

Out & About with Geraldene **LOWE** - Black, White and Beautiful

GERALDENE LOWE has been leading mainly expat groups on tours of Singapore's heritage black-and-white houses for more years than she cares to remember. Here's another in **Verne Maree's** series of articles on cultural outings with Singapore's living, breathing national treasure.

As usual for Geraldene's coach tours, we meet in the coach park at the bottom of Dempsey. There's free parking nearby in the little road that leads to Samy's Curry Restaurant, located in the old Civil Service Club.

Geraldene on Dempsey:

This area was jungle until 200 years ago, when it became a plantation owned by the Eurasian Lester family. It had been offered to Raffles when he arrived, but he preferred the Hill of Singapore (now Fort Canning) for its vantage and the view of river and sea; he thought it'd be cooler. As the mangrove-covered area below

was found to breed malarial mosquitoes and other tropical nasties, the army moved its centre of command out here.

Dempsey village's long sheds were originally British Army stores. Though most of the original roof-tiles have been replaced with asbestos, you can see they have what we call 'jacked' roofs, double- or triple-stepped. These allowed hot air to rise and dissipate through vents; they also caught any passing breeze and circled it down into the

interior, effectively stopping the boots and such getting mouldy.

After the British colonial era, the buildings stood empty and derelict for many years. Then a clever businessman leased the old sheds cheaply from the government and rented them out cheaply to various furniture and carpet vendors. In time, the government took them all back and developed Dempsey into the popular retail, entertainment and dining hub you see today.



As we swing out along Tanglin Road, Geraldene points out the British High Commission on the corner of Napier Road. After Independence in 1965, she says, the Singapore government gave that piece of land to the British government, along with a few of the black-and-white houses it had built. A couple of the houses we are going to visit today were specifically built for army personnel; the first one is currently the home of the British High Commission's Defence Diplomacy head and his wife.

Though small, Geraldene reminds us, Singapore was strategically important to the British; from here they controlled Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Burma, Ceylon, Malaya and more. In 1932 they built the massive naval base in the north of the island, and there were three RAF bases. Singapore was regarded as an impregnable fortress – quite wrongly, as things turned out.

First stop: Ridley Park

According to historian Julian Davison in *Black and White: The Singapore House 1898-1841* (page 116), the increased military presence in Singapore from the mid-1920s to the outbreak of war in 1939 sparked a need for more military accommodation, and Ridley Park and Ridout Road were the first two enclaves developed as married quarters for officers and their families.

The road itself is named after Henry Ridley (1855-1956), the curator of the Botanic Gardens and a keen propagator of both rubber and the rubber industry; the story is that English explorer Sir Henry Alexander Wickham (1846-1928) smuggled the seeds out of Brazil in his umbrella to propagate them in Kew Gardens. They didn't grow well there, so they were tried in Singapore and other places with climates more like those in Brazil.

"Army-built houses always had the date on their façade, which makes my job as a tour guide much easier," says Geraldene. This one reads 1935.

Originally, the house was completely surrounded by a verandah. That has since been enclosed in order to enlarge the living room and the dining room, which now features a handsome 14-seater dining table. Earlier, cooling breezes would have drifted through. Now, with glassed-paned windows and air-conditioning, the elegant interior is nevertheless indistinctive; it could be anywhere in the world.

The house does have its original staircase, though, unlike others of the same era where the staircases were pushed back to make more room for dancing. Wonderfully decadent! Mind you, that was when most entertainment took place at home instead of at bars, restaurants and clubs.





Geraldene points out the betel-nut tree in front of the Ridley Park house



At the back of the house, the servants' quarters are separate, as was usual for the era, and linked by a covered walkway to the main house. Here, you can still see the original wooden shutters.

Behind the dining room is a newish kitchen that would have been a servery. The kitchens in these houses are often quite small, explains Geraldene, because they were developed from a back verandah. This kitchen, however, is fairly big – though not always big enough for her needs, comments the lady of the house wryly – and very well equipped.

"It's a nice house to live in," she says. "Roomy and big, but not *too* large for just the two of us. It has four bedrooms: two enormous, the other two smaller. They're all centralised, and that keeps them cooler."

It's amazingly peaceful and quiet, she adds. Perhaps *too* quiet. "As a tour group was leaving one day, a large snake slithered along the fence.

Along the Way

Driving once more along Tanglin Road, our guide points out a number of big old black-and-whites that – "being

close to civilisation" – were taken up for various uses. Number 303 used to be the Boy Scouts HQ and is now the home of Australasian Arts Projects; another, in Draycott Road, was the Petit Ecole and the Alliance Française.

"The Alliance was very trendy in the 60s," she recalls. "They had a library of French books, and used to show racy French movies. We had a lot of censorship in those days, so we didn't see much exotic stuff!"

There was also a nice little row of black-and-white houses as Tanglin curves around to Camden Medical Centre,

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she recalls. They were demolished in the early 60s after Independence was achieved, to house the newly formed Tourist Board. Geraldene recalls “an open-air restaurant with the *best* chicken rice and the *best* noodles”.

Now, only **Tudor Court** remains. In the old days, she says, government jobs might have paid lower salaries than the private sector, but you always got a house with your job. Tudor Court provided double-storey accommodation for the families of postmen.

As we turn into Nassim Road, we spy a number of big black-and-whites tucked back behind the road. This near to Orchard Road, they could cost up to \$30K per month to rent.

We pass the UK High Commissioner’s residence, **Eden Hall** at 28 Nassim Road. Not a traditional black-and-white, of course, it is nevertheless an important part of Singapore’s architectural heritage.

In Cluny Road, Geraldene points out a few little black-and-whites built for professors at the University of Malaya in Singapore, the first English university in Asia and now the NUS (National University of Singapore).



Second Stop: 41 Malcolm Road

Intrepid Budi is the only driver who’s prepared to negotiate this road in a full-size bus, we’re told. This is the 1925-built home of British artist Clare Hackby. Though piers at the front give it the illusion of being double-storeyed, it actually isn’t. Julian Davison in his book (page 91) describes a similar house at 29 Malcolm Road as follows:

“The archetypal PWD [Public Works Department] bungalow of the interwar years, a long and thin, single-storey affair, built on the side of a hill, with the main living floor raised on brick or reinforced concrete piers.” At Malcolm Road, he adds, “the split-level, side-of-a-hill house becomes a distinct architectural genre in its own right”.

It’s very special, Geraldene says, pointing out wooden beams and hand-



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chiselled details on the exterior of the building. The beauty of number 41 is that it “hasn’t been messed about with”, and so retains much of its original character. That’s because it was the clubhouse of the 1945-founded Stage Club from 1965 to 2005, and for those 40 years it wasn’t actually lived in. This amateur theatrical group, the oldest theatre company in Singapore, is now based at 24 Whitchurch Road.

“Thursday nights were open house,” as Geraldene recalls, “and anyone could drop by for a beer. But they generally wouldn’t leave without promising to sew some costumes, paint a few posters or join the crew!”

The shiny white floor tiles are a recent addition, however; Geraldene says they would have been either terracotta or marble. She recalls that the original red terracotta tiles that came from

Malacca contained an insect repellent to discourage ants from coming in. “When I was a child,” she adds, “they made us wash our feet before bed, to prevent the red from the verandah floor rubbing off on the sheets; it was the same with red Tiger Balm.”

The tenant for the past two years, artist Clare Hackby, has her studio in the erstwhile servant’s quarters behind the kitchen, at the end of a short covered walkway. Unusually, because of the house being built into a hill, these outbuildings are on the same level.

Clare is working on a series of large

paintings of Singapore landmarks, in preparation for an upcoming exhibition at the Fullerton Hotel from 26 September to 15 November. Displayed on an easel in the living room is a great painting of her own home (*pictured*); I’m willing to bet *that’s* not for sale.





Third Stop: Swiss Cottage Estate

Before we enter, Geraldene offers us citronella oil to ward off any mozzies, and mentions that a dab of eucalyptus oil soothes the itch.

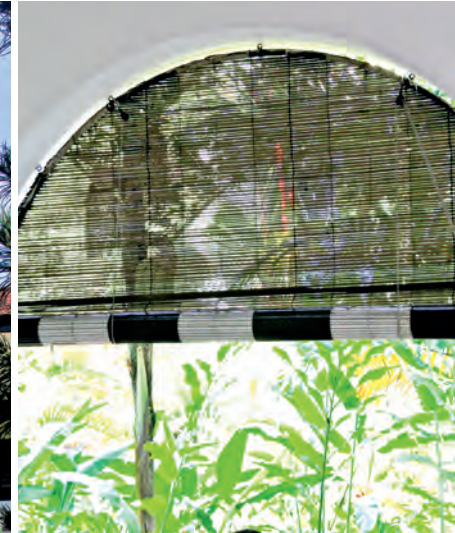
The garden is alive with birds, squirrels and interesting flora such as the tall and straight tembusu tree, used in the making of traditional boat-shaped Chinese coffins. She points out a fish-tail palm, a teakwood tree with its big leaves, then a stand of red-stemmed palms known variously as the lacquer palm, the lipstick palm or the sealing-wax palm.

Flowering frangipanis grow at the entrance – indicating expat tenants. They'd be taboo for a Chinese family, as frangipani flowers are used for funeral wreaths and are thus associated with death. Malays and Indians do like them, says Geraldene; and wearing a flower behind your right ear means you're "available".

Built for colonels in the British Army and featuring a square, terracotta-tiled entrance patio, the houses in this estate are typical of the square, verandah-wrapped bungalow style that the British found in India and adapted for use in other parts of the Empire. Here, this style

was also influenced by the traditional cruciform Malay house.

The comfortably furnished patio at the entrance was originally the porch where you'd alight after driving up to the house. Black-and-white chick blinds (*below*) keep out the sun and the rain, while allowing breezes through. Originally, before World War II, they'd have been made from hand-woven split bamboo and would have lasted only a year or so, Geraldene explains. Now they're generally lined with plastic, so they last much longer. Here, the plastic has fallen off – it's *much* better!





HERITAGE HOMES



Inside, it's clear from the vivid walls that the tenants love colour. In the dining room, set off by red-oxide-hued walls is a lovely collection of paintings by watercolourist Derek Corke, who takes commissions to paint Singapore's historic houses. In the thirties, there was no sewerage, water pipes or gas piping. "Every day, two guys would have filled two big Ali Baba jars from water they'd hauled from the well." Geraldene adds: "There would also have been a *punkah* (fan) suspended from the ceiling, and if you were rich enough you would have had a *punkah wallah* pulling a rope to keep it going."

From the square hall, we ascend the original wooden staircase. Before glass was installed in the windows, this seating area over the front porch would have been the coolest place in the house to sit. These monsoon windows had panels that opened outwards to keep the rain and sun out while allowing air to circulate.

Traditionally, these houses had just two very large bedrooms upstairs, one on either side. Some of them became boarding accommodation, housing three or four bachelors per room – each with his own mosquito net. In some cases, over the years, the huge bedrooms have been divided into two or three. That's what has happened here. The "cowboy

doors" or saloon doors gave some privacy but still allowed air to flow.

At the back is an enclosed kitchen, originally a servery on an open verandah. From there, a servants' staircase leads up to the outbuildings, where cooking would have been done, plus servants' quarters and a purpose-built garage.

The original army colonel resident would typically have had a driver and a batman along with a groom, a gardener, a cookboy, a housekeeper, a laundry maid, a nanny, a nightwatchman – and of course, a *tukang ayer* to fill those giant water jars. Now, with modern conveniences, one industrious Filipina helper can do it all.



Clockwise from top:
7 Royal Road
Bukit Damai
Tropical Deco charm
6 Royal Road
2 Canterbury Road



Through Alexandra Park

This large, attractive enclave features big and small black-and-whites from a variety of eras, from turn of the century to late thirties Tropical Deco. It was named after Princess Alexandra, wife of the then Prince of Wales who later became Edward VII, and all road names – Canterbury, Winchester and so on – are distinctively English.

Before it was developed for housing, this area was a pepper plantation. Pepper grows on a vine about two metres high; elephants were used to clear the plantation, and part of the reason for building the houses on stilts was to keep tigers out, according to Geraldene.

The oldest house in Alexandra Park is number 6 Russels Road (see page 47 for our feature article). Known as the **Plantation House**, it was built in the first few years of the 1900s: typically Malay

in style, up on stilts, and for coolness it has open latticework screens and few inner walls.

According to Julian Davison, the houses at numbers 5 and 7 Royal Road are the next oldest. Number 7 is also known as **Bukit Damai**; as the residence of a commanding officer, it was besieged by Sepoy militia during the Singapore Mutiny of 1915, but successfully defended.

Dating from 1936, numbers 3, 5 and 7 Winchester Road are built right on the road. Number 1 is typical of the British army bungalows of the time, according to Davison. **Winchester Place**, the officers' mess on Winchester Road, was also completed in the first decade of the 20th century. The enormous, 10-bedroom mess was at one time a boarding school; now, apparently, it has been let out to a single family. Number 9 next door is the Lorna Whiston preschool.

Geraldene is continually looking for historic homes to add to her tour itineraries. If you're lucky enough to live in a black-and-white, and would consider opening your home for a short period on the occasional weekday, do email her at geraldenestours@hotmail.com or call her on 6737 5250. You can contact her in the same way for details of upcoming tours. 📧

