The Singapore Harbour Board Artisans' Quarters at Morse Road

The SHB Artisans' Quarters was officially opened on 31 November 1939 by Sir Alexander Small, Singapore's Colonial Secretary. The quarters could house 216 families in 2-room units (a bedroom and a living room) with a bathroom, a kitchen and a lavatory. The units were rented to artisans at 7.5% of their salary. At that time, the SHB was a major employer of about 7,000 men. According to the Straits Times report, the units were considered "modern" with novel features like "the provision of triple clothes rods working on swivels". In 1953, another three 4-storey blocks of flats were added to bring the total to 16 blocks of flats and according to one of the residents, Wan Kam Fook, "arranged in a horseshoe along Morse Road".

(The above notes are extracted from reports by the Straits Times dated 30 November 1939 and 15 October 1953) (See this link for the original Straits Times report :http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article.aspx?articleid=straitstimes19391130-1.2.65&sessionid=578603cbb1e043ac80db0906e0c172bd&keyword=singapore+harbour+board+artisan+quarters&token=quarters%2cartisan%2cboard%2charbour%2csingapore).

In addition to the 216 artisans who worked for the British at the SHB, their children who grew up together in the enclave naturally followed their fathers' footsteps even after the SHB became PSA and Keppel Shipyard in 1968. The children typically began as apprentices from as young as 15 years old and during their 5-year stint followed part-time diploma courses at the Singapore Vocational Institute or the Singapore Polytechnic. They pursued their courses on day-release and/or evenings-only programmes. After their apprenticeship, most stayed on in the shipyard and worked their way up from technicians to managers. Many left to take up sea careers and several rose to Chief Engineer positions before returning to shore postings.

The "boys" from the SHB Artisan Quarters who grew up together and served their apprenticeship together are in their 60s today. They meet annually to raise a glass or two and reminiscence.

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Recently, I was invited to a reunion of several of Mr GT Tong's childhood friends. It turned out that they were his neighbours at Morse Road, where he grew up. His parents and their parents were "artisans" who worked for the Singapore Harbour Board (SHB) and they were housed in the SHB Artisans' Quarters at Morse Road. GT and most of his friends had as apprentices followed their fathers into the marine industry and made significant contributions to Keppel Shipyard.

The above "report" is the result of discoveries made during the course of the evening. I also learned that the apprentices played together as members of the SHB Boys' Club and they excelled as "Pirates" in softball. An excellent account of their exploits is given by Robert Ong. I also discovered the existence of "Club 1496". It turned out that David Chin is their "anchor" man and I got him to tell us about the club and its members.

Robert's and David's accounts are included in this eBook.

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