

Location	Fort Alice, Sri Aman	Ref No.	SA/WS/AR002
Subject	Site Visit with Local Teachers and Schoolchildren on the 17 <sup>th</sup> July 2013	Date	17 <sup>th</sup> July 2013
		Time	2.30-4.30pm
Attended by	Ref attached attendance list	Conducted by	Mike Boon
Recorded by	Geraldine Ho	Coordinated by	Goh Kaw Sze

**The Wooden Fort**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 2013, I was one of 18 participants which comprised facilitating teachers and local school children attending a site visit to Fort Alice, Sri Aman. The visit was conducted by Mike Boon and coordinated by Mr. Goh Kaw Sze. The aim of the visit was to give the school children a chance to see the structural core of the Fort before it was to be taken down completely.

We gathered at the foot of the hill at 2.30pm where we were treated to a view of the desolate-looking Fort. Being an architectural student from Kuching and having never seen a wooden Fort before, I was curious and tempted to investigate but security tapes had been used to cordon the area off.



Fort Alice with her fabric in the process of being dismantled, recorded, and stored for reuse.

Bare to her wooden frame with paint peeling and various vegetation poking out from her many crevices, the Fort has definitely seen better days. There was also that all-pervading smell of must, which rather reminds one of unpleasant things that crawl in the dark which could preferably be avoided. I had also been told some workers had to chase out friendly neighbourhood snakes from one of her watchtowers during dismantling works. Rest assured though, I'm sure the organisers have made the proper arrangements to ensure every visitors' safety on site.

The school children loved it. How often does one get a chance to explore a construction site, let alone one that is considered a valuable historical aspect of our country and pride of their hometown? To their inquisitive minds, it must have seemed like a playground filled with new sights and smells.

**Malay "Tomb"**



JMS Curator En. Mohd. Sherman explaining the archaeological investigation procedure to the students.

The day's events started with the mandatory safety briefing. We were each handed a hard hat and instructed to always keep in the designated zone clearly marked by security tapes. Then, we were brought to a freshly dug-up site at the front of the Fort and introduced to En. Mohd. Sherman, Curator from Jabatan Muzium Sarawak (JMS).

He explained that workers had recently unearthed a few stones and were insisting it was a Malay tomb due to their similarities in shape, stirring up the more superstitious employees. Some extreme ones had even started giving it offerings.

To placate their fears, En. Sherman did a very basic archaeological investigation – he dug the stones out. The “tomb” turned out to be mere rocks possibly placed there for landscaping purposes. He went on to list reasons for his deduction, ranging from the type of stone (hard river stones or granite are usually used for Malay tombstones), depth the stones were buried (Malay tombs are buried 600mm deep), to the direction the stones were pointing at (headstones usually point to the Kiblat, these didn't). Moral of the story - in conservation and archaeological works, all claims must first be verified with supporting evidence before publicised to avoid unwanted speculations and rumours.

**Dismantling Process**

We were then given a brief induction into the Fort's dismantling process by Conservators-on-site Mr. Eng Chee Kuan and Mr. Ooi Zhen Ning (both young graduates from Penang). They explained that during dismantling, every detail has to be recorded through sketches, drawings, photographs and videos so the Fort can be reassembled in the same manner.

As the Fort is a timber structure, their key focus was on the traditional joineries used to hold the building together and we were shown many measured drawings of these. Interestingly enough, different joints were used to accommodate different parts of the building. They also pointed out how they had systematically coded every single piece of timber in different colours to coincide with their plan drawings so they would know where each would be put back in place.



Conservator-on-Site Mr. Eng Chee Kuan showing his measured drawing records.



Colored codes on the timber pieces. (Yellow for main structural components, Red for secondary elements)



An example of a wooden mortise.



An example of wooden tenon.

**Timber**

Having learnt how the Fort is held up, we moved on to the shed at the rear of the building to discover what she was made of, which was primarily timber. Over the years, normal hardwood (now suffering from wet rot and termites) had been added on during maintenance works and the tour turned interactive as Local Carpenter Mr. Ting Nik Sing and Ar. Mike Boon tasked us with a series of tests utilizing our five senses to differentiate between belian and other hardwoods.

The schoolchildren jumped at the chance to participate and it was clear they welcomed the opportunity to investigate for themselves.

This was what we discovered from the simple exercise: Hear- belian produces a deeper tone when knocked as compared with hardwood; Touch- belian is denser than hardwood; Smell - belian has a very distinct smell from others; See- new timber planks have tongue and grooves mechanically cut into them. Old belian have adze marks on their surfaces.

We also learnt how the Fort's old paint scheme can be established by stripping down paint from oldest piece of timber in a layer-by-layer process (it appears that the Fort has no less than 4 layers of paint, including traditional lime wash and modern acrylic-based coating). We then moved on to learn how lime wash is made and the other traditional finishes used to protect the timber from rotting. Lastly, we were shown the difference between old traditional ship nails and modern nails. Ship nails were only used sparingly for specific applications.

The site visit ended at around 4.30pm. It was an interesting experience for all and definitely an educational one for me. The encouraging turnout proves that the local Sri Aman students are adopting a healthy interest in the conservation of the Fort and are keen on attending visits of a similar nature in the near future.



Ar. Mike Boon & Mr Ting Nik Sing demonstrating the techniques in differentiating different types of timber.



Pointing out joineries and explaining how they work.



Smelling to identify the scent of belian.



Lifting the timber to gauge the difference in weight between belian and other hardwood species.