

## Historic Building Appraisal

### “Birds Bridge”, Queen’s Road West, Hong Kong

“Birds Bridge” is the colloquial name that local residents use to refer to the roadway that runs up the small slope from Queen’s Road West to the Sai Ying Pun Jockey Club Polyclinic.<sup>1</sup> It features two inclines that meet in the middle to create the shape of an arch, which is supported by retaining walls of granite blocks underneath, all of which gives it the appearance of a bridge.

A survey map from 1843 provides the first known reference to a path that ran from Queen’s Road up to a building named Edger,<sup>2</sup> later known as Edger’s Bungalow. The government purchased the two-storey building for \$10,000 in 1859 and converted it into the Government Civil Hospital. A lock hospital, specialising in the treatment of venereal diseases, had already opened in the vicinity in 1858.

After Edger’s Bungalow was destroyed by a typhoon on 22 September 1874, the GCH was moved temporarily into the Hotel d’Europe<sup>3</sup> on Hollywood Road. An application to build a new lock hospital on the site on which the GCH had stood was then approved by the government. However, the hotel housing the GCH burned down on 26 December 1878. Patients were transferred to the new Lock Hospital the following day, and its premises were taken over by the GCH in 1879.

At the time that the GCH was moved into the new Lock Hospital building, the small road from Queen’s Road (now Queen’s Road West) was in a poor condition: it had been allowed to fall into disrepair, rubbish was dumped along the sides, while coolies treated it as a public latrine, leaving it smelly and dirty as a result.<sup>4</sup> The inclined-roadway leading up to the GCH from Queen’s Road was renovated and the adjoining granite rubble masonry walls

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<sup>1</sup> The polyclinic, which opened in 1960, is located on the site of the former Government Civil Hospital (GCH).

<sup>2</sup> The Edger’s Bungalow that appeared in the 1843 survey map once belonged to Joseph Frost Edger, a leading British merchant in China and Hong Kong and one of the first unofficial members of Hong Kong’s Legislative Council. He managed the trading firm of Jamieson, How & Co., which maintained a godown that was connected to Queen’s Road by a path.

<sup>3</sup> Located at 2 Hollywood Road behind Victoria Gaol, Hotel d’Europe was in business until 1874 when the owner went bankrupt, the hotel closed and the property was taken over by the Hong Kong government, which later converted it into a civil hospital. The building burned down in a fire that broke out in the city at Christmas in 1878.

<sup>4</sup> Colonial Surgeon Annual Report 1879, Hong Kong Sessional Papers, 1880.

as they stand today were built in 1881. An entrance lodge and gates on the roadway running from Queen's Road to the hospital were constructed around late 1882 and 1883. In addition, retaining walls, a ramp and drainage channels were constructed and the lower end of the roadway was renovated under the same tender.

Known as a trough closet in the early days, a public toilet that contained 38 seats and two urinal stalls was constructed in 1911<sup>5</sup> underneath the “bridge”. Now filled in, five ventilation openings supported by granite windowsills facing Queen's Road West can be found in the retaining wall.

There are different stories that are told about the origin of the colloquial name “Birds Bridge”. Some long-time residents recount that the slope used to be home to a bazaar selling birds and bird food, while others say it was named after the large flocks of wild birds that inhabited the wooded areas nearby.<sup>6</sup>

Dating back to the late 19th century, “Birds Bridge” also has historical interest thanks to its close connection with the different hospitals that it has provided access to over many years.

“Birds Bridge” is not in fact a bridge, but a structure combining a wide inclined public road for vehicles (in the past) comprising its eastern section and a narrower inclined pathway for pedestrians making up its western section, supported by two sections of retaining wall. The “bridge” extends along the south side of Queen's Road West from no. 106 at the eastern end to the eastern border of no. 136 at the western end. It is approximately 140 metres in length, 18 metres in width at its widest point and about 4 metres above road level at its highest point at the entrance to the polyclinic.

#### *Architectural Merit*

Beneath the roadway is a curved masonry retaining wall built of uncoursed random rubble with low granite piers at each end. Dressed, saddleback granite blocks top the wall stem as capping. Granite is not only a local material that is readily available in Hong Kong, but also the best-known hard igneous rock used in construction in England, which may have contributed to its selection for building the wall. The granite blocks of the wall stem do not have a uniform shape or size, but were nevertheless laid and arranged to keep long vertical joints to a minimum and to distribute pressure

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<sup>5</sup> Public Works Department Report for 1911, (Appendix P), P. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Neither of these stories can be verified. No official written records have so far been found which refer to ‘Birds Bridge,’ and only oral evidence seems to be available.

over the maximum area possible. The pier at the western end is simply a plain granite block with no ornamentation, while the one at the eastern end is topped with a pyramid-shaped column cap.

The old masonry retaining wall leading up to the entrance of the polyclinic is still in place. Also built of random granite rubble, it includes an ornamental pier at one end. This pier, which once served as the base for a lamp post, features the most ornamentation of the wall piers. On each of the three outward-facing sides is a recessed panel trimmed with mouldings and decorated with diamond rustication at the centre.

The roadway is now surfaced with concrete paving. Although the paving has been relaid from time to time to allow the underground utility infrastructure to be repaired or replaced, the two inclines still retain their original general appearance. The western section of “Birds Bridge” comprises the pedestrian path, which today is flanked by pipe railings and has a surface water channel on the side adjoining the retaining wall for drainage. Moreover, the modern cement pointing that was introduced in order to repair the arch now dominates the appearance of the wall. In addition, weep holes – which were not originally provided – were built into the wall for drainage. All these later additions diminish the authenticity of the site to some extent.

***Authenticity & Rarity***

The “Birds Bridge” is a surviving infrastructure work that bears witness to the early development of Sai Ying Pun as well as the transformation of civil engineering techniques. The tangible traces left from the former underground trough closet also qualify the “Birds Bridge” as an important piece of evidence marking the development of public health and hygiene in Hong Kong. Although the window openings and sills left by the trough closet contribute to the value of the “Birds Bridge”, they also altered the original masonry arrangement, with some parts of the wall now coursed rather than uncoursed.

***Social Value & Local Interest***

The social value of “Birds Bridge” lies in the role it has played in providing access for more than one and a half centuries from Queen’s Road West to the old GCH and the Lock Hospital in Hong Kong’s early years and the Sai Ying Pun Jockey Club Polyclinic today. A renowned landmark in the district, it has long formed part of the original streetscape along this historical section of Sai Ying Pun and has valuable local interest as well as social value for the local community.

There are several historic buildings and declared monuments in the ***Group Value*** vicinity, including Old Tsan Yuk Maternity Hospital (Grade 1), Main Block, Tung Wah Hospital (Grade 1), Main Building and Staff Quarters, Old Lunatic Asylum Chinese Block (Grade 2), the façade of the Old Mental Hospital (declared monument) and the Old Pathological Institute (declared monument).

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