

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

Text and Images by SaraAnn Ang and Chng Mun Wye



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.¹



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.² 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