

# Fort Canning Park: A Glimpse into Its Multi-faceted Past

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Come to Fort Canning Park today and you may find, amid the lush flora, a number of historic relics hinting at a deeper past. Perhaps the oldest monument there is the *keramat*, or shrine, to a fourteenth-century ruler, that long predates the founding of modern Singapore. Artefacts up to 700 years old are on display at the archaeological dig site in the park. Visitors can walk through the main gate and along the weathered walls of a nineteenth century colonial fort, or explore the interior of the old military barracks. Nearby, tombstones built into brick walls bear the names of Singapore's early Christian community.

These relics and structures have been deliberately and carefully preserved over the years. To park users, they offer a glimpse into the multifaceted past of Fort Canning Park. They also stand alongside a more recently established series of historical gardens, designed to bring the history of the hill to life. From reimagining the different parts of a former palace, to highlighting the botanical initiatives of its first British inhabitants, the gardens emphasise the heritage value of the park, and add to an educational visitor experience.

These landscape features are unique among parks in Singapore – a representation of Fort Canning's historical importance as a political, military, cultural, and natural landmark. For decades, the hill has been developed as a total historic park, in a way that keeps and accentuates its historic character. The sustained efforts to

preserve the historic and natural assets of the park, and the inventive curation of the variously themed gardens, has moulded Fort Canning Park into the foremost historic park in Singapore today.

## A Historic Landmark

Understanding the landscaping of Fort Canning Park requires some awareness of its history, as recent developments have centred on elucidating its 700-year past. As a vantage point overlooking the historic core of Singapore, the hill was well used by early leaders for both symbolic and practical reasons. Its first inhabitants were the ancient kings of Singapura, who built their palace here around the turn of the fourteenth century. From there, a succession of five kings governed a flourishing port along the Singapore River, trading extensively with China and the Riau Islands.<sup>1</sup>



It is said that Singapura was sacked by Majapahit forces in 1398. Following this, the hill took on the name *Bukit Larangan* meaning "forbidden hill", as locals feared it was haunted by the kings of the past. The hill was re-inhabited by the British in the nineteenth century, when they discovered remnants of the former settlement.<sup>2</sup> Among their findings were a number of huge fruit trees, which may have belonged to an old royal garden, and a freshwater spring, which was said to be the former bathing place of the noble consorts.

During British rule, the hill was the site of Government House, where Sir Stamford Raffles and the governors after him resided. Raffles and



1. The view from Farquhar Garden in Fort Canning Park, with Fort Canning Centre in the distance. (Image: National Parks Board)

2. Chinese coins found on Fort Canning Hill, which are dated to approximately the fourteenth century, point to trade relations between China and pre-colonial Singapura. (Image: Prof John Miksic)

3. Plan of the Town of Singapore by Lieut Jackson (Image: National Archives of Singapore)

4. Fort Canning lighthouse, located on top of Fort Canning Hill and one of the 13 important lighthouses in the Straits of Malacca.

Together with a flagstaff and a Time Ball, it played an essential role during the early maritime history of Singapore, c. 1950s. (Image: National Archives of Singapore)

5. River Valley Swimming Pool with United Engineers' Building in the distance (Image: National Archives of Singapore)

6. The iconic façade of the National Theatre, which was open at the foot of Fort Canning Hill from 1963 to 1984. (Image: National Parks Board)

Major-General William Farquhar nurtured a small spice plantation near the house, experimenting with nutmeg and clove. The first botanic garden, set up in 1822 at the foot of the hill, cultivated these and other economic crops at a larger scale.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, the flagstaff, lighthouse and time ball on the hill made it an important communication landmark to locals and foreign merchants alike.

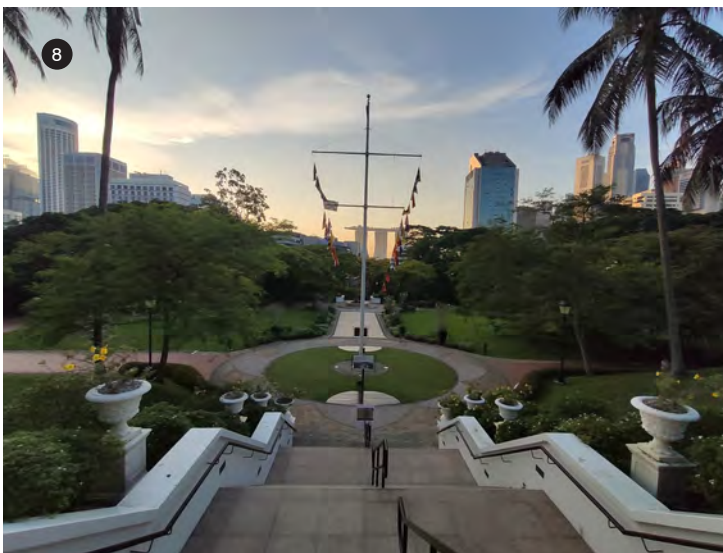
In 1861, a fort named after the first Viceroy of India, Earl Charles John Canning was established on the hill. Although it was out of use by the early twentieth century, the British continued to establish other military buildings there, including their military headquarters, barracks, and an underground bunker from which they operated in World War II. After the war, the hill grew popular as a leisure destination. The iconic National Theatre, the Van Kleef Aquarium, public swimming pools, a playground, and even a former roller-skating rink were among its well-used amenities.

Fort Canning Park was given its present name

in 1981, and plans to develop and maximise the urban parkland quickly got underway. Early plans envisioned the park as an integrated tourist and recreational centre. To this end, a comprehensive revamp of the hill was proposed in 1984, calling for various new tourist attractions, entertainment and event spaces, and practical facilities such as more parking space.

But as archaeological evidence emerged of an ancient settlement on the hill, and as local urban planners began to consider the value of preserving Singapore's historic core, plans started to shift. The initial proposal was reviewed with an eye to the heritage value of the historic hill. By 1986, developers were advocating instead for a 'total historical park'. This entailed restoring the park's historical structures and relics, retaining its natural assets, and preserving its historic character and ambience.

This concept of a total historical park has remained a constant and primary guiding force in



7. "National Theatre@50", designed by Lai Chee Kien, is one of the public sculptures in Fort Canning Park. Created for the 2013 Singapore Biennale, it recalls the façade of the National Theatre which was located where the sculpture now stands.

8–10. The Raffles Garden combines the botanical and the maritime - the plants tell the story of Raffles and other pioneering naturalists while the lighthouse, flagstaff and timeball showcase the importance of the hill as a nautical communications hub.



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The former Far East Command Headquarters and British military barracks, both built in the 1920s, were also reinstated and prepared for adaptive reuse. The barracks were renovated and occupied by performing arts companies, giving the colonial building a new lease of life as an arts centre. Some years later, the Far East Command Headquarters building was shored up and leased out. Its tenants converted it first into a country club, and later into a hotel. Today, both buildings continue to be widely used and appreciated for their heritage significance. They were given conservation status in 2005.

Elsewhere, the monuments at the old Christian cemetery were cleaned and professionally restored. They include the headstones of prominent people in early colonial Singapore, and the Cupolas and Gothic Gates, two of the oldest examples of gothic revival architecture in Singapore. The military bunker was converted into a museum telling Singapore's story of World War II. An archaeological excavation site that was found to be a fourteenth century artisan's workshop was left uncovered, and now forms part of a site exhibition showing some examples of the many types of artefacts found at the hill. Replicas of the since-demolished flagstaff, lighthouse and time ball were erected near where they once stood, proudly overlooking the historic High Street.

To further articulate the historical themes of the park, interpretive signboards were developed to explain the newly-restored features, and narrate Fort Canning's and Singapore's history through the years. Thematic walking trails, centred on the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively, were designed to guide visitors in exploring the park and its history.

### Preservation Works

One unique feature of Fort Canning's landscape is that a number of historic relics and structures are scattered throughout the park, nestled in the lush greenery. They remain as a result of concerted efforts at preservation, especially from the 1990s onwards.

A few key restoration works took place in this decade. The *keramat*, or shrine to Iskandar Shah, the last ancient king of Singapura, was restored and a *pendopo* roof put over it. The *pendopo*, embellished with cock-fighting motifs on its pillars, was designed true to the traditional fourteenth century Javanese style that was probably prevalent in pre-colonial Singapore.

11. The Keramat Iskandar Shah, formerly sheltered under a simple hut. (Image: National Parks Board)

12. A traditional *pendopo* roof has since been installed over the *keramat*. (Image: National Parks Board)

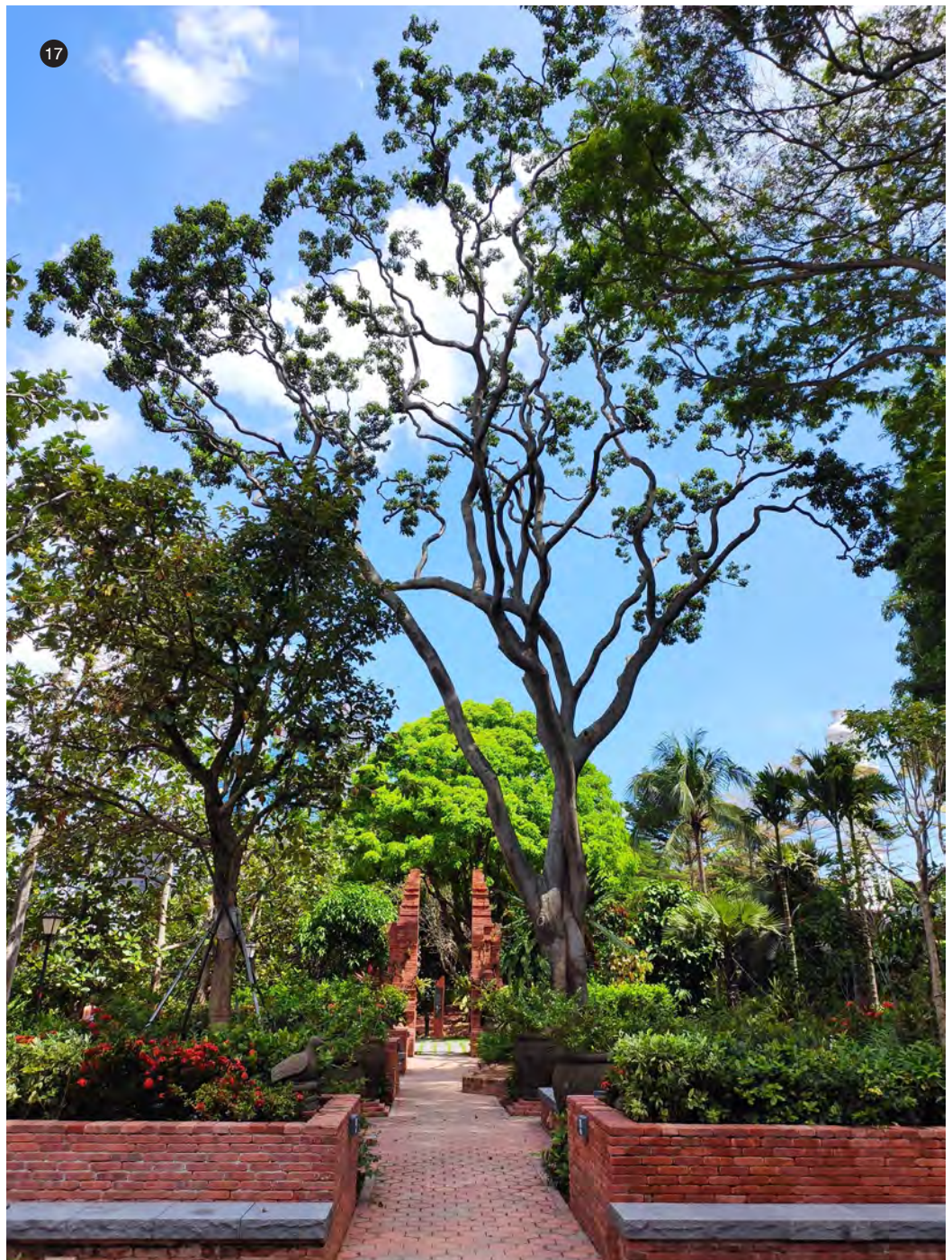
13. Spices including clove and ginger plants are lined up in planter boxes along Canning Rise, within the restored First Botanic Garden. (Image: National Parks Board)

14. Planter beds in Raffles Garden feature the spices that Raffles introduced to Singapore, and specimens in his personal natural history collection. (Image: National Parks Board)

### Historical Gardens

More recently, plans to strengthen Fort Canning Park as a heritage and community outreach hub resulted in a flurry of enhancements in the last few years. Nine historical gardens were unveiled in the park in 2019, to coincide with Singapore's bicentennial commemoration. Some of these gardens take their cue from the former botanic and spice gardens on the hill, or remember the





15. Fort Canning Centre has hosted arts groups such as the Singapore Dance Theatre and TheatreWorks since its restoration in the 1990s. (Image: National Parks Board)

16. The Fort Gate is one of the few remaining relics of the old nineteenth-century fort, and is the inspiration for Fort Canning Park's logo.

17. The longitudinal space of the garden with a series of brick gateways has become a favourite photo spot for park visitor.



naturalist efforts of its former residents. Others reimagine sites of the ancient palace that once stood on Fort Canning – the royal gardens, bathing place, and artisan’s village. Each garden brings to life one aspect of the park’s history; collectively, they communicate the richness of its heritage.

A hallmark of the historical gardens is that their planting palettes have a historical basis. Research was done by the team from National Parks Board on what plants might have once been present in, or were relevant to, the time period or locale that each garden represents. So the early colonial interest in experimenting with spices is reflected in the Spice Garden and sections of the restored First Botanic Garden, where nutmeg, clove, ginger, chili, and other edibles that people attempted to cultivate are planted. The Sang Nila Utama Garden, a reinterpretation of Singapura’s royal gardens, is filled with collections of fruit trees, as well as fragrant and flowering plants that were of symbolic importance in fourteenth century

Southeast Asia. The Raffles Garden showcases species that Raffles documented, collected, or introduced to Singapore, and species associated with his naturalist colleagues and friends. And plant specimens from the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings are featured at the Farquhar Garden, highlighted in life-sized frames as a nod to the original botanical drawings that Farquhar commissioned and compiled.

Enhancements were made across the park to enrich its landscape. In the fourteenth-century gardens, new structures were added to represent what ancient structures in Fort Canning Park could have looked like. They were done in consultation with local historians, and with reference to what we know about the architecture of the time. Brick enclosures with stone carvings and ornamental water spouts, which are typical of ancient bath sites in regional royal compounds, can be found at the Forbidden Spring. The garden is so named because it was once the site of the noble ladies’ bathing place, and one of the most restricted sites in the old palace. Elsewhere in the Sang Nila Utama Garden, the four different planting themes are separated by split gateways, called *candi bentar*, which are inspired by Majapahit-era compounds found in Indonesia.

Other zones have been developed in line with their historic function and significance. The area around the retained archaeological site was renamed the Artisan’s Garden, as it was found to be the site of a royal craftsmen’s workshop in





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#### Reference

- <sup>1</sup> Kwa Chong Guan, *Pre-Colonial Singapore*, (Singapore, 2017), pp. 34-35.
- <sup>2</sup> John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China: Exhibiting a View of the Actual State of Those Kingdoms*, (London, 1830), p. 72.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Zumbroich, 'Singapore's First Spice Plantation and Botanic Garden, 1819-1859', *Gardens' Bulletin Singapore*, 56 (2004), 4-10.

18. The intricate stone carvings at the Pancur Larangan were designed by Mr Eng Siak Loy, a prominent local artist. (Image: National Parks Board)

19. The split gates at the Sang Nila Utama Garden take design inspiration from other regional fourteenth century compounds. (Image: National Parks Board)

20. Artefacts are showcased in wall-mounted displays and a glass walkway at the Artisan's Garden (Image: National Parks Board)

21. Biophilic log play area at Jubilee Park (Image: National Parks Board)

22. Dancers performing at the Pancur Larangan (Image: Wong Tuan Wah)

23. Student volunteers facilitate a ceramic handling activity session at Fort Canning Park (Image: National Parks Board)

24. Concert-goers enjoyed a night out at Rockstrs.

the fourteenth century. It showcases the variety of ceramic and glass artefacts, crafted locally and abroad, that were found at the site, and is complete with a decking area for hosting related programmes. Elsewhere at the western foot of the hill, a nature playgarden was installed, complete with giant see-saws and slides that make use of the undulating terrain. Built near the former site of the National Theatre and Van Kleef Aquarium, the site has been restored to its historic function as a recreation venue, and remains immensely popular among families and children.

Finally, the heritage value of the park is communicated not only through its landscape design, but also through its programmes. The new gardens are complemented with events and activities that are closely aligned with their historical themes. Gamelan and traditional Javanese dance performances have been staged at the fourteenth century gardens, showcasing some of the culture of ancient Southeast Asia against the backdrop of its reimagined historic landscape. Spice-related workshops and trails are regularly held at the Spice Garden, explaining both the historic significance and practical usage of spices; and some visitors to the Artisan's Garden may have chanced upon ceramic handling activity sessions – a chance for the everyday park user to touch, feel, and learn about the artefacts found in the soil beneath their feet.

Fort Canning Park today is the result of a sustained commitment to preserving and articulating its heritage value. Its historic and natural features have been carefully maintained, and its heritage significance is further accentuated with the curation and design of historical gardens. Today, the park offers not only an immersion in nature but also a heritage experience – a walk back through time in one of Singapore's oldest landmarks. 

