

## **Ann Siang and Club Street**

*Today's trendy Ann Siang Hill, Ann Siang Road and Club Street neighbourhood was once an important gathering place for new migrants and Straits Chinese elites in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

A melting pot of old and new, Ann Siang Hill, Ann Siang Road and Club Street is not just one of Singapore's quirkiest hipster enclaves; it is richly steeped in history. Once abuzz with clan associations, trade guilds and elite social clubs, it was a gathering place for Chinese migrants, as well as Singapore's high society.

### **The Ann Siang Enclave**

Ann Siang Hill was one of three hills collectively known as Telok Ayer Hills. The other two, Mount Wallrich and Mount Erskine, were levelled as part of reclamation work in the 1980s, leaving Ann Siang Hill the highest ground in the area.

The foot of the hill was the site of a Cantonese burial ground, one of the oldest Chinese burial grounds in Singapore. This graveyard was exhumed in 1907 and developed as part of the reclamation project. A Malay school, which provided education for the Temenggong of Johor and other young members of royalty, was also located here.

A long chain of names reflects the hill's early ownership. Originally acquired by Charles Scott, it was known as Scott's Hill, and had a clove and nutmeg plantation. It was irrigated by wells that tapped into an underground spring. One of these wells remains at the foot of Ann Siang Hill today.

After a series of blights across Singapore that devastated the plantation, Scott sold his plantation to John Gemmill who named it Gemmill's Hill. In 1894, the hill changed hands yet again. It was sold to a Malacca-born Hokkien Chinese sawmiller, landowner and businessman Chia Ann Siang (1832–1892), who built his house and estate here. Since then, it has been known as Ann Siang Hill (Chinese: 安祥山, Malay: *Bukit Ann Siang*).

### **Migrant Communities**

Between 1903 and 1941, shophouses and terraces were built over the plantation. This marked a major turning point for Ann Siang Hill and Ann Siang Road. As Chinese residents and businesses moved into the area, so too did Chinese clan associations. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were 20 or so associations, known as *hui guans* (会馆). These associations provided important social and economic support for the area's migrant communities.

They offered new migrants a sense of kinship and familiarity, since the same dialects were spoken and the same customs were practised as in the migrants' hometowns. They also helped new migrants with housing, jobs and education.

Ning Yeung Wui Kuan (宁阳会馆), one of Singapore's oldest clan associations also moved from South Bridge Road to 39 Ann Siang Road in 1995. Founded in 1822 by Cho Ah Chee for migrants from Toi San County in Guangdong, it continues, to this day, to provide welfare services, employment, housing and education for the Cantonese community.

Migrant workers would gather at these associations to socialise over mahjong and opera performances. Letter writers and remittance agents also set up shop on the hill, enabling illiterate migrants to keep in touch with family members in China and send their hard-earned money home.

Due to rising rental costs and dwindling membership, most of these associations are no longer operational. Only a handful of original clan associations such as Cantonese associations Fa Yun Wui Kwun (花县会馆) and Ching Yoon Woon Kwoon (清远会馆) remain today.

### Club Street

Leading down from Ann Siang Road to Cross Street and South Bridge Road is Club Street. Predominantly a Hokkien area, most of its inhabitants came from three villages in the Tong Ann county in the Fujian province of China. It is said that there was a big gateway at the entrance of Club Street, which earned it the nickname of *tua man lai* (大门里, meaning 'within the big gate' in Hokkien.)

It is believed that this street got its official name from the famous Chinese clubs and trade guilds located here. These clubs and guilds attracted high society, and movers and shakers who played an important role in Singapore's economic, social and cultural development.

Among these clubs, the Chinese Weekly Entertainment Club, located at 76 Club Street, was the most prestigious. Established in 1881 by wealthy Peranakans, it only admitted English-speaking Straits Chinese elites.

The club's events were the talk of the town. Sir Song Ong Siang, the first Chinese to receive a knighthood, was a member of the club. He recalled a lavish fifth-anniversary fancy dress ball where guests came decked to the nines as royalty.

Other prominent clubs included Kee Lam Club, which attracted Straits Chinese, as well as Ee Hoe Hean Club. Founded by a group of Hokkien businessmen in 1895 at Duxton Road, the latter shifted to 38 Club Street in 1910, before moving again to Bukit Pasoh in 1925. It was also home to Chui Lan Teng Club, which attracted wealthy Chinese businessmen. Hence the Hokkiens often refer to this street as *chui lan teng*, which means "Chui Lan pavillion'.

In addition to Chinese elite, Club Street was also home to a sizeable Indonesian Malay community. From 1932 to 2000, they occupied Pondok Peranakan Gelam Club, a communal house where married couples resided on the upper floors, and children and single adults lived on the lower levels. This building was declared a historic site by the National Heritage Board in 2000.

### 21<sup>st</sup> Century Changes

Today, trendy restaurants, bars and boutiques have replaced many of these historical clubs, guilds and associations on these two streets. Occupying elegantly restored pre-war shophouses, terraces and five-foot walkways, they attract revellers who enjoy the nightlife when both Ann Siang Road and Club Street are closed to traffic from evening to past midnight at weekends.

One of the most famous eateries in this enclave is The Coconut Club at 28 Ann Siang Road, listed on the Michelin Bib Gourmand in 2018. As its name suggests, this restaurant serves coconut-centric local dishes such as *nasi lemak* (coconut infused rice with spiced chicken, ikan bilis, roasted peanut, a sunny-side-up and sambal chilli), *otak otak* (grilled spicy fishcake), *chendol* (a shaved ice dessert with jelly, coconut milk and palm sugar syrup) and *kueh kosui* (steamed gula melaka cake with grated coconut).

Co-founder Chef Lee Eng Su honed his culinary skills by whipping up French food around the world for 12 years before returning to Singapore in 2016. The restaurant is so well known for its *nasi lemak* that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong hosted Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte for a meal here in December 2016.

Other eateries in the area that have distinguished themselves include Lolla at 22 Ann Siang Road for Mediterranean-inspired small plates, Izy Dining + Bar at 27 Club Street for modern Japanese served with a comprehensive sake selection, and Oxwell & Co (5 Ann Siang Road), which was opened by Gordon Ramsay's right-hand man Mark Sergeant, and serves hearty British yorkies and roast. More exotic eats, such as Beef Tongue Sammie and Rabbit Boudin Blanc can be found at Le Bon Funk (29 Club Street).

Bar-hopping is a favourite activity among locals, and Nutmeg & Clove (10A Ann Siang Hill) serves drinks inspired by flora and fauna in first British Resident and Commandant William Farquhar's 'Natural History Drawings'. Unusual local ingredients such as durian and mangosteen, as well as spices such as galangal and bay leaves invigorate classic cocktails and pay homage to Singapore's history and memories. Other bars to hit include B28 (28 Ann Siang Road), Catchfly (12 Ann Siang Road) and Operation Dagger (7 Ann Siang Hill).

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