

SITE VISIT TO BROOKE DOCKYARD, KUCHING



View of Brooke Dockyard from the entrances at Jalan Market (left) and from the Sarawak River (right).

Traffic flows in an endless stream past the entrance to Brooke Dockyard. The occupants of the cars give little thought to what lies within the enormous steel structure, right in the heritage core of old Kuching. Why should they? From their vantage point, it looks like any number of industrial warehouses. However, inside, it houses a real slice of Kuching's maritime industrial history.

As you enter the gates, the first thing that strikes you is the cavernous dry dock, like a sunken amphitheatre surrounded by tiers of concrete steps. On the day of the visit, the space is empty, the water of the Sarawak River held at bay by the garishly painted gate at its far end.

This fascinating piece of engineering is simple in design. Its hollow interior fills with water, creating enough weight to lock the gate in place and keep the wall of water out. But, empty the water and the gate can be floated out of the way, allowing ships to pass into the dock beyond.



Ships of all shapes and sizes have been passing through this gate for nearly a hundred years as Brooke Dockyard will celebrate its centenary next year. It was opened on 30 May 1912, the same year as the sinking of the Titanic, by Charles Vyner Brooke, the then Rajah of Sarawak. At that time, it was part of the Government workshop dealing in repairs of Government vessels and machinery.

It was equipped with some astonishing pieces of engineering equipment, many imported from the UK, some of which can still be seen today. Under the vaulted steel structure is the gigantic and aptly-named power hammer and a host of other sturdy ship-building equipment. However, the highlight is the canary yellow steam crane, the only one of its kind in Sarawak, perched overlooking the river.

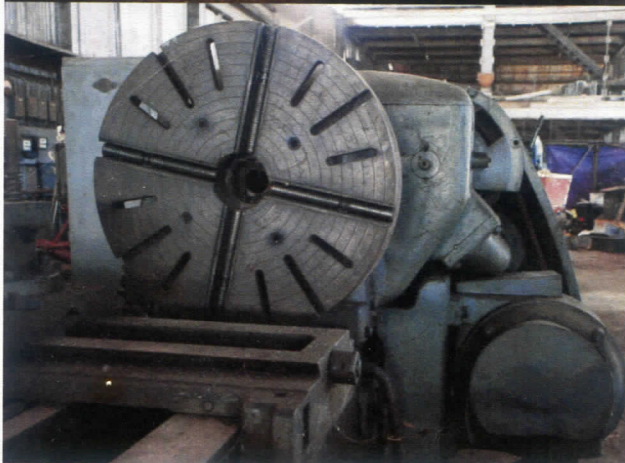
In fact, the Dockyard has been in continuous service ever since its opening, seeing a parade of crafts ranging from military vessels during confrontation to private ships. Even though the bulk of the Dockyard's operations moved to new premises in Sejingkat in 1996, work still continues on the original site.

The dry dock, still in service a century on, stands empty and waiting for work. At the far end, is the gate, valiantly holding back the tide.





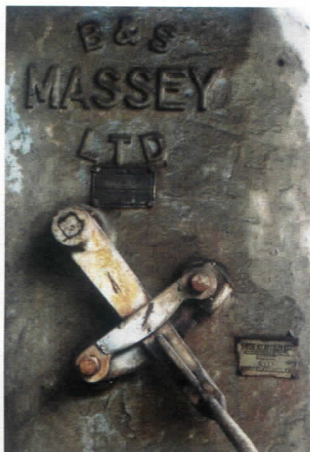
The original, delicate steel structure is still in excellent condition.



A remarkable piece of shipbuilding engineering, still going strong.



The power hammer—what more can you say.



The power hammer clearly bears the legend of its origins in Yorkshire.

The steam crane — the only one of its kind in Sarawak, still in prime condition.



So, what is the future of maritime treasure? At present, the water taxi ride from Bintangor is slated to take in a stop at the dockyard. So plans are afoot to revitalize the site, standing, as it does, at the end of the newly extended waterfront.

During the visit, SHS members were given a glimpse of one possible future in which the existing structure would be demolished to make way for an exhibition area, housing a marine heritage museum, above yet another shopping centre.

When asked to express an opinion on the proposal, Past President Mike Boon floated an alternative view from a heritage perspective. In his vision, the location could continue in service as a dry dock. The original steel structure would remain with only the cladding changed, though the machines would be re-sited to allow a more coherent walkthrough for visitors. This cost-effective solution would create a living museum, thus preserving the authenticity of this historic site. So, for future developments, watch that space.