

Historic Building Appraisal

Building Remains at Cochrane Street, Central, H.K.

Hong Kong street names were by and large taken from British politicians, military figures and local civil servants. Cochrane Street (閣麟街) was named after Sir Thomas John Cochrane (1789-1872), Commander of the British naval forces in the Far East who flew his flag in HMS Agincourt based in Hong Kong in 1843 and left the city in 1847. Gutzlaff Street (吉士笠街) bears the name of Karl Friedrich August Gutzlaff (1803-1851), a Lutheran missionary, whose knowledge of several Chinese dialects made him a valued interpreter, magistrate, assistant secretary of Chinese affairs, and chief secretary to the Governor of Hong Kong. Cochrane Street and Gutzlaff Street which are parallel to each other and lying in the middle of the earliest developed part of Central District were laid out in the mid-1840s.

*Historical
Interest*

Trade and commerce brought prosperity to the colonial settlement (later called the City of Victoria) which in turn attracted a huge inflow of capital and people. The local Chinese tended to build flimsy huts to live wherever they could, and the area near the present-day Cochrane, Gutzlaff, Graham and Peel Streets was one of the largest areas of huts of this kind. The then Governor, Sir Henry Pottinger embarked on a removal programme which was continued by his successor, Sir John F. Davis. In 1843-1847, the hut dwellers were relocated to the area near Tai Ping Shan Street in Sheung Wan with the area south of Queen's Road Central re-plotted, new streets laid out and new lots auctioned for building development.

Today, sandwiched between a section of Cochrane Street and the back facing Gutzlaff Street, there are remains of old walls constructed of bricks and granite which are believed to be the remains of the back and party walls of tenement houses that may be traced back to the 1930s.

Hong Kong Tong Lau (Tenement Houses/ Tenements)

Tong Lau (唐樓), which literally means “Chinese-type houses” or “Chinese houses” or often referred to as “tenement houses”, or “tenements” in colonial records, was a collective term for dwellings of a majority of the population in pre-war and early post-war Hong Kong. The term describes a form of living in multiple dwellings within which the space is subdivided into many units let to tenants who are unable to afford anything better. The older *Tong Lau* were built in a variety of styles including back-to-back, back-to-side, back-to-lane,

back-to-street / road etc. whilst the newer ones had provision of proper bathrooms and toilets possible.¹

A great plague started in 1894 in the Tai Ping Shan area which cost many lives. In proposing measures to prevent the reoccurrence of plagues, Dr James A. Lowson, Medial Officer in charge of Epidemic Hospital, urged that amongst other things, the use of basements as domestic accommodation should be prohibited, and back-to-back houses should be demolished as soon as possible. Although nos. 25, 29 and 31 Cochrane Street were recorded to have basements in 1895, all the 10 tenements at 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street and 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street were recorded of having no basements according to the records of Tenancy Tribunal of 1963, 1965, 1967 and 1972.² The records of Tenancy Tribunal may have suggested that the current building remains on site are not related to the buildings of 1895.

The Public Health and Buildings Ordinance was passed in 1903 requiring every new domestic building erected on land leased after 1903 to be provided with an open space equivalent to not less than one-third of the roofed-over area of the building and a scavenging lane with a width of at least 6 feet (about 1.8 m) behind the building.

Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street (until the fire in 1878)

Inland Lot 104 was leased to Frederick James Porter, a merchant, in January 1844 and was soon divided into different portions.³ After a few

¹ Dr Phineas Ayres, a Colonial Surgeon, in his report of 1874, spoke indignantly of the Hong Kong tenements that were constructed back to back with no ventilation or natural light except from the front. Mr Osbert Chadwick, a sanitation expert continued to draw attention to the serious consequences that would arise if nothing were done to alleviate the bad sanitary condition of the city in his 1882 report. A sign of improvement came in July 1878 when the Government, in consultation with landholders, introduced a useful change in the interest of public health, i.e. to incorporate an open yard separating the kitchen from the rest of the building to allow free air ventilation into the building. The Government, in giving permission to erect verandas over Crown Land, could now demand landholders to admit certain amount of fresh air and sunlight through the open yard while trying to economise space to the utmost.

According to 'Return of Cases of Bubonic Plague' published in Hongkong Government Gazette dated 14 October 1899, amongst the around 680 tenement units infected by bubonic plague, around 55% of the units were in back to back style, 27% in back to lane style, 12 % in back to side style and less than 1% in back to street / road style.

² It was mentioned in *Hongkong Government Gazette*, 22 June 1895 that there were basements in Nos. 25, 29 and 31 Cochrane Street. But according to the demolished building case records of the Tenancy Tribunal of 1963, 1965, 1967 and 1972, all the tenements at Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 & 10 Gutzlaff Street and 25, 27, 29, 31 & 33 Cochrane Street did not have any basement.

³ Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street and Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street fell on Inland Lot 104 where the Crown Lease commenced in 1844. The lot was later divided into Section A, which consisted of Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street, and Sections B, C, D, E and Remaining Portion (R.P.), which covered Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street.

ownership changes, the land lot which covered Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street were acquired by Douglas Lapraik (德忌利士·林柏)⁴ (1818-1869), a Scot who amassed a vast amount of wealth in Hong Kong, in 1848. After his death in 1869 and till the end of 1899, the property at Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street was kept in the estate of Douglas Lapraik deceased.

Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street (until the fire in 1878)

This portion of the plot of land (i.e. Section A of Inland Lot No. 104) was brought by James Bridges Endicott (詹姆斯·安德葛) (1815-1870), an American ship captain, at a cost of \$1,500 in July 1847 from Douglas Lapraik.⁵ Endicott worked for an American firm, Messrs. Russell & Co. in Canton (present-day Guangzhou) to take charge of an opium hulk, *Ruparell*. With the fortune made from the opium trade, he started his business and later became a director of the Union Dock Company in Hong Kong.

Upon his arrival in Canton around 1842, the 27-year-old Endicott entered into a relationship with a boat woman named Ng Kew (吳嬌) with whom they had three sons and two daughters although Endicott did not marry her and separated with her in 1852 when he married Miss Ann Russell from London in Macao. Women like Ng Kew were known as “protected women” historically, whom might be well-kept and left well-provided for when their “protectors” left them.⁶

Before his marriage at Macao, Endicott placed the property at Nos. 2, 4,

⁴ Douglas Lapraik came to the Far East in 1839 and arrived in Hong Kong about 1842. He founded the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Company Ltd. and was the donor of the Pedder Street Clock Tower which remained a local landmark from 1862 to 1913. His legacy endures in the names of a street, a lane, and a building. Douglas Street and Douglas Lane are named after him. He built a mansion called “Douglas Castle” (now being used as University Hall of The University of Hong Kong and has been declared a monument under the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance in 1995) where for years he lived with a Chinese mistress named Kwi Lam, alias Atai whom was given a life estate of a land lot in Stanley Street on 22 June 1861 by Douglas Lapraik.

⁵ The lot where Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street stood was first acquired by Ong Sow at a cost of \$6,000 in December 1844. It was subsequently sold to Dougals Lapraik at \$1,400 in June 1847. Lapraik later sold the lot to James Bridges Endicott at \$1,500 in July 1847.

⁶ The presence of large numbers of foreign traders in China gave rise to the emergence of a distinct type of Chinese women who were acquired by the foreigners and living with them. These women, like Kwi Lam, alias Atai, were sizable enough to give rise to the term of “protected women” (受保護婦女/涉外婚婦) in local history. Many of the “protected women” were from the boat dwelling population along China’s southern coast whose water-life made it natural for them to get to know, to mix with and to develop extensive contact with foreigners. At times, the “protectors” made provision for their secret lovers by the creation of a Trust or the gift of real estate.

6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street in trust for Ng Kew who held the property in trust. Endicott named Douglas Lapraik as trustee of his interest and a gentleman called William Scott of Ng Kew's.

After separated with Endicott, Ng Kew moved from Macao to Hong Kong and formed a business partnership with a Chinese comprador named Fung Aching whom was described as her husband in a newspaper. They got involved in property business and their relationship ended in 1856 when Fung Aching left Hong Kong. Afterwards, Ng Kew transacted business on her own account, brokered loans and became the leader of a group of single women during the 1870s. It is believed that Ng Kew lived in Nos. 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street in 1872 and the subsequent years like 1876 - 1878. She was described as “*Hung Mo Kew*”⁷ (literally means “red-haired Akew”) in the Collection Books of the Rating and Valuation Department, a name which was used to describe Gutzlaff Street as well.⁸

Ng Kew was adjudged a bankrupt on 7 March 1878, after her creditors filed lawsuits against her. Her personal belongings, including expensive furniture,⁹ were sold to meet her debts, but the property at Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street were still kept by her, as it had been conferred on her by a deed of trust. According to the notice to announce the bankruptcy case of Ng A-kew published on Hongkong Government Gazette on 9 June 1880, it said that “the

⁷ A Chinese in the 19th century rarely had only one name, and there is not just one way of rendering Chinese names into English, so that Ng Kew (吳嬌) is described as Ng Akew (吳亞嬌), Ong Akew, Ng A Kew or Ng A-Kew in some accounts, and again, Hung Mo Kew (紅毛嬌), Ong Mo Kew or On Mow Kew in yet other accounts. The use of the “A” to precede a given name is not uncommon, thus “Akew”. At times, “Akew” was written as two words, “A Kew”. Another practice was to hyphenate the two words in the name, thus “A-Kew”. The difference in Eastern and English phonetics means that any one single word may be rendered differently, so “Hung Mo Kew” was also presented as “Ong Mo Kew” or “On Mow Kew”. Such discrepancies in spelling were not uncommon during the 19th century, as most official papers were hand-written by clerks.

⁸ Gutzlaff Street was called by generations of Chinese as *Hung Mo Kew Kai* (紅毛嬌街), which literally means a street of red-haired (Hung Mo) women (Kew) that could also be interpreted as “Street of Western Women”. Local legend had it, or at least so it was alleged, that “Western prostitutes” were active along here, which was one of the reasons advanced for the street being so called. Another interpretation is that the term “Hung Mo Kew” is a name also given to the “Western ladies” who always came here to have their shoes repaired, as Gutzlaff Street was where all the cobblers of great skill were to be found. That said, based on the latest research findings, it seems that “Hung Mo Kew Kai” might have originated from Ng Kew, alias Hung Mo Kew (which looks like an amusing nickname), who had once lived in that street. “Hung Mo Kew” might have begun as an individual style added to Ng Kew’s name and later entered into formal usage in the Rate Lists of the 1860s.

⁹ The furniture of Ng Kew was described as “Canton-made Blackwood Marble-top Tables, Chairs, and Stools, Blackwood Carved Sofas, Chairs, and Tables. Chimney Glasses, Engravings, Pictures, Lamps, Carpets, Clocks, Bookcase, Sideboard, Crockery, Glass and Plated Ware, Vases and Ornaments, Canton-made Blackwood Bedsteads, Teakwood Wardrobes, Toilet Table and Glass, and Washstands. One Iron Safe” by *Hong Kong Daily Press* dated 29 March 1878. However, according to a statement given by H.F. Gibbons, the then Registrar of the Supreme Court of Hong Kong, on 21 October 1880, he did not seem to believe that Ng Kew was bankrupted since she was still keeping unlicensed brothels and or rented property.

age of the Bankrupt [i.e. Ng A-kew] then is believed to be about sixty”.

The fire on Christmas of 1878 and aftermath

Before the fire of 1878, the area around today's Cochrane Street, Gutzlaff Street, Graham Street and Peel Street had become a bazaar area between two European sections¹⁰ of the city and was described as the city's “marginal residence” or “in between” area for being not quite European and not quite Chinese, and consisted mainly of small shops and poorer residences populated by an ethnically mixed and polyglot group comprising Chinese and Indian tradesmen, Parsee and Muslim communities, Chinese and European prostitutes, protected women and their Eurasian children who existed on the periphery of both European and Chinese communities.

The fire broke out in Central on Christmas 1878 entirely swept away “Cochrane Street, Gutzlaff Street, Graham Street... and also portions of Stanley Street, Wellington Street, Gage Street, Lyndhurst Terrace and Hollywood Road” (*The China Mail*, 26 December 1878) making the area “a mass of tottering walls and crumbling ruins.” Orders were even given to pull down walls of destroyed houses. The whole blocks of houses at Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street and Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street (structures erected untold ages before) were described as “Burnt 25/26 Dec 1878” in the Rates Book for 1879 and were exempted from payment of rates for the whole year of 1879.

It is believed that John Steward Lapraik (the nephew of Douglas Lapraik deceased) had a stake in both sides of Inland Lot 104. Managing the remaining portion and serving as one of four devisees of the trust property in Section A, he enabled the two rows of houses in both sides of the land lot to be rebuilt together. In May 1879, *Daily Press* noted that houses were in progress of rebuilding in Cochrane Street. Soon afterwards, Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street and Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Streets were liable for rates paid for the January to March quarter in 1880.

The late Rev Carl T. Smith, a renowned historian, believed that Ng Kew lived in the rebuilt houses in Gutzlaff Street after her bankruptcy in 1878 and probably until her death in 1914 when the trust was dissolved, albeit no official record is found to support the claim. However, according to the Rates Book of 1879, the owner of Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street which was first hand

¹⁰ The two European sections are (a) the area around Queen's Road in which most of the important banks and European business firms were established, and (b) the socially higher up residential districts in Caine, Bonham & Robinson Roads.

written as Ng Kew was crossed and rewritten as “Fung Kow”. Furthermore, as Ng Kew was about 60 when her properties were gazetted for sale in 1880 after her bankruptcy, she would have been 94 in 1914. Such life expectancy was highly uncommon in the late nineteenth century.¹¹ As such, it does not seem to be likely that Ng Kew would have lived until 1914.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, foreign traders especially British taipans were to some extent eclipsed by the growth of their Chinese counterparts who went on to make fortunes¹². According to the land records, Ho Tung (何東) (later Sir Robert, comprador, financier and public benefactor) purchased the houses at Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street for \$32,000 on 27 January 1900. He then resold the houses within 1 to 9 days.¹³ On 27 October 1916, the houses at Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street (which were under the ownership of Robert Endicott) were sold to the 50-year-old merchant, Ho Kom Tong (何甘棠) (1866-1950) at \$50,000. Subsequently, Ho Kom Tong sold No. 2 Gutzlaff Street on 28 October, Nos. 4 and 6 on 2 November, Nos. 8 and 10 on 1 December, all in 1916.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that both Ho Tung and Ho Kom Tong merely owned the lots for only a few days to about a month according to the official land transaction records.

After the sub-division of lot numbers in 1900 and 1916, the ownership of the subject 10 tenements at Cochrane Street and Gutzlaff Street had become very diverse including both Chinese and non-Chinese.¹⁵

¹¹ According to the Chadwick’s Report dated 1882, the mean ages at death for men and women in Hong Kong (who died over 20 years of age) in 1881 were 42 and 46 respectively, and 43 in average. If the children and young people who died before 20, the average mean age of death in 1881 was 18.33.

¹² The then Governor Sir John Pope Hennessy himself testified to the economic success of the Chinese by pointing out in the Legislative Council, in May 1881, that all but one of the 18 ratepayers then possessing property assessed at over \$1,000 per quarter were Chinese – the only British firm in the race was Jardine, Matheson & Co. Sir Hennessy also noted in the Legislative Council that in the 17 months from January 1880 to May 1881 the Chinese had purchased 1.7 million dollars’ worth of real estate from foreigners, 8 times what the foreigners purchased from the Chinese.

¹³ Ho Tung sold the properties at Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street at a total cost of \$38,200, thus making a profit of around \$6,200 in 9 days.

¹⁴ Ho Kom Tong sold the houses at Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street at a total cost of \$63,000, making a profit of around \$13,000 in 35 days.

¹⁵ The Chinese owners of the subject tenements include Chan, Ho, Hu, Kan, Kwong, Lai, Leung, Lui, etc. and non-Chinese such as Dhunjeebhoy Sorabjee Dady Burjor (敦治寶) (merchant & commission agent, formerly of Bombay, who may have been a Parsee), Ahmet Rumjahn (艾哈邁德) (broker and estate agent, himself a Muslim from India). The Shu Pun Charitable Association, Ltd. (樹本善堂) had an office at No. 27 Cochrane Street from 1933 to 1973. The Hoseinee Society of Hong Kong (香港賀善尼會) stayed at No. 21 and 23 Cochrane Street in different times until 1965. The area had rich “in between” character up to the mid-twentieth century.

It is important to note that according to the report of Mr H. Y. Chan (陳洪業), the authorised architect commissioned by Madam Ko Wai Yung (高惠容), dated 8 November 1963 applying to demolish the then buildings at Nos. 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street, it stated that the then buildings were built about 30 years ago, i.e. in the 1930s, and were in dilapidated condition and had extremely poor hygiene condition.¹⁶ The report was subsequently accepted by Tenancy Tribunal in 1963, which recommended to Governor in Council to approve the redevelopment of Nos. 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street.¹⁷ The building remains currently left on site, which stretch from No. 2 to No. 10 Gutzlaff Street were homogenous in style, building materials and craftsmanship. In other words, the primary materials uncovered seem pointing towards that the buildings of the current building remains were likely to be built in the 1930s.

After World War II, the tremendous increase in population led to great demands in housing. The subject 10 tenements were exceedingly crowded with inner space subdivided to accommodate as many as 124 people (mostly adults) at No. 25 Cochrane Street in November 1965.

The tenement houses deteriorated in their conditions. On inspection in July 1972 it was found that the brickwork of some walls of the tenements in Nos. 2, 4 and 6 Gutzlaff Street was bulged and fractured; in addition, much of the structural timber was decayed and these conditions made them unfit for habitation. Much of the same situations had been identified in the tenements of the back facing Cochrane Street, which had been under observation by the Building Authority for a considerable time. The tenements were declared to be in dangerous condition and eventually demolished, redeveloped or reverted to the Crown.

In the early 1990s, the Central-to-Mid-Levels hillside escalator link was built. Now, the street space facing Nos. 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33 Cochrane Street is much wider, the ground underneath the hillside escalator is originally the parcels of ground of the tenement house fronts.

Back-to-back building was a cost-saving system of building houses between those facing in opposite directions. Those houses, therefore, shared a common back wall or attaching walls to each other at the rear as well as party walls or cross walls along the sides. The brick-built walls stand on a site

*Architectural
Merit*

¹⁶ Tenancy Tribunal Applications Nos. H.E. 1758-1763 of 1963.

¹⁷ 'Properties recommended by the Tenancy Tribunal for Exclusion from the Landlord and Tenant Ordinance', Extract From Minutes of The Executive Council dated 7 April 1964.

located on the south eastern side of Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street, which was originally the kitchen on the ground floor. The brickworks are remains of what were two rows of five tenements each. Also identified on site are the back-to-side wall remains of Nos. 21 and 23 Cochrane Street and Nos. 1 and 2 Yim Fong Lane. According to the records of 1942, the Gutzlaff Street tenements had a width (i.e. frontage) between 14' 11" and 15' 7½", likely governed by the normal usable length of the China fir poles, about 15 feet, used for floor joists and roof beams and a length (i.e. the depth) of 67 feet back from the street, so that the whole of the ground floor was sufficiently deep to be divided into the front part for shops, the inner part for living and sleeping, and the rear part for cooking and utility purposes.

The building remains run throughout the length of the rear parts of the subject 10 tenement units. The ceiling of the ground floor of Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 Gutzlaff Street separates the back wall into two sections, i.e. a section of 4.3 m above the ground line of Gutzlaff Street which is the foundation of 5 houses at Cochrane Street on the one side and the kitchens of the 5 houses at Gutzlaff House on the other; and another section of 0.6 m to 0.7 m above the ground line of Cochrane Street. The walls were constructed with fair-face Chinese green bricks (青磚, or also known as "blue bricks")¹⁸ with granite as foundation. There are patches of repairs using concrete on brick and granite faces of the building remains.

The party walls are bonded into the building remains, separating each tenement from adjacent units. Corbellings with some modifications are seen at the section of party wall shared by Nos. 6 and 8 Gutzlaff Street. The bricks of the corbelling are laid in tiers arranged into a particular pattern.

A few small openings (slots) are found on the party walls at No. 6 Gutzlaff Street, which may indicate that at one time, there might be a platform or

¹⁸ Albeit the Buildings Ordinance of 1903 stipulating that blue bricks (commonly known as green bricks 青磚 in Cantonese) may not, without the approval of the Building Authority, be used in the walls of storeys other than the uppermost storey of a building or in the uppermost fifteen feet of the walls of such storey, there were cases that blue bricks were used at ground floor level. According to "Hong Kong Depositions Taken by the Magistrate Sitting as Coroner, and Finding in the Enquiry into the Deaths which Occurred in the Collapsed Houses in Cochrane Street" dated 1901 and included in *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, No. 36 of 1901, an enquiry on the collapse of Nos. 32 and 34 Cochrane Street with around 41 people killed stated that "It had been pointed out in the evidence that the [Buildings] Ordinance required amongst other things that all walls shall be built solid, of good bricks properly bonded together, and that the lower storey must be built of red brick and so on ...(p.16)"; "... It has never been required in the case of an old building when alterations or additions are to be made that the bricks of the ground floor are to be red brick ...(p.9)", "... It is the universal practice of the Public Works Department to approve of a plan submitted by an European architect without knowing whether the foundations are good or bad ... The plans do not show whether the walls are of blue bricks or red bricks...(p.12)". As such, it was **not uncommon for ground floors of tenement buildings built after 1903 to be constructed with blue bricks.**

mezzanine floor built over part of the kitchen and used as a workplace.

It seems that the building remains and some party walls were intentionally left over during the demolition of the subject tenements to provide structural support to the adjoining sloping site of Cochrane Street. The remains of the walls and party walls had undergone substantial repairs with thick layers of concrete.

There was a variety of architectural forms of Hong Kong *Tong Lau* found on the island of the nineteenth century, e.g. tenement houses constructed in back-to-back, back-to-lane, back-to side, back-to-street / road styles etc.¹⁹ The building remains shed light on the study of tenement buildings of pre-war period.

**Rarity,
Built
Heritage
Value &
Authenticity**

The building remains lay waste over the past decades since the front and middle parts of their respective tenement houses were demolished. The condition of the building remains has to be carefully surveyed and properly consolidated if they are to be preserved *in-situ*.

The building remains provide evidence of what life was like for common people in the pre-war period, and thus demonstrates how society has moved on.

**Social Value
& Local
Interest**

The site where the subject tenement stood has certain social history of Hong Kong created by both the Chinese and expatriate communities in Hong Kong.

**Group
Value**

The wall remains could serve as a reminder of a building and living style of pre-war Hong Kong. Visitors may be interested to visit the former Central Police Station Compound (consisting three groups of declared monuments), and the shophouse units at No. 26A-C Graham Street which have been earmarked by the Urban Renewal Authority for preservation.

¹⁹. Please see footnote 1.

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