

**Heritage Appraisal of the Signal Tower  
Blackhead Point (Tai Pau Mai), Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon**

The Signal Tower (訊號塔) in the Signal Hill Garden at Blackhead Point<sup>1</sup> (Tai Pau Mai 大包米<sup>2</sup>) was built in 1907 by the Hong Kong Observatory (香港天文台), to house a time-ball apparatus that was previously located in the nearby Round House of the Former Marine Police Headquarters (前水警總部). The Signal Tower was one of the two buildings which were constructed in Hong Kong for the purpose of signalling accurate time to the mariners and the public. *Historical Interest*

In Hong Kong, the time-ball service can trace its history back to the establishment of the Hong Kong Observatory in 1883. Such a service was crucial to mariners for the purpose of setting their chronometers before the advent of reliable radio broadcasting. The first time-ball apparatus was installed in the Round House of the Former Marine Police Headquarters, Tsim Sha Tsui, with its first official use on 1 January 1885. Because of development around the building, a new Signal Tower was required at a higher location and Blackhead Point was chosen, reusing the existing time-ball apparatus and resuming the service on 8 January 1908.

Blackhead's Hill (as it was then known) was a strategic high point owned by the British Military, originally as the site for the Kowloon East Battery, which complemented the existing Kowloon West Battery (near the Former Marine Police Headquarters), as a harbour defence. The British Military retained ownership of the site until 1958, when it was then handed-over to the Colonial Government.

From 1908 to 1920, the time ball at Signal Tower dropped

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<sup>1</sup> Blackhead Point was a name assigned by the British upon their official arrival in Kowloon after the Convention of Peking in 1860. The name was derived from the German merchant B. Schwarzkopf who operated a sail making, soap manufacturing and coal shipment business in Hong Kong from 1855 until the beginning of First World War. As Schwarzkopf's godowns were close to the site, the Hill was named after him. "Blackhead" is the English translation of "Schwarzkopf".

<sup>2</sup> The name "Tai Pau Mai" was coined by local residents since the Blackhead Point resembled a large bag of rice.

once daily except Sundays and government holidays. Shortly before at 1 pm every day, the 6 feet diameter hollow copper ball was raised by hand-winch to the top of the mast, then at exactly 1 pm it was automatically released and dropped to the foot of the mast. From 1920 onwards, the time ball dropped twice a day at 10 am and 4 pm until 1933.

The Signal Tower was originally 42 feet high with three storeys. The ground floor served as a store room for the typhoon signals, the first floor contained the air cylinder to check the fall of the ball, and the upper floor installed with hoisting machinery and an electric clock. In 1927, a storey was added to raise its height by 20 feet, in order to enhance the Signal Tower's visibility, which was affected by the continuous development of surrounding high buildings.

The time-ball service ceased on 30 June 1933, with the approval of the Naval Authorities and the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce, the opinion being that the method had become obsolete with the use of radio-telegraphy and telephony. By then, regular radio time signals were being broadcast and many buildings prominently displayed large clocks.

During the Second World War, the Signal Tower was used as a temporary ammunition store but was later gradually abandoned. In 1980, the Signal Hill Garden was opened to the public and the retired Signal Tower became a landmark feature of the Garden.

The Signal Tower was built to a heavy Classical Baroque design incorporating popular Edwardian decorative features of the time, which combined red brickwork with contrasting lighter colour stone architectural features. It is also a square-shaped building with elegant chamfered corners, as compared to the usual square corners. The brickwork is in "English Bond" (i.e. alternating courses of headers and stretchers) of specially made red bricks, while the stonework is of carved local granite. Architectural features include granite plinth, band course and moulded cornices; the granite surrounds to the window frames are known as "Gibbs surrounds"

*Architectural  
Merit*

The ground floor features a set of “blank windows”, which keep the symmetry of the design, without the necessity of actual window openings. The additional storey, constructed in 1927, was designed to closely harmonise with the existing Baroque building style, with its bulls-eye windows, arched window heads and similar treatment of red brickwork; it is surmounted with a domed concrete roof.

The interior of the building is simple and functional. The walls are plain, plastered and white-washed. The floors are constructed of reinforced concrete. The main internal architectural feature is the elegant concrete spiral staircase, built around a cast-iron central post, with a wrought-iron handrail that serves G/F to 2/F; the 3/F added in 1927 is accessible by a steel cat-ladder from the 2/F.

Although the Signal Tower underwent a major alteration in 1927 with the addition of a 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, very few other alterations have taken place since its original construction. Virtually all the original significant architectural heritage assets and decorative masonry features are still intact, including moulded cornices, pedimented entrance, windows with “Gibbs surrounds”, etc. *Authenticity*

The Signal Tower at Blackhead Point and the Round House of the Former Marine Police Headquarters are the only two purpose-built structures ever equipped with a time-ball device in Hong Kong. The Signal Tower constitutes a rare example of fine designed and constructed Edwardian Baroque architecture in Hong Kong. *Rarity*

Apart from providing an essential navigational aid for mariners for over 20 years, the Signal Tower had an important significance in the daily life of the public and businesses by giving a precise time signal to all those within sight of the Tower. Situated in a prominent position overlooking Victoria Harbour for more than a century, the Signal Tower is a testimony of the evolution of the Hong Kong Observatory and its Time Service. The Signal Tower is now opened for public viewing at set times. *Social Value & Local Interest*

The Signal Tower is functionally and historically closely connected with two nearby declared monuments, the Round House of the Former Marine Police Headquarters Compound and the Hong Kong Observatory, which both testify the time service history of Hong Kong in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, there are also other nearby historic buildings which recall the historical and socio-cultural development of the Tsim Sha Tsui area, including the Former Kowloon-Canton Railway Clock Tower (前九廣鐵路鐘樓) (Declared Monument), Former Kowloon British School (前九龍英童學校) (Declared Monument), Peninsula Hotel (半島酒店) (Grade 1), Rosary Church (玫瑰堂) (Grade 1), St. Mary's Canossian College (嘉諾撒聖瑪利書院) (Grade 1) and the Main Block of Old Kowloon Fire Station (舊九龍消防局主樓) (Grade 2).

*Group Value*