

Historic Building Appraisal
Wan Chai Fire Station
435 Hennessy Road, Wan Chai, H.K.

The Wan Chai Fire Station, situated at 435 Hennessy Road, was purposely designed and built for fire-fighting purposes with the provision of an appliance room, offices, stores, ancillary accommodation, an open drill yard, and a hose drying and drill tower. It was constructed between 1940 and 1941. Construction was however interrupted by the Japanese occupation, which began in December 1941, so no official records show its opening date. *Historical Interest*

Since the establishment of the Hong Kong Fire Brigade in 1868, Fire Brigade Station (滅火局) or Engine House (水車館) had been set up in Wan Chai to provide fire protection services to the eastern part of the Hong Kong Island mainly by using manual fire pumps on carts. To accommodate new motorised fire engines, a new Wan Chai Fire Station was built in December 1921. It was a temporary one to accommodate 20 firemen, converted from an old cinema shed on newly reclaimed land at the intersection of O'Brien Road and Johnston Road. Equipped with a 50-foot hose drying and drill tower, the station was later demolished to make way for road developments. Another temporary fire station was erected at Thomson Road in 1932. However, the space was so small that it had to take up part of the space in the newly constructed No. 2 Police Station on Gloucester Road to accommodate its garage as well as the hose drying and drill tower. The tower was erected in the police station compound where the annual fire brigade display took place. For administrative considerations, Wan Chai Fire Station was renamed Eastern Fire Station (東區消防局) in 1937 to highlight its geographical location as the most easterly fire station on Hong Kong Island. This consideration no longer applied in 1967, when Eastern Fire Station was redesignated Wan Chai Fire Station to clarify the main district it was responsible for.

As the war was approaching in the late 1930s, the Government expected increasing demand for war-related emergencies and fire services in the war period. The Auxiliary Fire Services was founded in 1938 to provide supplementary manpower support to the regular fire brigade. The whole of the Wan Chai Fire Station was then designated to serve as the headquarters for the Auxiliary Fire Services. Therefore, plans for a new Wan Chai Fire Station at the junction of Hennessy Road and Canal Road East were drawn up in 1939 to accommodate the regular fire brigade. The construction, at an estimated cost of \$110,000, was carried out by Cheong Hing Co, starting at the end of 1940. The war journal of John Charter (1912-1989), an architect in the Public Works Department, who had been working for some 18 months or more on the design of the new Wan Chai Fire Station and was subsequently interned by the

Japanese at the Stanley Civilian Internment Camp, mentions the following about the new fire station:

“This was nearing completion, but most of the fittings ordered from England, such as the sliding folding electrical door gear; all door furniture for the upstairs doors, sanitary fittings, etc. were six to nine months overdue and the job was not completed before war began.¹ It was quite heavily shelled by the Japanese from Kowloon, across the harbour, during the war as it was being used, despite its unfinished condition, by the Fire Brigade. I have not seen it since the war but I hear the Japanese have now finished it off somehow and have established it as the fire station for the Eastern District, as it was intended to be used.

It makes me smile, somewhat ruefully, when I think of the time and trouble that I spent designing the first floor to support the weight of the superstructure in case it was hit by a bomb during the war. The idea was, that though the upper stories might collapse, the fire engines in the appliance room below would not be damaged and the station could still be operated. As it happened, all the fire engines during the war were kept out of the fire stations, chiefly because they were in continual use, but also because the Japs seemed to know just where the stations were, and it was safer to keep the engines in side streets, under trees etc.”²

During the Japanese occupation, the development of the Hong Kong Fire Brigade was suspended because of the loss of manpower and equipment. However, fire services continued to be offered by the Gendarmerie Fire Brigade under Japanese rule, and a fire team was set up in Wan Chai district. The newly built Wan Chai Fire Station was believed to have been used throughout the period. After the war, the fire station resumed normal operation and became one of the venues to run initial training courses for sub-officers, firemen and fire engine drivers between 1959 and 1961.

Since it was built, the fire station has occupied a strategic and prominent location, which ensures a swift response to fire calls. Its front entrance is on Hennessy Road, an important thoroughfare that connects Queensway at its west end and Causeway Bay at its east end. Besides, it was built along and almost at the north end of Bowrington Canal, which was later covered. Another important thoroughfare, namely Canal Road Flyover, which currently connects Aberdeen Tunnel to the Cross-Harbour Tunnel, was then built over the Bowrington Canal.

¹ The war refers to the Japanese invaded Hong Kong in December 1941.

² Anthony Crowley Charter, *The First Shall Be Last*, UK: Grosvenor House Publishing Ltd, 2018. pp. 56-57.

The year 1960 marked a milestone in the development of the Hong Kong Fire Brigade. The then Deputy Colonial Secretary, David Trench (1915-1988) was appointed to look into the problem of the Hong Kong Fire Brigade. He compiled a report, namely Trench Report which radically reorganised the fire brigade and called for a 10-year phased development. One of his concerns was about the accommodation needs for on-duty staff. To echo with such an initiative on staff accommodation, a policy of departmental quarters for senior fire officers at each major station was further proposed by the Chief Officer of Fire Brigade, one of which was Wan Chai Fire Station. Therefore, major renovations were carried out in Wan Chai Fire Station from 1966 to 1967 to provide five additional quarters to house one station officer and four assistant station officers on the second and third floors of the fire station. To cater for the changing operational needs, the quarters on the second floor were later changed to an office and recreation area.

The Wan Chai Fire Station was designed by John Charter of the Public Works Department, who also designed Queen's College in Causeway Bay, and the East and Central Wings of the Central Government Offices after the war. He was promoted to head of the Government Architectural Office in 1959. *Architectural Merit*

Situated at the junction of Hennessy Road and Canal Road East, Wan Chai Fire Station is accessible from Hennessy Road and Lockhart Road via the folding gates of the appliance room and the back doors respectively. Built with brick and reinforced concrete, the fire station comprises a four-storey main building facing Hennessy Road, a one-storey annex block along Canal Road East forming a L-shape plan, and an open drill yard facing Lockhart Road. It is modernist architecture, adopting a humble and functional design, featuring a cubic external appearance, emphasising the horizontal elements, namely the overhang projections, balconies and a simple stringcourse running around the wall surfaces. Its simple form with regular window and door fenestration can be seen in a photo taken from Bowrington Canal looking north in 1941.

It is a four-bay fire station. The ground floor of the main building is dominated by the appliance room facing Hennessy Road, which accommodates four fire engines and is equipped with automatic folding gates, with the original granite thresholds still retained. As it was constructed not long before the Japanese occupation, its structure on the ground floor was specifically designed to take the load of the superstructure should it collapse if hit by a bomb. Such a feature was also covered in a news report on 11 March 1941, describing the almost completed Wan Chai Fire Station.³ Adjoining

³ “New Fire Engines – Latest Type Appliances Expected Shortly – For Wanchai Station”, *South China*

the appliance room is the office and watch room. The upper floors contain a mess room, a kitchen, dormitories for firemen and station officers, offices for the station commander and clerical staff, a gym, a meeting room, a laundry and drying room, and married quarters. There are two sets of sliding poles from the upper floors to each end of the appliance room. The annex block houses various stores. On one side of the drill yard is a hose drying and drill tower, and there are two vehicle accesses to the fire station from Lockhart Road.

The fire station has undergone several additions and alterations over the years to cater for operational needs. For instance, the original teak doors for the fire engine bays were replaced by new folding gates. Two pedestrian access points to the main building on Hennessy Road and Canal Road East were enclosed in the 1980s for the alteration and expansion of the office and watch room. Most of the windows were replaced by modern windows, and all the original French doors on the first floor balcony were replaced by windows, which removed balcony access. The major alterations undertaken between 1966 and 1967 for additional quarters on the second and third floors removed the original staircase on the third floor corridor to the roof terrace, and a new staircase was added on the third floor at the existing stair well to give access to the roof terrace. Besides, part of the original corridors on the second and third floors, and flat roof on the second floor were enclosed to form new interior spaces for these alterations. The sliding pole leading down from the dormitory on the first floor to the east end of the appliance room is believed to have been added after the late 1960s.

Despite the above renovations to the interior of the fire station, notable features have been retained, including the drill yard together with the steel hose drying and drill tower erected thereon, which is the only existing steel tower still in use in the fire stations in Hong Kong. Also retained, to the west end of the appliance room, is the earliest set of sliding poles made of brass among all the existing fire stations, instead of stainless steel which is now commonly used. Besides, the setting of an engine bay with the original granite thresholds also remains.

The social value of Wan Chai Fire Station lies mainly in its long-term service to society. Since the station is situated in an area with very convenient transport, its service has not been confined to the Wan Chai district. It has extended to Kowloon and even the New Territories, making it one of the busiest fire stations in Hong Kong. The prominent location also turned it into a well-known local landmark and it is dubbed the “Goose Neck Bridge Fire Station” (鵝頸橋消防局).

***Social Value
and Local
Interest***

Morning Post, 11 March 1941.

In order to avoid affecting daily operations, the fire station is generally not open to the public. Its accessible location and iconic building form, with its red folding gates abutting Hennessy Road and the steel drill tower at the rear of the fire station often arouse curiosity and attract attention from the public and tourists to take pictures of them.

To pray for protection during dangerous work, firemen conduct “worship of the hose drying and drill tower” (拜喉架), which is a popular ritual in fire stations, including Wan Chai Fire Station on occasions like greeting newcomers, celebrating promotions and important traditional Chinese festivals such as Lunar New Year, the Dragon Boat Festival and the Mid-autumn Festival. The worship of Kwan Tai (關帝) is also common in fire stations.

Wan Chai Fire Station is within walking distance of other graded historic buildings, such as St. Paul’s Convent Church, Sheng Kung Hui St. Mary’s Church, the Old Wan Chai Police Station and No. 6 Stewart Road. ***Group Value***

Wan Chai Fire Station, a massive four-storey reinforced concrete structure of modernist and functional design, is the longest-serving fire station in Hong Kong. Prior to 1958, no standard specifications were set for the design of fire stations. Nevertheless, fire stations have two common architectural features – an open drill yard and covered appliance bays – and the Wan Chai Fire Station is no exception. Wan Chai Fire Station is one of the two surviving fire stations with an early unconventional design and still in its original use. Another one is Mong Kok Fire Station, which has been in service since 1953. The Wan Chai Fire Station retains considerable authenticity, as the original structure and integrity in design remain intact. ***Rarity, Built Heritage Value & Authenticity***

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