

Exploring Jalan Besar

By Sharon Seow

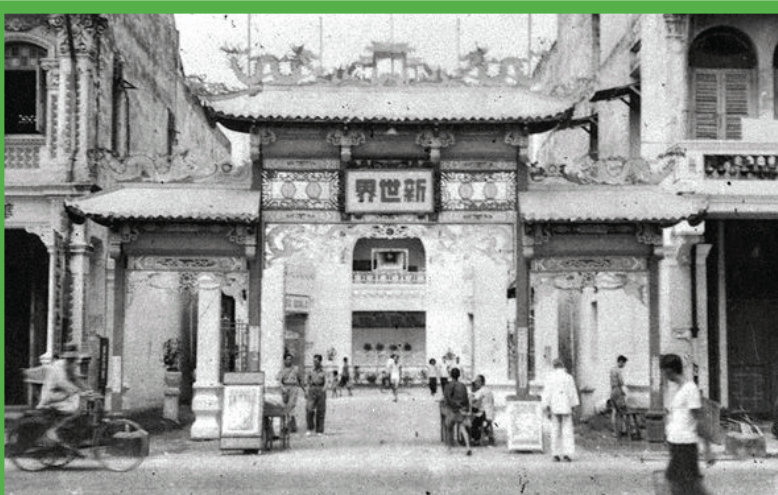
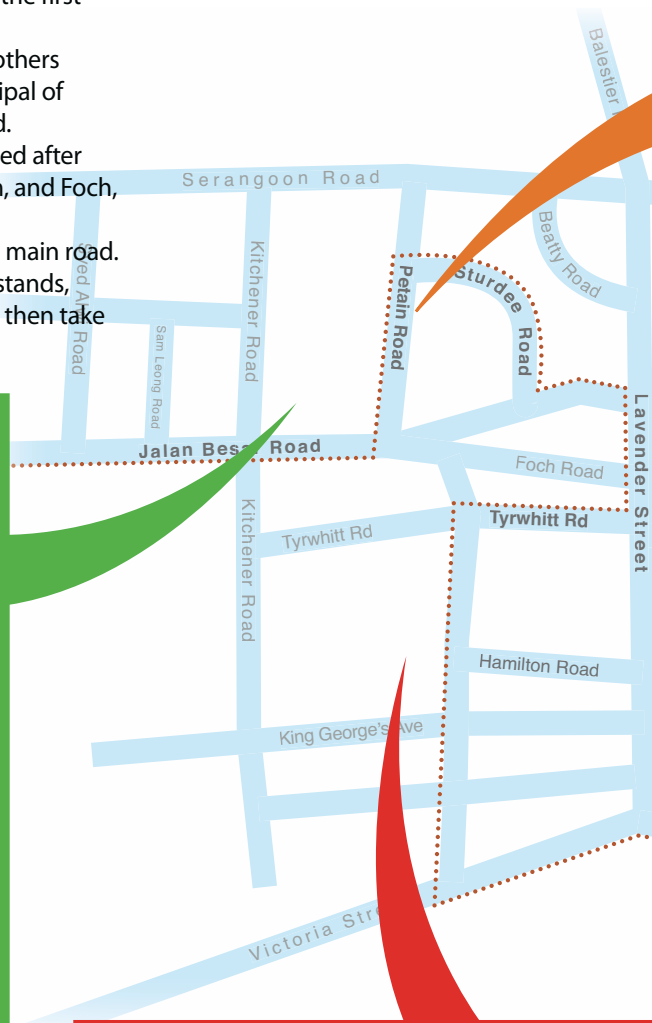
Jalan Besar, which literally means Big or Wide Road in Malay, was one of the first roads built in Singapore. It stretches from Sungei Road to Lavender Street.

When it was built, it cut through mostly swamp land which was bought by brothers Richard Owen and George Norris — ancestors of Ms Evelyn Norris, who was principal of Raffles Girls School. The men turned it into a betel nut plantation and fruit orchard.

Those who wander up Jalan Besar will notice many of the side streets are named after World War I battlesites and personalities, for instance, Flanders, an area in Belgium, and Foch, the French marshall who was the commander of the allied forces then.

Buildings from the late 19th to the mid-20th century still line both sides of the main road.

To get a feel of the area, start at 191 Jalan Besar where Swee Choon Dim Sum stands, branch off at Petain Road, loop round at Sturdee Road and into Bendemeer Road, then take Tyrwhitt Road to Lavender Street all the way to Kallang.



The New World

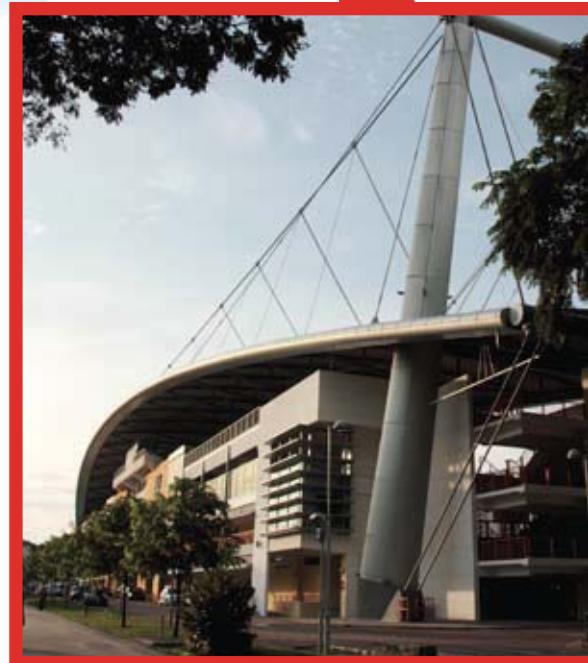
One of the first stops must be the site of the former New World, where City Square Project — a park, condo and mall — is being built. The original gate to the New World stands at the junction of Kitchener and Jalan Besar roads.

The place, which closed in the mid-1980s, was one of three “worlds”, the other two being Great World and Gay World. Basically, these were amusement parks, with cinemas, game stalls, merry-go-rounds and cabarets. Boxing matches and wrestling matches were also staged there.

The site was originally owned by two Straits Chinese merchants, Ong Boon Tat and Ong Peck Hock. It was one of their many business interests. Their legacy lives on in roads named after them.

During World War II, the New World and Jalan Besar Stadium were two of the many sites used by the Japanese to screen Chinese men. A total of 242 people from these sessions at Jalan Besar were eventually massacred at Changi beach as part of a “purification” process.

Photograph courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Petaian Road

The decorated shophouses here were possibly built during the boom years of the 1920s when rubber and tin fetched high prices. More such examples can be seen in Balestier Road. An award-winning art deco building, once owned by philanthropist Lee Kong Chian, can be viewed at 161 Lavender Street.

The Petaian Road area has a history of being a red-light district, which it still is today.



Kallang

The word is an old Malay name referring to a group of sea gypsies called Orang Biduanda Kallang. There were about 500 here in 1819.

One landmark was the large blue tubular container that was Kallang Gasworks. It was completed in 1862, when the piped gas supply was turned on in Singapore. It ceased production in 1997. Senoko Gasworks took over providing gas.

The place has been marked as a historic site. Just Gasholder No 3, with its structural columns, has been preserved here.

The shops leading up to it were metal foundries. And passers-by could watch muscular men hammer glowing red metal pieces into shape.

A little further afield is Kallang Basin, which used to be a squatter colony. People here lived in rickety wooden homes with zinc roofs and slept on planks. Now an HDB estate, it is earmarked for high-density, water-front housing developments.

Photograph courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Jalan Besar Stadium

The stadium, put up in 1932, is considered the birthplace of Singapore football. Malaysia Cup soccer matches were played here between 1932 and 1966, and 1967 and 1973, among other games. The first Youth Festival (1955) and first Armed Forces Day (1969) were held here too. The original stadium was torn down, and the present one opened officially in 2003.

