

Historic Building Appraisal
Battery Path Steps and Balustrades
Central, Hong Kong

Battery Path has been in existence since the 1850s although the name did not appear on any plan until 1867. The name “Battery Path” is believed to have been derived from the Murray Battery in its vicinity, which was built between 1841 and 1842 as one of the first coastal defence gun batteries to command the centre of the city. A map from 1845 shows that the Murray Battery was 150 feet above sea level, in a position that could easily defend the town and the anchorage. The battery was named after Sir George Murray, who served as the Master-General of the Board of Ordnance. Battery Path was a pathway stretching from the junction of Queen’s Road (now Queen’s Road Central) and Ice House Lane (now Ice House Street), leading up to Johnston’s House (now the former French Mission Building) and St. John’s Cathedral as well as to Murray Battery and Government Offices (now the site of the former Central Government Offices). The area where these buildings situated was commonly known as “Government Hill” at that time. *Historical Interest*

According to the earliest available maps, the steps of Battery Path were constructed around 1867 in an L-shape, starting from Queen’s Road, at a position obliquely opposite the first generation Hong Kong City Hall (now the HSBC Main Building and part of the Bank of China Building) and going straight up to the top of Battery Path near Johnston’s House, from where people could further proceed to other religious and government premises such as St. John’s Cathedral and Government Office.

Sedan chairs were widely used in Hong Kong in the early days. Government records show that the use of sedan chairs progressively increased between the 1860s and 1890s with a total of 28 public stands located in Central in 1894. Among them, two were located on Queen’s Road near Battery Path, suggesting that the path was well used by sedan chairs. The steps, on the other hand, were built specially for pedestrians as an additional and more shorter and direct means to travel between Queen’s Road and the top of Battery Path.

The steps continued to serve their purpose well. Commercial buildings including banks, business and trading firms came to be established adjacent to the steps, for example Beaconsfield Arcade, E.D. Sassoon & Co., Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China, etc. The steps linked Queen’s Road, the major thoroughfare at the commercial heart of Hong Kong, where these buildings were situated, to “Government Hill”, an uphill area

where Government, military and religious premises were a focus.

A couple of major works were carried out to the steps in the 1870s and 1930s respectively. In 1876, a tender was issued for repairs to Queen's Road, which included "rebuilding of the public steps leading from Queen's Road to the Battery Path, opposite the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank". The completion of the works was covered in a news report on 16 April 1877, describing the new flight of steps as "a very handsome piece of work". Later, in 1938, the lower part of the steps was demolished and reconstructed to give a better alignment to Queen's Road. Since then, the layout of the steps are believed to have remained the same, with the landing at the corner set back towards Battery Path.

Battery Path is a pleasant tree lined pedestrian thoroughfare bounded by rubble retaining walls on one side with a set of steps leading down to Queen's Road Central. The steps are constructed out of local dressed ashlar granite. The stairway consists of five flights of steps separated by four intermediate level landings. The treads of the steps are long narrow blocks of granite and the landings are formed by square granite slabs set on a diagonal. The treads of the steps in the upper portion near Battery Path bear a narrow groove along one edge to facilitate rainwater discharge. However, some of the grooves in the lower portion are not aligned, indicating the possible reuse or rearrangement of the granite slabs, probably as a result of the reconstruction in 1938. *Architectural Merit*

The balustrade wall on the outer side of the steps is made up of rough rendered panelled sections with moulded granite plinths and copings set between classical style panelled piers. The piers are built of granite and each of them has a moulded panel decorated with diamond rustication at the centre. The existing ball ornament on top of each pier is made of concrete with Shanghai plaster surfacing to resemble granite. The inner side of the steps has 1950s style wave pattern railings mounted on a moulded granite plinth with gilded gold finials on each main upright.

The Battery Path stairway is a familiar landmark in the Central District. Bearing witness to the development of the heart of Central for over a century, it has been much used by a variety of users at various times including missionaries, church congregations, government staff, office workers, visitors, etc. It also leads pedestrians from the busiest part of the Central District up to a relatively tranquil space, where historic buildings such as the former French Mission Building, St. John's Cathedral and the former Central Government Offices are situated, and hence merits social value and local interest. *Social Value & Local Interest*

The steps have group value with other historic buildings and structures in the vicinity, including the former French Mission Building, St. John's Cathedral, the former Central Government Offices, Government House, and Duddell Street Steps and Gas Lamps. ***Group Value***

The steps have undergone various major works since the 1870s. One of the major works was carried out in 1876, when the steps were rebuilt. Later, in 1938, the lower portion of the steps was demolished and reconstructed. Apart from the reconstruction which took place in 1938, the steps have experienced several other alterations over the years. A photo taken around 1936 looking towards the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank from the Battery Path steps shows that there was only a lamp post but nothing sited on the piers of the steps, suggesting that the ball ornaments on the piers are later additions. Additionally, in the same photo we can see that the railings along the inner side of the steps are different from those currently in place. Together with the traces of some old socket holes left on the granite plinths along the inner side as observed on site, these give evidence of another set of railings being installed previously. ***Rarity, Built Heritage Value & Authenticity***

The panels of the outer side of the steps originally consisted of classical balustrading with vase-shape balusters, which can be seen in a photo taken around 1941 (not long before the Japanese Occupation) in their original condition. When comparing these with the existing rough rendered panels on the outer side of the steps, the latter are apparently later additions most likely put in place after the war.

The steps of Battery Path are one of the oldest surviving flights of steps in the Central District, which was the earliest developed area in Hong Kong from the beginning of British rule in 1841. Although alterations have been carried out to the stairway over the years, its old granite steps, coping stones, plinths, landings and classical piers still survive, making it a rare piece of built heritage in a heavily developed part of the city.

REFERENCES

Archives at Public Records Office, Hong Kong

HKRS207-12-1. “Plan of Victoria Hong Kong, 1867”.

Hong Kong Government Reports Online

Government Notification No. 102, *The Hongkong Government Gazette*, 26 September 1863, from Hong Kong Government Reports Online.

Government Notification No. 181, *The Hongkong Government Gazette*, 14 October 1876, from Hong Kong Government Reports Online.

Government Notification No. 285, *The Hongkong Government Gazette*, 21 July 1894, from Hong Kong Government Reports Online.

Maps of the Hong Kong Government

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. “Plan of Victoria, Hong Kong, 1845” (Map Ref.: HG22-3).

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. “Plan of Victoria, Hong Kong, 1887” (Map Ref.: HG27-2).

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. “Plan of Victoria, Hong Kong, 1889” (Map Ref.: HG28-3).

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. “Plan of Victoria, Hong Kong, 1897”, no. 15.

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. Topographic Map, 1:600, sheet number 150-SW-10, 1922.

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. Topographic Map, 1:600, sheet number 196-SW-11, November 1954.

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. Topographic Map, 1:600, sheet number 196-SW-11, July 1960.

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. Topographic Map, 1:600, sheet number C-196-SW-11, Aug 1970.

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. Topographic Map, 1:600, sheet number C-196-SW-11, November 1975.

Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department. Topographic Map, 1:1000, sheet number 11-SW-8D, March 2023.

Maps from Other Sources

“(1842) Pottinger’s Map”, Hal Empson, *Mapping Hong Kong: a historical atlas*, [Hong Kong]: Govt. Printer, 1992, pp.160-161, Plate 3-1a.

“(1843) Gordon’s Map”, Hal Empson, *Mapping Hong Kong: a historical atlas*, [Hong Kong]: Govt. Printer, 1992, pp.160-161, Plate 3-1b.

“(1845) The 4 inch ‘Collinson’ Map (reduced)” *Mapping Hong Kong: a historical atlas*, [Hong Kong]: Govt. Printer, 1992, pp.128-129 Plate 2-1.

CO129/49. “Plan of Ground in Victoria Hongkong to accompany Sir George Bonham’s Despatch to the Right Hon. 3th Earl Grel, No.38, June 1851”, *Despatches: 1855 Jan. –Apr.*, p.57, from *China and the Modern World*, accessed on 28 April 2023.

“(1856) Plan of Victoria”, Hal Empson, *Mapping Hong Kong: a historical atlas*, [Hong Kong]: Govt. Printer, 1992, pp160-161, Plate 3-1c.

National Archives, “Plans of portion of the City – by the Surveyor-General, June 1859”, CO 700/HongKongandChina54, <https://www.hkmaps.hk/map.html?1859>, accessed on 28 April 2023.

“(1863) The 8 inch map of Victoria and Kowloon (reduced)”, Hal Empson, *Mapping Hong Kong: a historical atlas*, [Hong Kong]: Govt. Printer, 1992, pp.132-133, Plate 2-2.

National Archives, “Plan of Victoria, Hong Kong. 6½ inches to 1 mile”, CO 700/HongKongandChina3, <https://www.hkmaps.hk/map.html?1865>, accessed on 28 April 2023.

“(1911) Map of Hong Kong Central”, *Mapping Hong Kong: a historical atlas*, [Hong Kong]: Govt. Printer, 1992, p.165, Plate 3-4.

Newspapers

Hong Kong Daily Press, 16 April 1877.

“Road Widening: New Alignment Opposite Hongkong Bank”, *South China Morning Post*, 11 June 1938.

“Many Colony Place-names recall early celebrities”, *South China Morning Post*, 25 January 1941.

Books

Denis Rollo, *The Guns and Gunners of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Gunner’s Roll of Hong Kong, 1991.

Hal Empson, *Mapping Hong Kong: a historical atlas*, [Hong Kong]: Govt. Printer, 1992.

Garrett, Richard J, *The Peak: An Illustrated History of Hong Kong’s Top District*, Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books, 2018.

Other Sources

Purcell Miller Tritton LLP, “Central Government Offices Historical and Architectural Appraisal”, September 2009,
https://www.amo.gov.hk/filemanager/amo/common/form/research_CGO_ch2_e.pdf,
accessed on 25 April, 2023.

Hong Kong Museum of History, Photo captioned “The Hongkong & Shanghai Bank, Central District, Hong Kong Island, c.1936.” (Photo Ref.: P1992.3.52).

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Library, Photo captioned “Hong Kong, street scene with pedestrians”, c.1941. (Digital ID: fr211761),

<https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agsphoto/id/18231/rec/61>, accessed on 25

April 2023