

Historic Building Appraisal
Stone Pillars and Flight of Steps at the Former Main Entrance
Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens (alias Ping Tau Fa Yuen)
Albany Road, Central, H.K.

First built between 1861 and 1864, the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens (hereafter “the Gardens”, 香港動植物公園) was officially named thus in 1975. It was originally known as Botanic Gardens (植物公園), Botanical Gardens or Public Gardens (公家花園). In 1848, the idea of establishing a public botanical garden was mentioned officially for the first time.¹ In November 1861, public funding for the formation of the garden was first sanctioned, and in October of the same year, Thomas McDonaldson was appointed the first Curator of Gardens. *Historical Interest*

Henry Fletcher Hance (1827 – 1886), a distinguished botanist, was consulted on the location of the Gardens. The site he recommended was what is now the eastern (or older) part of the Gardens. It is the area of rising ground to the south of the present Government House, which was built between 1851 and 1855. The site was formerly occupied by the Record Office which had also temporarily been the Governor’s residence from 1841 to 1842.² Since the Governor also served as the Commander of British Forces in Hong Kong (駐港英軍三軍司令), the Gardens established on the site of the former Governor’s residence was nicknamed “Ping Tau Fa Yuen” in Cantonese (兵頭花園, where “Ping” literally means “forces”, “Tau” is “head”, and “Fa Yuen” is “garden”).³ On 6 August 1864, the Gardens was first opened to the public, and is the first public garden in Hong Kong. In 1870, the government introduced the Public Gardens Ordinance and in 1871, Charles Ford (1844 – 1927) was appointed the first Superintendent of Gardens (1871 – 1902). In the same year (1871), the second stage of the Gardens was completed and the western part was opened to the public.

The Gardens was bordered by Upper Albert Road (上亞厘畢道), Robinson Road (羅便臣道) and Garden Road (花園道), and was divided into the eastern and western parts by Albany Road (雅賓利道). The eastern (opened in 1864) and western (opened in 1871) parts of the Gardens were known respectively as the Old

¹ It was aimed at establishing an assemblage of native plants for collection and research, but also for commercial purposes. The herbarium was formally established in 1878 and had two Forest Guards to search for and collect plants and trees unknown in Europe. Plenty of research and experimentation was conducted to identify trees suitable for being planted on the hill slopes to prevent soil erosion and along the roadsides in Hong Kong. Hong Kong’s seasonally stormy weather posed significant challenges for Charles Ford (1844 – 1927), who was appointed the first Superintendent of Gardens (1871 – 1902). The trees successfully planted included banyans, India-rubber trees, bamboos, *wampee*, *lychee* and *longan* obtained from the nurseries in Canton, *Tristania conferta* (紅膠木) from Australia, and camphor (樟腦) trees. On the commercial side, a system of plant sales was formally established in 1884, and about 1,500 plants had been sold by the end of that year, for instance. Ford also introduced a wide variety of economically important exotic plants to Hong Kong.

² The name of the building, “Record Office”, was indicated on a map dated 1842.

³ It was also said that the nickname was derived from the close proximity of the Gardens to Government House.

Garden and New Garden. The older one was also locally known as “Tai Ping Tau Fa Yuen” (大兵頭花園, meaning the “first gardens”), whereas the younger one was referred to as “Yi Ping Tau Fa Yuen” (二兵頭花園, meaning the “second gardens”). According to government records, in 1883, for instance, over a selected three-day period, the average number of visitors to the Gardens was 856 Chinese and 400 foreigners.⁴

There are a number of entrances to the Gardens. If arriving from Upper Albert Road opposite Government House, visitors will firstly see six granite pillars that mark the former main entrance. One of them is engraved with the name “OLD BOTANIC GARDENS”. Behind them is a flight of granite steps, which is identifiable on a map dated 1867, and a Chinese War Memorial (華人紀念碑) erected in 1928.⁵ By ascending those steps and then turning right, visitors can reach the fountain terrace garden via another granite staircase.⁶ This latter staircase was built between 1931 and 1933. Near the end of the fountain terrace garden is a former Band Stand dating from 1866. Visitors can leave the Gardens via a number of entrances, but they can see a pair of granite gate pillars at the entrance on Garden Road.

Today, the six stone pillars at the former main entrance, together with the flight of steps, the Chinese War Memorial, the former Band Stand and the entrance gate pillars on Garden Road are the oldest surviving historic structures in the Gardens.

The six stone pillars marking the Gardens’ former main entrance on Upper Albert Road are believed to be erected between 1861 and 1864. A historical photo dating from around 1900 shows that the name “OLD BOTANIC GARDENS” was yet to be engraved on the pillar at that time. In 1971, the vehicular connection between Cotton Tree Drive and Upper Albert Road underwent improvement works, which included the construction of the existing flyover over Garden Road. These works required the old entrance to be moved back and raised up 18 feet, which also meant that the flights of granite steps behind it had to be truncated and a new concrete staircase was also constructed in front of it.

The Chinese War Memorial was erected by the Imperial War Graves Commission (renamed the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 1960), and

⁴ The average numbers were derived by taking the numbers of visitors on three days in 1883, and did not include domestic servants and children.

⁵ In a government’s press release dated 1981, the Chinese War Memorial was referred to as “華人紀念碑” in Chinese.

⁶ The original fountain was built in 1864 but was dismantled in 1932 to facilitate the construction of an underground reservoir. The maps dating from the 1930s show a new fountain and a new layout of the fountain terrace garden. Over the years, the fountain has undergone numerous reconstructions and alteration, such as those in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, as well as renovation in 2010.

was unveiled by Governor Sir Cecil Clementi (1925 – 1930) on 6 May 1928 to commemorate the 945 Chinese who had served in Her Majesty’s Forces and auxiliary formations, and in the Mercantile Marine. They lost their lives during the First World War (1914 – 1918), but their graves were not known. The memorial bore on both faces an inscription in English on the arched panel, which read:

“ERECTED BY THE IMPERIAL WAR GRAVES COMMISSION IN MEMORY OF THE CHINESE IN THE SERVICE OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT WHO DIED THROUGH ENEMY ACTION IN THE GREAT WAR 1914 – 1918”

The corresponding Chinese inscription on both faces of the columns was:

「一九一四年至一九一八年 歐戰時華人國殤紀念碑 英國國殤墳地公會建立」⁷

During the Japanese Occupation (1941 – 1945), the Gardens was renamed from “兵頭花園” to “大正公園” (pronounced as “Tai Ching Kung Yuen” in Cantonese). It was badly cut up to form gun emplacements and defensive trenches. After the war, extensive rehabilitation work was carried out, including the re-erection of the entrance gates, railings and garden seats.⁸ Besides, the English inscription on the Chinese War Memorial was revised by the Imperial War Graves Commission to commemorate the Chinese who lost their lives in the Second World War (1939 – 1945), as follows:

“IN MEMORY OF THE CHINESE WHO DIED LOYAL TO THE ALLIED CAUSE IN THE WARS OF 1914 – 1918 AND 1939 – 1945”

The corresponding Chinese inscriptions on the columns were also revised as follows:

「紀念戰時華人為同盟國殉難者 一九一四年至一九一八年
紀念戰時華人為同盟國殉難者 一九三八年至一九四五年」

Before 1981, on Remembrance Sunday in memory of those who fell in the two World Wars, wreaths would be laid by the Governor and major officials, including the Chief Justice and the Commander of British Forces, at the Chinese War Memorial

⁷ Public Records Office, Letter dated 31 March 1948 from the Colonial Office to the Imperial War Graves Commission, *Chinese War Memorial* (Ref.: HKRS41-1-1885, Encl. 11(1)); and a letter dated 15 January 1948 from the Colonial Office to the Imperial War Graves Commission, Encl. 11(1), *Chinese War Memorial* (Ref.: HKRS41-1-1885, Encl. 7).

⁸ Before the war, most of the seats in the Gardens were made of wood, and almost all of them had disappeared. After the war, plans were made for the erection of forty seats of granite and concrete.

first and then the Cenotaph (和平紀念碑, Declared Monument), which was followed by a Remembrance Day Service at St. John's Cathedral (聖約翰座堂, Declared Monument). But in 1981, the wreath-laying and the remembrance service were combined into a single ceremony at the Cenotaph. Since then, the memorial has not played any part in the remembrance.

The former Band Stand is another important historic structure in the Gardens. A programme of performance by the military bands in the Gardens can be identified in a newspaper dated November 1864. In 1866, the Band Stand was constructed using funding provided by the Parsee community in 1866. The bands could then have their musical performances at the pavilion. From 1886 onwards, a military band usually played in the Gardens one evening every week. However, according to a government report for the year 1887, the Band Stand had not been used for some years by that time due to "its situation being unsuitable for music to be heard from it to the terraces below where visitors congregate and promenade; it is also too small to accommodate the number of men of which the band consists".⁹ Despite that, the Band Stand could still provide a shelter for visitors if they were caught in showers.

The Band Stand was erected using a donation of \$1,500 from the Parsees, and is one of the few surviving structures that serves as a historical reminder of the Parsee community in Hong Kong. When Britain took possession of Hong Kong Island, four Parsee merchants moved to Hong Kong and were among the first purchasers of land in June 1841.¹⁰ From about 1850, more Parsees opened offices in the colony.¹¹ By the 1860s, there were some well-established Parsee firms in Hong Kong, such as Cowasjee Pallanjee & Co., Dorabjee Naorojee & Co. and F.M. Talati.¹²

As mentioned above, there are a number of entrances to the Gardens. Visitors may enter or leave the Gardens via the entrance on Garden Road. A pair of entrance gate pillars built of granite blocks are still in use there. This entrance can be

⁹ "Annual Report on Botanical and Afforestation Department for the Year 1887", *Supplement to the Hongkong Government Gazette of 14th July 1888*, from Hong Kong Government Reports Online.

¹⁰ They were Dhunjibhoy Ruttonjee Bisney, Hirjibhoy Rustonjee, Pestonji Cawasji and Framjee Jamsetjee.

¹¹ Persia (Iran today) is the home country of the Parsee faith known as Zoroastrianism (瑣羅亞斯德教/ 拜火教). From the eighth to the tenth centuries, due to political and religious persecution, the Parsees fled Persia and took refuge to India, mainly in Bombay, under British rule. The Parsee merchants made great contributions to the commercial development of Bombay and Calcutta, and were regarded as loyal supporters of the British Crown. Towards the end of the eighteenth century they entered the China trade in Canton and Macau, and traded in commodities such as opium, cotton, spices, silk, tea, etc. Beginning in about 1850, there was a steady stream of Parsees opening offices in Hong Kong. By 1860, 17 of the 73 merchant firms then listed in the *Hongkong Directory* were owned by Parsees. Nowadays, "Parsee" is commonly spelt "Parsi".

The Parsee Cemetery (波斯墳場) was established in Happy Valley in 1852. The Pavilion (亭子), Service Hall (禮堂) and Gardener's House (園丁宿舍) (all Grade 2) are the surviving historic buildings there.

¹² The trading interests of Cowasjee Pallanjee & Co. mainly lay in opium, spices and silk; Dorabjee Naorojee & Co.'s business included the supply of provisions to the Army and Navy and investments in hotels, and in the 1880s, it started a ferry service between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island, which later became the Star Ferry founded by Sir Paul Chater in 1898; and F.M. Talati's business focus was on jewellery, silk, medicines, metalwork, etc.

identified on a map dating from 1867.

It is worthy of note that the Gardens also accommodates waterworks heritage. The public water supply system underwent continued expansion in the 1930s in order to meet the demands of the growing population. Between 1931 and 1933, a storage reservoir, which was known as Hong Kong Public Gardens Service Reservoir, was built under the fountain terrace garden at a construction cost of \$240,000. Having a capacity of 4.96 million gallons, it was part of the Shing Mun Water Supply System, which aimed at gravitating water from the Shing Mun Reservoir to this storage reservoir for the supply of water to Central. The Gardens was closed during the three years it took for the construction works to be completed.¹³ Today, the reservoir is known as Gardens Fresh Water Service Reservoir (動植物公園食水配水庫).

The old fountain terrace garden was raised and rebuilt to make way for the service reservoir. In order to accommodate the difference in levels created between the new fountain terrace and the footpath leading from the memorial arch, a flight of granite steps was built between 1931 and 1933, which brings visitors from the Chinese War Memorial to the fountain. The staircase can be identified on a map dating from 1936. These steps do not share the same architectural details as those at the former main entrance. The nosing has square edges and does not have the projecting trim beneath it.

In 1975 the Botanic Gardens was renamed the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens (香港動植物公園), thus reflecting the significant expansion of zoological work in the early 1970s. The eastern part (formerly the Old Gardens) provides a children's playground, aviaries, a green house and the fountain terrace garden, whereas the western part (formerly the New Gardens) is mainly home to mammals and reptiles.

(1) Stone Pillars and Flight of Steps at the Former Main Entrance *Architectural Merit*
(Serial No. N357)

An inscription reading “OLD BOTANIC GARDENS” is engraved on one of the six stone pillars at the entrance. Each pillar is square in section with chamfered edges and has a base dressed with a punched finish in a foliage-like or reticulated pattern. Besides, each pillar has stepped capital and is topped by an ornamental capping with triangular panels on all four elevations.

¹³ Ho Pui-yin, *Water for a Barren Rock: 150 Years of Water Supply in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press (H.K.) Ltd., 2001), pp. 98 – 103.

Behind the entrance gateway is a flight of granite steps. The steps are distinguished by their full bullnose nosing articulated with a projecting trim below. The landings are paved with granite slabs. The parapet walls on either side of the steps are built of granite blocks and are topped with massive granite copings. A pair of round pillars, each topped with a cubic block, were installed at the upper end of the flight of steps. They might carry some form of lighting in the past.

(2) Chinese War Memorial (Serial No. N358)

Messrs. Palmer and Turner were the architects of this memorial arch. The construction was carried out by Messrs. Wing Yick, the contractors. It is built of granite in the form of a *pai-lou* (牌樓), with two granite unicorns at each foot. On the arched panel, which has a tiered profile, is the inscription “IN MEMORY OF THE CHINESE WHO DIED LOYAL TO THE ALLIED CAUSE IN THE WARS OF 1914 - 1918 AND 1939 – 1945”, and on the columns there is the corresponding Chinese inscription “紀念戰時華人為同盟國殉難者 一九一四年至一九一八年” and “紀念戰時華人為同盟國殉難者 一九三九年至一九四五年”. The same set of inscriptions has been engraved on the opposite face of the memorial. The signs of war damage during the Japanese invasion, in the form of bullet holes and shrapnel damage, have been retained as they were regarded by the government and the Imperial War Graves Commission as “honourable scars of war”.¹⁴

(3) Former Band Stand (Serial No. N359)

The pavilion is octagonal in plan. The original pyramidal roof had been flattened by 1949. Resembling the structure of an umbrella, the roof is formed of octagonal rings and timber planks radiating out from the centre. That arrangement is echoed in the flooring, which is composed of granite blocks cut and fitted carefully with their joint lines creating a delicate spider’s web pattern. The roof is supported on eight cast-iron pillars positioned at each change in angle around the periphery of the octagonal form. The upper ends of the pillars are articulated with wrought-iron brackets that are both decorative and functional. The entire structure is reinforced with eight metal rods that tie the top of the pillars to the central structure suspended from the roof, thus preventing uplifting of the roof by strong winds while at the same time creating a simple space framed by the timber roof. There are four cement benches with granolithic finishes and a round table at the centre. A marble plaque engraved with the words “PARSEE COMMUNITY” is fixed to a granite step at the base of the pavilion to acknowledge the generous donation of the Parsee community for the construction of the Band Stand.

¹⁴ Public Records Office, “Chinese War Memorial”, Minutes dated 17 February 1948 from Secretary for Chinese Affairs to Colonial Secretary (File Ref.: HKRS41-1-1885).

(4) Entrance Gate Pillars on Garden Road (Serial No. N360)

This pair of gate pillars is built of granite blocks with extruded pointing. Each has an ornamental capping featuring stepped edges topped with a piece of granite in a pyramid-like shape.

(5) Tunnel Portal of Gardens Service Reservoir under Fountain Terrace (Serial No. N361)

Below the fountain terrace is a service reservoir built between 1931 and 1933. A concrete tunnel portal was built into the hillside opposite the main entrance to Government House. The roof canopy bears an inscription “H K W W 1931-33”, which stands for “Hong Kong Water Works 1931-33” in abbreviated form. The surround of the arched opening fitted with a double-leaf ornamental iron gate, and the walls on either side have a granolithic finish and are articulated with grooved lines to imitate a masonry keystone and voussoirs. The interior walls are plastered and painted.

(6) Flight of Steps leading to Fountain Terrace (Serial No. N362)

This flight of granite steps serves to connect the elevated fountain terrace (due to the construction of the underground reservoir) to the passageway leading from the former main entrance. These steps do not share the same architectural details as those at the former main entrance. The nosing has square edges and lacks the projecting trim beneath it. The parapet walls on either side are built of granite.

The stone pillars together with the flight of steps behind them, the Chinese War Memorial and the former Band Stand (now known as Pavilion) are on the Gardens’ heritage trail. The nickname “Ping Tau Fa Yuen” (兵頭花園) is still fondly remembered and used by the older generations, whereas the younger generations can learn this historic nickname from publications, electronic resources and information on the heritage trail. The pillars, memorial and the former band stand are also popular spots for photo-taking.

***Social Value
& Local
Interest***

The historic structures in the Gardens are within walking distance from other historic buildings, such as Government House (香港禮賓府), the exterior of The Helena May (梅夫人婦女會), North and West Blocks of St. Joseph’s College (聖若瑟書院北座及西座), St. John’s Cathedral (聖約翰座堂) and the Former French Mission Building (前法國外方傳道會大樓) (all Declared Monuments).

Group Value

The Gardens is a very rare piece of built heritage, displaying multi-faceted living heritage in terms of public gardens, the Parsee community, the two World Wars and water supply.

***Rarity,
Built Heritage
Value &
Authenticity***

The six stone pillars and the flight of steps at the former main entrance, and the entrance gate pillars on Garden Road are the oldest surviving structures in the Gardens. They have survived numerous alteration and renovation works to the gardens over the years, and remain intact.

The former Band Stand is one of the few surviving historic structures relating to the Parsees, who have made tremendous contributions to the development of Hong Kong, especially from the 1840s to the early twentieth century.¹⁵ Although having its roof altered by 1949, it is the oldest surviving ironwork pavilion in Hong Kong and is well maintained.

On the other hand, the Chinese War Memorial, the tunnel portal of the underground service reservoir and the flight of steps constructed due to the reservoir's creation serve to enrich and diversify the cultural links between the historic structures in the Gardens. The Chinese War Memorial is the oldest memorial dedicated solely to the Chinese who fell in the two World Wars, and the second oldest war memorial after the Cenotaph (unveiled in 1923, Declared Monument) in Hong Kong.¹⁶ As for the tunnel portal of the service reservoir, it was part of the Shing Mun Water Supply System, which testifies to the expansion of waterworks facilities and networks in the early 1930s. The memorial, the tunnel portal and the steps are all well maintained.

¹⁵ Sir Hormusjee Mody and Jehangir Hormusjee Ruttonjee were examples of prominent and influential Parsee merchants in Hong Kong. However, the business and population of the Parsee community in Hong Kong contracted rapidly from the early twentieth century, mainly because they encountered a ban on opium trade and strong competition in cotton trade from the Mainland and Japan. Over the years, many Parsees have left Hong Kong for opportunities in other places. In 2019, there were only about 200 Parsees in Hong Kong.

Sir Hormusjee Narojee Mody (1838 – 1911) arrived in Hong Kong in 1858 as a clerk in a small local firm. In the early 1860s, he became an auctioneer, and in 1868, he formed a brokerage company named Chater and Mody in partnership with Sir Paul Chater (1846 – 1926). Mody was well known for his great involvement in many important public projects, including the Pray Reclamation in the Central District and the development of Kowloon Peninsula from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Mody Road in Tsim Sha Tsui was named after him. He also made donation to cover the entire cost of the Main Building of The University of Hong Kong. The foundation stone of the Main Building was laid on 16 March 1910, and Mody was knighted in the same year.

Jehangir Hormusjee Ruttonjee (1880 – 1960) arrived in Hong Kong at the age of 12. After graduating from Queen's College, he worked in the family company, H. Ruttonjee & Son. He later invested in property, acquiring land in Central, Stanley, Sham Shui Po, etc. He also established a brewery at Sham Tseng, and built Homi Villa (Grade 3) near the brewery. In 1944, his daughter Tehmi contracted tuberculosis and passed away. In 1948, Ruttonjee founded the Hong Kong Anti-Tuberculosis Association (香港防癆協會), with its headquarters building constructed in 1951 – 1953 (Grade 3). In 1949, he established a tuberculosis sanatorium named Ruttonjee Sanatorium. In 1991, the sanatorium was transformed into a general hospital known as Ruttonjee Hospital (律敦治醫院).

¹⁶ The Cenotaph, unveiled on 24 May 1923 by Governor Sir Edward Stubbs (1919 – 1925), is the earliest memorial formally constructed to commemorate the dead of the First World War in Hong Kong. The Cenotaph was initially inscribed with the words "The Glorious Dead" and "1914-1918", the years of the First World War. The years "1939-1945" were added later to honour victims of the Second World War. In the 1980s, eight Chinese characters, "英魂不朽 浩氣長存", meaning "May their martyred souls be immortal, and their noble spirits endure", were carved on one side of the Cenotaph to match the inscription "The Glorious Dead" and make it clear that the monument commemorates all who died in the wars, especially those who fell in the defence of Hong Kong. Commemorative activities are held by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and other relevant associations at the Cenotaph every year.

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