



**O**n a drizzly Saturday morning, I am one of about 50 eager beavers who congregate at the corner of Emerald Hill and Orchard Road for a walking tour of this heritage precinct. The relative coolness is a blessing, but whatever the weather, I know from previous experience that Geraldene Lowe's tours are pure pleasure.

She starts with a brief rundown of the history of Orchard Road and this part of it in particular, succinctly putting Emerald Hill and Peranakan Place into context. It's a fascinating story.

# Emerald Hill

with Geraldene Lowe

*Story and photographs by Verne Maree*

## 19th-century Orchard

Orchard as a road and an area was commercialised only in the 1900s. Before then, it was a **fertile valley** where plantations of gambier, nutmeg and pepper flourished; then came the fruit orchards that gave it its name. Later, it became a popular residential street.

During the period before the 1960s, what is now Ngee Ann City was a big Chinese graveyard; but the British authorities set the life of a cemetery at 100 years. There was some muttering about the building of Ngee Ann City, says Geraldene, but that doesn't seem to have affected its commercial success.

One side of Orchard Road was Scottish, and the other side was Irish; hence road names such as **Claymore** and **Cairnhill**, and **Killiney** and **Dublin**. There was much rivalry between the two sides; but an Irishman did eventually come over to buy land on the Scottish side of Orchard Road – the name **Emerald Hill** refers to William Cuppage's association with Ireland, the Emerald Isle.

Cuppage was a postal clerk in Raffles' time who retired in the 1860s as the colonial administration's acting postmaster. In those days, officials were allowed to have their own businesses on the side. He was bankrupted when his nutmeg plantation was attacked by beetles, but fortunate enough to be bailed out, says Geraldene, by one of his two daughters marrying a wealthy Dutch Eurasian by the name of Koek (pronounced "cook"), who acquired a slice of the land. Hence **Koek Road**, which led up to his residence. **Cuppage Road** was the driveway to William's houses, Erin Lodge and Fern Cottage.

## Turn of the Century

In 1900, a **railway line** was built to link Malaya and Singapore. The train crossed a bridge over Orchard Road and stopped where The Centrepoint is sited today; the lane that now runs behind the houses, next to and parallel to the CTE, was part of this railway line to Bukit Timah. Interestingly, The Centrepoint's predecessor was the **Cold Storage Building**, constructed in 1917 (pictured opposite).

Around 1900, Cuppage's acreage was acquired by the Seah brothers, who subdivided it for the building of terraced housing. Wealthy Peranakans started building homes here; the ones nearer Orchard – what is now the **Alley Bar**, for example – tend to be older. One of these became the **first Peranakan museum**, where three families displayed their own treasures; today, you can visit the new Peranakan Museum in the beautiful period building at 39 Armenian Street.

## Architectural Treasures

The **small frontages** of these terraced houses belie their size, because they are designed as a succession of single rooms that extend back to a surprising depth. In the front room, the men hung out; for a woman to spend time there would be seen as rather forward, says Geraldene. A **well** would be sunk in the second room, and the space above it would be open to the sky, providing light and ventilation. Nowadays, these have become fishponds or atriums. Depending on the depth of the house, there might be another well and skylight farther down.

As we wander up the hill, Geraldene points out interesting architectural features, such as the **decorative tiling**, and tells us what is original and what is not. It was all imported: ships travelling from the West carried the patterned wall tiles as ballast; the green roof-tiles were brought in by Chinese junks, and also served as ballast.

There was **no glass** in the windows of Singapore houses until 1927; even then, it was used only in smaller windows, often brightly coloured, for decorative purposes. Colonial architectural styles, including shophouses, relied on **through-ventilation**. Glass windows make houses hot.

Electricity was installed in Orchard only in the late 1920s, in stages from the Tangs end of the road. Before then, **oil lamps** provided illumination; the tour group peers up into a portico roof to see the small hole through which a taper would have been pushed to light the lamp at dusk – it was also a peephole, says Geraldene, to see who was at





**WHAT IS PERANAKAN PLACE?**

Peranakan Place is an architectural heritage site, named for the wealthy Peranakans who built their houses here at the turn of the last century. In this instance, the term refers to the early (19th century) Chinese immigrants who intermarried with local Malay women and established a unique culture that includes elements of both Chinese and Malay origin.

the door and perhaps drop the front-door key down to them. Traditionally, you would keep handy a basket on a long rope, so that when your favourite hawker came by you could lower it down to him with some money in it. In the time he took to cook your meal, you could come downstairs to collect it.

You can always tell which houses have Chinese families in them and which have been colonised by expats, says Geraldene, pointing out the **plants** that are traditionally outside a Chinese house to keep bad luck away: something sweet, something red, something fleshy and something thorny. A jasmine bush and a red-flowering cactus would do the trick. Plants with medicinal purposes are common, too – perhaps with leaves to soothe a sore throat, or to treat a bruise.

With a rueful look, she indicates a façade painted black and white, with a frangipani tree and a couple of pretty wicker chairs. “Black is the colour of death and mourning, and white flowers are used in funeral wreaths.” Hmm ... I’d thought it looked really pretty.

### House Calls

We start at **No. 5 Emerald Hill**, a popular bar in a row of watering-holes, where the bleary-eyed staff is clearing up the detritus of Friday night. The feeling is distinctly different during the day. Over the bar mirror in what would have been the second room hangs a huge, ornate carving, moved from its original position where it would have served as the divider between the first and second rooms. Light still filters down atmospherically from the skylight above the bar.



The **first home** we go into is a real beauty that is in the process of being restored – not renovated. It’s nice to see that the original internal structure has been retained, along with features such as the built-in mirrored cabinets in which the Peranakan owners would have displayed their colourful porcelain and other treasures. We’re told the owner inherited it, and lived in it for some time before starting to hanker after an air-conditioned condo with a pool. Some fortunate tenant, however, is going to revel in the romance of this gorgeous home.

One stretch of **seven terraced houses** was apparently built by a man who eventually married seven wives in succession, in a desperate but unfruitful bid to produce an heir. Eventually, he gave up and adopted seven boys, one for each wife, and this is where his seven families lived. Says Geraldene: “For him, having children was not so much about carrying on the family name or business; for a proper, dignified burial, you needed sons to carry the coffin – and he was a big man.”

As I live in the area, I often walk down Emerald Hill to shop in Orchard Road. Each time, I avert



my gaze from the relatively unattractive **Chatsworth International School**, at number 37. Geraldene explains that the property belonged to Lim Boon Keng; his original house is situated back from the street. In 1924 it became the Singapore Chinese Girls' School, and around 1994 all state schools were moved out to satellite towns in order to ease traffic congestion.

Our final call is the house of the **Robicheaux family**, which backs onto Emerald Hill but has its front entrance on Cairnhill Road. Tastefully furnished in original style, it was featured last year in *Expat Living*.

### A Fine City

Right from the start, Raffles laid down strict regulations for buildings. For one, at least the ground floor had to be built of **brick and stone**. Having been in India and Burma, Raffles had seen how quickly houses decayed in the tropics. He wanted Singapore to be a model colony, and as a result of this law, these houses are still basically sound and repairable after more than a century.

Shady verandahs known as **five-foot ways** were also legislated by Raffles, the idea being to protect pedestrians from the sun and the rain. Looking up the hill, it's clear that the right-hand side, which boasts the five-foot way, was regarded as more auspicious; on the other side, the houses have front gardens with a wall. These created a barrier to prevent bad luck from entering.

From 1927, houses had to be built with a **back lane**. This made sense for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that the night-soil man came to remove your bucket every two or three days, and if you didn't have a back lane, he'd have to slop the smelly thing through the house. Most of the back kitchen areas that opened onto these lanes have been modernised, but Geraldene shows us one that still has its original gutter and two backdoor chutes: one for a bucket-system toilet, the other for kitchen waste. Orchard Road was a valley with a riverbed, and the water would rise on the high tide to wash your garbage away. Handy, huh?

The 1927 law also required that there be a dividing wall rising up from the roof-line to serve as a **fire-break** between houses. And if your house was more than two storeys high, it had to have an **external staircase**. These were usually made of cast-iron, and added on to the back of the house. After 1927, they were built of brick at the same time as the house. Go to the Bugis Street back lanes, urges Geraldene, to see some stunning, brightly painted examples. 📷

### ABOUT GERALDENE LOWE-ISMAIL

Eurasian Singaporean Geraldene Lowe speaks six languages, and is a mine of information. She should be declared a national treasure, having contributed a good fifty years and more to this country's tourism industry.

For more than forty years, she has led walking and bus tours of ethnic areas that cover **temple festivals, World War II sites, traditional trades, antiques** and Singapore's unique **architecture**. They are put on especially for the expatriate community, generally through the various clubs and associations.

The proceeds of all Geraldene's weekend tours go to charities such as **Transient Workers Count Too**, and the **Cuff Road Project**. Geraldene is increasingly in demand for her in-depth, intimate knowledge of a country whose development she has not just studied, but lived.

Her upcoming tours include **Ramadan Ramble** walks leading up to Hari Raya on 10 September, **Mooncake Magic** walking tours of Chinatown, and a fun night tour by coach to visit Hindu temples and feast at an Indian buffet during the **Navarathri Festival**.



For tour details, or to request your own guided tour, call Geraldene at 6737 5250 or send an email to [geraldenestours@hotmail.com](mailto:geraldenestours@hotmail.com).