

Heritage Appraisal of Block 7, Old Lei Yue Mun Barracks Lei Yue Mun, Chai Wan, Hong Kong

Old Lei Yue Mun Barracks (the “Barracks”) was one of the earliest and most important British Army fortifications in Hong Kong. The name was taken from the fishing village of Lei Yue Mun¹ (鯉魚門), the “Gateway of the Carp”, which lies on the mainland side of the narrow strait below Devil’s Peak. The Barracks was divided into three parts – the central area (main barracks), the western ridge (upper fort) and the headland (lower fort). The main barracks, built at different times from 1890 to 1939, mainly served as offices and married quarters for the British Army.

***Historical
Interest***

Situated at the northeast corner of Hong Kong Island overlooking the eastern approach to the Victoria Harbour, Lei Yue Mun occupied a strategic position. Before the establishment of the Barracks in the late nineteenth century, the British military had in 1844 built barracks at the nearby Sai Wan² (西灣) to the south of the channel.³ Due to prevalent diseases such as malaria and dysentery which killed a sizable number of British soldiers and civilians, the barracks was later abandoned.⁴ In 1885, the military switched their attention to construction of a permanent infrastructure at Lei Yue Mun. This was probably attributed to the possible attacks from Russia and France to the colony. As war fears increased, the then Hong Kong Governor Sir George Ferguson Bowen was compelled to fund the construction of a fort at Lei Yue Mun Pass. In addition, other military installations, including a redoubt, barracks and a series of tunnels were built in the subsequent years, which altogether formed the Barracks. By the 1890s, the fortifications at Lei Yue Mun had fully become an important point of coastal defence.

In the following three decades, the military installations at the Barracks continued to expand in size and number, including the erection of a number of new blocks in the central area. By the 1930s, however, the strategic importance of Lei Yue Mun declined considerably as a result of technological and tactical advances which had prompted the establishment of new defence positions in the territory.

¹ The place name of "Lei Yue Mun", in its old usage, includes "Lyemun", "Lyeemun", "Lyemoon" and "Lyeemoon".

² The place name of "Sai Wan" was also called "Saiwan" and "Sywan".

³ Bard, Solomon M. *Notes on the History of Hong Kong's Coastal Defences during the British Administration, with Special Reference to Lei Yue Mun*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence, 2015: 37.

⁴ Ko, Tim Keung & Wordie, Jason. *Ruins of Wars: a Guide to Hong Kong's Battlefields and Wartime Sites*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (HK) Co. Ltd., 1996: 75.

During the Japanese Occupation, the Barracks fell into the hands of the Japanese. On 8 December 1941, the Japanese launched their attacks in Hong Kong. After the fall of the New Territories and Kowloon, the British Forces immediately strengthened the defences at Lei Yue Mun to prevent the Japanese from crossing the Lei Yue Mun Channel from Devil's Peak. On 19 December 1941, the Barracks fell despite the fact that it was defended by various units, including a company of the Royal Rifles of Canada, the 5/7 Rajputs and the 6th Battery of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps.

In the post-war period, the Barracks was used by the British Army as a training ground until 1987. During the first half of the 1950s, the upper fort was occupied by a troop of air defence artillery. From 1948 to 1984, the Barracks housed the Depot and Record Office of the Hong Kong Military Service Corps ("HKMSC"). In 1987, the Army relinquished the Barracks to the Hong Kong Government and the site was then converted to civil use. The central area and the western ridge have become the Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village since 1988, whereas the military installations at the headland were restored to form the Museum of Coastal Defence which opened in 2000.

Block 7 was built in 1890-1895 at the north end of the Barracks on top of a prestigious hill overlooking Lei Yue Mun Pass. It is believed to be one of the earliest buildings constructed in the first phase of the barracks development. Originally it was built as Officers Quarters for four single Royal Artillery officers, who were probably required to help organise the mounting of new guns and their emplacements, then under construction at the time. The building was later used as the Officers Mess until about 1909 when the building was converted to Officers Quarters once more. In the post-war period, it was used as a Training Centre for the HKMSC until the Corps moved out from the Barracks in 1984.

The architectural style of Block 7 is "Colonial Vernacular", built in a *Architectural* basic Classical version of a traditional "bungalow", which featured the *Merit* characteristic wide open verandahs on three sides, a raised ground floor for ventilation and damp-proofing purposes, and a central "Jack-Roof".⁵ The building is rectangular in plan, of single-storey brick construction

⁵ A "Jack-Roof" is a small separate pitched roof, erected about 1-2m on top of the main pitched roof, in order to provide a horizontal gap between the two roofs for ventilation and light. It was widely used in "bungalow" style houses in British Malaya and India.

and set on low segmental arches. Two ornamental brick and granite chimney stacks still exist. The building was originally set out as accommodation for four single officers, with four separate en-suite bedrooms. External architectural features include simple square Tuscan order columns which support the verandah roofs. The main entrance doorway has a segmental arch and central keystone. There are short flight of masonry steps fitted with modern metal balustrading, leading up to both the front and rear entrances. Internal architectural features include the remains of the brick fireplaces, some Classical plaster mouldings to the ceiling cornices and timber skirting boards.

Alterations to the building include the replacement of the tiled pitched “Jack-Roof” by a flat concrete roof, the demolition of most of the internal brick partitions, the blocking-in of the open verandahs, and new flooring. Nevertheless, the original main brick external structure and sub-floor still exist in good condition. ***Authenticity***

Block 7 was constructed at the start of the first phase of building development at Lei Yue Mun, to provide the initial accommodation and facilities for the Royal Artillery, who were manning the coastal defence guns. It is therefore a rare and early example of the once popular “bungalow” design of dwelling house that was introduced into Hong Kong from India by the British. ***Rarity***

When Block 7 was exclusively used by the British Army, it had little social value to the local community. Now as a coffee shop for the Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village, it has become very popular among the public for both refreshments and also as an excellent spot for scenic views and photo shoots, and therefore acquired higher social value and local interest. ***Social Value & Local Interest***

Block 7 is physically remote from other main buildings in the Barracks (this was a deliberate choice in order to give the officers living there a restful location), but it still forms an integral part of the overall composition and understanding of the original barracks layout. It has been contributing to the group value of the historic buildings in the Barracks, as well as the military installations at the site of the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence and the Sai Wan Fort and Redoubt (西灣炮台及堡壘). The Barracks is also physically close to other graded historic buildings such as Salesian Mission House, Main Building (慈幼會修院主樓) (Grade 2), Salesian Mission House, Villa (慈幼會修院房舍) ***Group Value***

(Grade 2), Tin Hau Temple (天后廟) (Grade 2), Tam Kung Temple (譚公
仙聖廟) (Grade 3) and Shing Wong Temple (城隍廟) (Grade 3).