, Mount Alvernia Hospital was staffed entirely by FMDM sisters and the local nurses they had recruited and trained, with visiting doctors from their private practices. It later recruited lay staff, with the hospital's first resident medical officer joining in 1963 and its first administrator who was not a FMDM sister being appointed in 1987. A hospice for the chronically ill, known today as the Assisi Hospice, was established in 1969.

FORMER TOA PAYOH HOSPITAL

Opened as the Thomson Road Hospital in 1959 and upgraded to a general hospital in 1968, this public hospital was renamed the Toa Payoh Hospital in 1975. Its founding preceded the Mount Alvernia Hospital by two years, making it the first hospital in Toa Payoh.

Regarded as a branch to receive overflow patients from the Sepoy Lines General Hospital

(now known as the Singapore General Hospital), the Thomson Road Hospital operated only a single ward for chronically ill patients when it opened in 1959. By the end of the year, it had 369 beds, two doctors and seven nursing staff.

The hospital's location in a relatively undeveloped part of Singapore and its designation as an institution for the chronically ill led many to label it a second-rate institution.

Doctors had to wade through patches of tall *lallang* grass to get to the hospital, while during a major flood in 1969, the only vehicles that were able to make their way to and from the hospital were three-tonne military trucks. In its early, poorly-funded years, staff used empty Brand's Essence of Chicken bottles to collect urine samples while patients brought their stool samples to the hospital in used Ovaltine tins.

The hospital's first medical superintendant Dr Seah Cheng Siang and his team worked to change public perception of the hospital through an emphasis on clinical teaching and research. The hospital became known for the training of post-graduate doctors, and was the one of the first hospitals in Singapore to specialise in the areas of neurosurgery and gastroenterology.

The expansion of its medical services was recognised with its renaming as a general hospital in 1968, and it served the populations of Toa Payoh, Ang Mo Kio, Thomson Road, Yio Chu Kang, Mandai and Sembawang.

In 1988, the hospital was slated for an expansion on a larger site. While land adjacent to its location along Toa Payoh Rise was considered, it was eventually decided that the growing medical needs of the population in the east of Singapore had to be addressed.

The Toa Payoh Hospital was privatised in 1990 and merged with the old Changi Hospital to form the present Changi General Hospital. Toa Payoh Hospital closed on 15 February 1997.

Underprivileged children from charitable homes were treated to a magic show, talentime, games and goodies at Toa Payoh Hospital School of Nursing during Nurses Week in 1977.

SIA-NKF DIALYSIS CENTRE

Blk 225 Toa Payoh Lorong 8 #01-54

When it opened in December 1987, the SIA-NKF Dialysis Centre was the first dialysis centre in Singapore to be established outside a hospital. The centre pioneered the concept of affordable and readily reachable treatment, bringing treatment of kidney disease to a wider section of patients.

In the 1980s, a patient needed to spend an average of $4,000 for dialysis at a private hospital, as compared to the treatment costs of $400 to $800 at the centre. There were also limited places available for dialysis at public hospitals.

Equipped with 12 dialysis machines, each costing between $25,000 and $30,000 at the time, the centre was funded through a $223,000 donation from Singapore Airlines and sales of greeting cards and artworks to the public.

Patients at the centre were taught to operate the dialysis machines by themselves, watched over by a nurse, and patients were selected for treatment by a panel comprised of National Kidney Foundation members and community leaders.

LEE AH MOOI OLD AGE HOME

1 Thomson Lane

Established in the mid-1960s, the Lee Ah Mooi Old Age Home has been located in Toa Payoh since 1984.

The Home was founded when Madam Lay Ah Mooi, a former nurse at the Singapore General Hospital, opened the doors at her Kampong Chong Pang residence to retired Samsui women (Chinese immigrants who largely worked in the construction and domestic sectors, often recognised by their red cloth hats) and former *amahs* (nursemaids in wealthy households). As most of these women were without family in their later years, Madam Lay's home was a welcome haven for them.

Over the years, the Home occupied various locations including Sembawang, Jalan Kayu, Telok Blangah and Teck Whye. In 1984, the Home moved to the site of the former Lee Kuo Chuan School on Thomson Road with the assistance of the authorities and former Minister for Finance Lim Kim San.

Madam Lay passed away in 1992 and the Home came under the management of her grandsons, Then Mun Wah and Then Mun Tat.

GRAVE HILL

Grave Hill includes the final resting place of Seah Eu Chin, a 19th century Chinese merchant and community leader. The hill was formerly part of Seah's plantation along Thomson Road, and was used as his family burial ground. Grave Hill can be accessed by a path at the end of Toa Payoh West, almost directly opposite the entrance to the Ministry of Social and Family Development building.

Seah Eu Chin, 1800s.

The son of a local government official in Guangdong, Seah was one of the few literate immigrants from China to arrive in Singapore in the early 1820s. Starting off as a clerk and accountant, his mercantile ability eventually proved exceptional and he expanded into property investment and plantation ownership.

One of Seah's gambier and pepper plantations took in a 12km stretch between River Valley and Bukit Timah Road, and he soon became known as the 'King of gambier and pepper'. His trading company also diversified into products like tea and firearms, and in 1840 Seah was one of the few Chinese to be admitted into the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, then dominated by European merchants.

Seah also played a prominent leadership role in the community. In 1830, he brought together 13 Chinese clans to form the social welfare organisation Ngee Ann Kun, later renamed the Ngee Ann Kongsi. Seah served as the association's president from 1845 until his death in 1883.

Naturalised as a British subject in 1853, Seah helped mediate disputes in the Chinese community, including the 1851 Anti-Catholic riots and the 1854 Hokkien-Teochew riots. He was appointed a Justice of the Peace in 1867 and a Honorary Magistrate in 1872, and the weight of Seah's name among the Chinese was such that he was known colloquially as 'Emperor Seah'.

Seah died on 23 September 1883 at his house at North Boat Quay, with his descendents including his son Seah Liang Seah, himself a noted businessman, community leader and author. A report of his funeral in *The Straits Times* called Seah "probably the oldest, wealthiest and most respected Chinaman in (Singapore)", and described a funeral procession more than a mile in length. Besides family, servants, employees, friends and representatives from various associations, there were Chinese, Malay and Indian musicians in the procession.

Seah's coffin was borne on a catafalque adorned with gold ornaments and carried by forty men, and followed by priests and coolies carrying shrines and other religious emblems. The procession went from North Boat Quay to Seah's plantation and family burial ground along Thomson Road (known as Grave Hill today), and the guests (including Abu Bakar ibni Daing Ibrahim, then Maharaja and later Sultan of Johor and Tso Ping Lung, the Chinese consul to Singapore) were entertained at Seah's bungalow E-Choon.

DRAGON PLAYGROUND

Courtesy of Housing & Development Board

The dragon playground, 1980s.

We end our exploration with one of the most loved landmarks in Singapore – the Dragon playground along Lorong 6. Designed by the Housing & Development Board (HDB)'s Mr Khor Ean Ghee and built in 1979, this concrete dragon has been an icon of Singapore design across various forms of media.

In the early 1970s, HDB's first series of playground designs for HDB housing estates had an animal theme, including pelican, giraffe and tortoise sculptures alongside the requisite swings and slides.

HDB's second wave of playgrounds, built from the late 1970s, had a more interesting brief: to feature more objects and concepts easily identifiable with local culture. This second wave of HDB playgrounds included bumboat and rickshaw designs, as well as the three-dimensional dragon seen at the former Block 28.

This playground followed an earlier experiment with a dragon design, built in the Toa Payoh Town Park. That playground featured a dragon with a longer spine, a metal head and a circular monkey bar.

After feedback that the Town Park's dragon was too long, its metal head difficult to fabricate and that the colour of its head faded with time, Mr Khor tweaked his initial design. In 1979, HDB's new dragon design featured a larger head tiled with terrazzo and glass in red, blue, orange and green versions. It also had a body of colourfully-painted steel rings which children could slide or climb through.

The use of terrazzo tiles produced a mosaic aesthetic that remains beloved decades after the dragon playground's construction. The main motivation for the use of terrazzo was more practical than aesthetic however – the tiles precluded the need to repaint the dragon periodically and saved on maintenance costs.

This dragon playground is one of two remaining playgrounds in Singapore with this design, the other being located in Ang Mo Kio. While the Toa Payoh playground still retains its original sand surface, the Ang Mo Kio one has been covered with rubber mats. Two smaller playgrounds with different dragon designs can also be found in Braddell and MacPherson.

Courtesy of Wong Lo Tuck

The earlier dragon design in Toa Payoh Town Park, 1976.

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GUIDE TO MARKED SITES

Church of the Risen Christ
91 Toa Payoh Central
Opened in 1971, the Church of the Risen Christ was the first church in Toa Payoh. Like other religious institutions in Toa Payoh, the church was an important pillar of support in the community with a number of social ventures.

1973 SEAP Games Village
Toa Payoh Central
The 1973 SEAP Games Village opened in the heart of Toa Payoh, with four HDB point blocks serving as accommodation for athletes before being sold to the public after the Games. The Toa Payoh Public Library was also used as the secretariat building for the Games, while the Toa Payoh Stadium, Sports Hall and Swimming Complex were all competition venues.

Chung Hwa Medical Institution
640 Lorong 4 Toa Payoh
Known as the Chung Hwa Free Clinic when it opened in 1978, the Medical Institution includes a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) clinic, the Singapore College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the Chinese Medical and Drugs Research Institute and the Chinese Acupuncture Research Institution.

Toa Payoh Town Park
Junction of Toa Payoh Lorong 2 and Lorong 6
Completed in 1972, the Toa Payoh Town Park was a popular choice for wedding photoshoots in the 1970s and 1980s. It remains a destination for nature lovers with its diverse plantlife and dragonfly populations.The park's Observation Tower was given conservation status by the Urban Redevelopment Authority in 2009.

Dragon Playground
In front of Block 28, Toa Payoh Lorong 6
One of the last remaining playgrounds with a dragon design in Singapore, the playground retains an iconic status with Singaporeans.

Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery
184E Jalan Toa Payoh
Established in 1912, the oldest Buddhist monastery in Singapore includes the Hall of Celestial Kings (Tian Wang Dian) and Mahavira Hall (Da Xiong Bao Dian), both of which are gazetted as national monuments for their historical and architectural value.

Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman Temple
2001 Lorong 8 Toa Payoh
Founded as a temple in the Orchard area in the late 1800s, Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman is one of the oldest Hindu temples in Singapore. The temple celebrates a number of festivals each year including the Brahmothsavan and Navakshari Homam festivals, as well as a santhana kudam (sandalwood paste) ceremony on National Day.

United Temple
177 Lorong 7 Toa Payoh
The United Temple was the first in Singapore to bring together Chinese temples founded by and catering to different dialect groups when it was established in 1974. The Chee Tian Keng, Shan Zu Yuan Fu De Ci, Tong Xing Gang and Zhao Ying Ci temples were all founded during the *kampong* days of Toa Payoh and are now housed under the same roof.

Masjid Muhajirin
275 Braddell Road
Masjid Muhajirin opened in 1977 and was the first mosque in Singapore to be built with financial contributions from the Mosque Building Fund scheme. After a major rebuilding in 2007, the mosque shares its grounds with the headquarters of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) and the Al-Irsyah Al-Islamiah madrasah (religious school).

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The Toa Payoh Heritage Trail is part of the National Heritage Board's ongoing efforts to document and present the history and social memories of places in Singapore. Jointly presented by the National Heritage Board and Toa Payoh Central Community Club, we hope this trail will bring back fond memories for those who have worked, lived or played in the area, and serve as a useful source of information for new residents and visitors.

National Heritage Board

Toa Payoh Central Citizens' Consultative Committee

toa payoh photography club

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