

Contents

Bukit Brown Cemetery 1922–1973 A Brief History	6
Foreword Singapore Heritage Society	9
Editors' Note	13
The Hill is A Life and Alive	18
The Beginning of the End	
Eight Days: 7 February to 15 February, 1942	22
If Not by Sea	34
Battle at Cemetery Hill	41
Silent Soldiers Still at Bukit Brown	50
Under Occupation	
Japan's Extortion of the Chinese in Singapore	54
The Life of Tan Yeok Seong	70
Armageddon—1942	75
Road to Endau	76
A Brush with Fate	88
Casualties of War	91
A Wartime Burial	93
Lost Promises	95
The Volunteers	99
Exploring the The Burial Registry of Bukit Brown	103
The Register of Burials	108

The End of the War: Lest We Forget

The Writing on the Wall	112
Atonement	116
From Transport Pioneer to War Hero	121
Wong Chin Yoke (Wong Chin Yeok)	126
A Family of Patriots	129
A Life of Loss & Healing	133
Two Brothers, One Survivor	142
Finding Grandpa—Cho Kim Leong	145
Bukit Brown & the Peranakan Connection	152
Wandering Souls of Bukit Brown: Salvation Rites and Rituals	158
We Were Just Kids	166
A Portrait of the New World	174
Tan Ean Kiam	186
Tan Ean Teck	190
Lee Choon Seng	192
Sabar: Patience and Thankfulness	198
All Things Bukit Brown : WW II @ Bukit Brown the Editorial Team	206
Acknowledgments	211

Bukit Brown Cemetery

1922–1973

A Brief History

Bukit Brown Cemetery opened on 1 January 1922—a municipal cemetery administered by the British and opened to all Chinese, regardless of dialect group and status. As a burial ground, it was a marked departure from the traditional practice of linking the final resting places for the Chinese, exclusively to ties of kinship and dialect communities. In short, it was as inclusive as clan cemeteries were exclusive, an example being just adjacent to it, the Seh Ong Cemetery.

Bukit Brown Cemetery itself was carved out of land acquired mainly from the Hokkien Seh Ong Clan for Chinese surnamed “Ong”. It is part of a complex of adjoining burial grounds, which include the Seh Ong, Lao Sua (Old Hill) and Kopi Sua (Coffee Hill) cemeteries, with the latter two belonging to the Hokkien Huay Kuan (Hokkien Clan Association). This complex, collectively known now as Greater Bukit Brown, is the largest cluster of Chinese graves outside of China with an estimated 200,000 graves and covers an area spanning nearly 400 acres.

Bukit Brown is named after George Henry Brown, a Briton who came to Singapore in the 1840s via India. A shipping merchant, Brown bought land and built his home on Mount Pleasant Road, an area later known as “Mr Brown’s Hill” on old maps. Bukit (“hill” in Malay) Brown (after the merchant) became the first hybrid English and Malay name in Singapore for a hill.

The cemetery came about after Dr. Lim Boon Keng (1868–1957), a noted community leader and businessman, first petitioned the British for a Municipal Chinese cemetery in 1904. His call was heeded by two prominent Chinese community leaders and successive Municipal Commissioners, Tan Kheam Hock (1884–1922) and See Tiong Wah (1886–1940). They were

Peranakan Chinese who were known in colonial times as the King's Chinese, influential leaders in the community with a say in matters of self-governance over the Chinese community.

It was to take almost 20 years for such a municipal burial ground to be realised and it was only on April 5, 1922 that the first burial took place. It was reported the Chinese were not keen on the orderly way the British prescribed plots that were standardised in size and positioning, given that the Chinese subscribed to geomancy principles of "feng shui". Feng shui took into account among other factors the time and date of birth of the deceased for grave design and positioning.

When Tan Kheam Hock passed away in April 1922, Municipal Commissioner See Teong Wah continued to lobby for changes to be made that would facilitate customary practices and also improve the environs. The Chinese found ways to circumvent certain restrictions of plot size as it was possible for those who could afford it to buy plots in reserve. There were also free plots set aside in low-lying areas for the paupers, whose funeral expenses could be covered by application to guild, clan and temple networks.

What emerges from Bukit Brown is a continuation of ties of kinship and clanship that bind under the British Administration with its own tradition of orderliness and social equity, with a well-maintained burial registry to record important details, such as date of death, cause of death and dialect group.

Bar a few chaotic weeks during the war, Bukit Brown remained open throughout the Japanese Occupation. It was during the war years that the burial registry showed a spike in entries from the bombing raids on 8 December 1941 to Singapore's eventual fall on 15 February 1942. Some plots that had been reserved and paid for were given over to the war dead in what was a period of great uncertainty.

By 1948, three years after the war, Bukit Brown burial plots had been fully reserved. Bukit Brown is also a place where the remains from other cemeteries, which were acquired for land development, were interred.

The last burial at Bukit Brown took place on 30 November 1972 and the cemetery officially closed for burials from 1 January 1973 as burials were no longer allowed within the perimeters of the city.

An estimated 100,000 who lived and died in Singapore from the 1800s to the late 1900s were buried in Bukit Brown Cemetery, making it a valuable capsule of 19th and 20th century history

A Note on the Key Players:

Dr Lim Boon Keng (1868–1957)—doctor, scholar and social reformer who played a seminal role in WW II in preempting more deaths during Sook Ching, the ethnic cleansing of Chinese—was buried at the former Bidadari Cemetery (1908–1972). Bidadari (“angels” in Malay) was once considered a possible site for the Chinese municipal cemetery, but was rejected as the customary funeral and remembrance practices of the Chinese could not peacefully complement those of Christians and Muslims. The graves at Bidadari were all exhumed by 2000, and is today a housing estate in development.

Tan Kheam Hock (1862–1922) was first buried at Alexander Cemetery, but when it was redeveloped, his remains and those of his immediate family including his wife and daughter were reinterred in Bukit Brown. On 1 June 1923, the road leading to Bukit Brown was renamed Kheam Hock Road in honour of his contribution to its formation.

See Tiong Wah (1886–1940) also came to be buried at Bukit Brown and his name given to the hill where he and his extended family were buried, the largest family cluster in Bukit Brown. Tomb keepers called that knoll on Hill 2 the See Tiong Wah Hill, now expunged to make way for a highway.

Foreword

Singapore Heritage Society

When the government announced plans to build an eight-lane highway across Bukit Brown in mid-2011, it piqued the interest of ordinary Singaporeans. It was the first time since the mass exhumation at the Bidahari cemetery 10 years ago that the government was embarking on a major development, which would mean exhuming about 4,000 graves on a 90-year-old site acknowledged by the government to have heritage and historical value. Bukit Brown had also been identified by the Nature Society of Singapore as one of 28 sites having “considerable ecological and biodiversity value” as far back as 1991.

In 2011, the only people who had a working ground knowledge of Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery and had been conducting limited private tours were the pair of brothers, Raymond and Charles Goh. They started to explore the site and had applied to the Singapore Tourism Board in 2007 for accreditation as licensed specialised guides conducting cemetery heritage tours.

By the end of 2011, the public’s interest in Bukit Brown was so overwhelming that the Goh brothers developed a DIY guide to map out tombs of interest with rudimentary markers—laminated information sheets on the ground—and made the guide available online. It was laudable, but not sustainable given the challenging terrain of Bukit Brown.

Enter the Brownies, as the volunteers came to be known. They are a group of individuals, who were initially strangers to one other and yet when they explored Bukit Brown independently, they were so drawn to it that they felt compelled to do something to save it from development in order to have a chance to learn more about its heritage, habitat and history.

That “something” materialised into a crash course led by Raymond Goh over two weekends in January 2012. It was surely not enough, but

interest had peaked and a handful of intrepid volunteers hit the road with public guided walks. Requests for Raymond to help descendants, who were concerned the graves of their ancestors may be affected by exhumation, started to escalate. With the Brownies starting to walk the ground, he was able to spend more time on such requests. In time, some Brownies themselves were also able to help with such requests.

I experienced first hand the community spirit of the Brownies when I attended their first NDP '12 @Bukit Brown; their take was to commemorate the Nation's Deceased Pioneers (NDP). I was impressed. They had even prepared alternative goody bags with items that helped tell the stories of our pioneers and took naturally to engaging with participants informally, but personally. The event was documented by the government's documentation team tasked with not just recording the tombs that were slated for exhumation, but also observing traditional cultural practices by longstanding stakeholders, including descendants during Qing Ming and tomb keepers at work.

The Brownies have emerged as a nascent community of stakeholders, a handful of whom are descendants and a majority of whom are English educated. They reflect a diversity of religious beliefs and come from various professional backgrounds. Some are engineers, lawyers and educators, while others are former journalists and practitioners in the theatre and the arts. The youngest is under 30 and the oldest is in his 60s. A handful of volunteers have never stepped into Bukit Brown before 2011.

Yet by 26 January 2013, they were so self-organised that the Singapore Heritage Society was pleased to partner them under the banner of All Things Bukit Brown to organise a one-day poster exhibition on "Celebrating Bukit Brown". With venue sponsorship by The Substation, the event attracted some 400 visitors and was covered by mainstream media. The programme included presentations of poetry and talks about heritage and development.

Five months later from 29 June to 7 September 2013, All Things Bukit Brown, together with Chui Huay Lim (Teochew) Club, organised a bigger 10-

day exhibition at the club's premises, where artefacts borrowed from both private collectors and descendants were displayed. For "Bukit Brown, Our Roots, Our Future", a series of talks over the two weekends bookmarking the exhibition featured speakers from across the causeway and an introduction to Jalan Kubor Cemetery in Kampong Gelam. Presentations by independent researchers and academics on cemetery history, nature and the material culture of Bukit Brown were done in two languages—English and Mandarin.

On 8 October 2013, Bukit Brown Cemetery was listed on the World Monuments Watch 2014 as a heritage site under threat by the World Monuments Fund (WMF)—an international non-government organisation based in New York whose mission is to preserve the world's architectural heritage of significant monuments, buildings and sites.

Bukit Brown, one of 67 sites identified globally for a two-year listing, became Singapore's first WMF Watch Site as a result of an application submitted by All Things Bukit Brown. Our closest neighbour, Penang's Georgetown, was on the WMF watch list before it attained UNESCO Heritage status in 2008.

The listing was timely as submissions had already been made for The Botanic Gardens to be considered as a heritage site under UNESCO. SHS organised a public forum "Globalising the Local", which I moderated, to better understand the meaning and significance of the two sites of which we had maintained embedded complementary narratives of colonial and migrant 19th century Singapore.

In July 2014, SHS once again worked with All Things Bukit Brown to curate a series of walks outside of the cemetery called "Bukit Brown in the City" under the annual Singapore Heritage Festival to explore the contributions of pioneers buried in Bukit Brown in commerce, economy, trade, education and social welfare organisations.

In August 2014, the Bukit Brown "Brownies" were recognised as the "Advocacy Organisation of the Year" in the inaugural Singapore Advocacy Awards. The citation read:

“Arguably, the Brownies’ efforts have succeeded in cultivating something more precious than the cemetery itself—a growing community of Singaporeans who treasure their common heritage and are determined to keep it alive.”

SHS was pleased to have nominated the Brownies for the award and we are once again pleased to support All Things Bukit Brown, which has evolved from a volunteer base conducting weekly public tours and regular customised tours to hosting exhibitions and participating in arts programmes to reach as broad a support base as possible to save what is left of the site.

The idea for a book to curtain raise the 75th year of The Fall of Singapore in 2017 germinated when the National Heritage Board invited All Things Bukit Brown to include their war-themed guided walks in 2015, as part of the nationwide World War II commemoration, which takes place every year in February.

Bukit Brown remains the largest cemetery in Singapore for the war dead in situ, and there are many untold stories of bravery, resilience, tragedy, survival and, amid the darkness, hope. Some of these stories have been shared with the Brownies. The book offers new material and insights into the human tragedy of war, adding another layer to the already vast literature on WW II in Singapore.

Our partnership with the Brownies in our respective collaborations has been enriching. We are pleased to co-publish this book with Ethos Books, which also published our book “Spaces of the Dead—A Case from the Living” in 2011.

Bukit Brown has unexpectedly turned out to be a touchstone about the loss of heritage—tangible and intangible—in a Singapore eager to modernise and develop. “WW II @ Bukit Brown” is an ongoing effort in unlocking lost memories in the search of our identity and our roots.

Dr Chua Ai Lin
President, Singapore Heritage Society

Editors' Note

Our first encounter with a World War II story at Bukit Brown was at the tomb of Tay Koh Yat. We are old enough to have taken his buses, but we never knew the part he played in galvanising a “people’s volunteer force” for homeland security in the lead up to the fall of Singapore or his crucial role in bringing to justice the perpetrators of war crimes and seeking reparations. The essay on Tay Koh Yat in this book pays tribute to an almost forgotten hero of WW II, once on the top three wanted list—dead or alive—of the Japanese invaders.

Tay Koh Yat was one of the first stories we posted when we started the blog bukitbrown.com. His story—based on research by Raymond Goh at that time—was posted on 15 February 2012 and began with this sentence:

“Today, at precisely 12 pm, the sirens will sound all over Singapore to mark the darkest period in our nation’s history....”



Tay Koh Yat, seated third from right in a family portrait (date unknown)
Photo courtesy of Jaimie Ho, great granddaughter

We could never have anticipated that a month later in March, we were to receive an email from his great granddaughter Jaimie Ho from Australia. She told us that her mother, born in 1957 and who grew up being known as “Tay Koh Yat’s granddaughter to her classmates”, never knew he was a war hero. Our blog post had moved and thrilled her. Jamie followed up and sent us a family portrait taken of a younger Tay Koh Yat in happier times, the photo speaks for itself.

And so began our collective journey of connecting with descendants and collecting stories for our guided walks. It is in the personal stories that we found greater resonance with participants. But what resonated most with the Brownies who have been contacted by descendants was how the process helped unlock family histories long forgotten and inspired many to start their own journeys into the past.

In curating the stories and essays for this book, we selected stories where there was a direct connection to Bukit Brown in ancestry and as a battlefield. The stories have taken us to the Endau Settlement in Johor, Taiping in Malaysia and the battlefields in Europe in such unexpected ways that took our breath away. It was slow and at times painful when unravelling family history. Those who survived the war oftentimes needed to be persuaded, cajoled to share their memories before it is too late. Family history is also untidy, a photo uncovered unexpectedly becomes a mystery to be solved. It takes persistence. It has taken up to seven decades for some of these fragments to be pulled together and therefore, we see this not as a one-off book, but a first step in a difficult journey of re-discovery and remembering the lost community.

The narratives also reaffirm Singapore’s place in regional and global historical narratives. Those who recounted their journeys have also shone a light on the post-war diaspora, scattered in Canada, Australia and the U.S. So in some ways, ironically, as we delved into the lives of the buried pioneers, we kept encountering the Singapore diaspora all over the world today, enriching our own understanding of the Bukit Brown story. The stories are like a patchwork quilt of memories, with each fragment contributing to a work in progress. Some stories are “orphans” as we don’t know their

descendants. We have tried to weave in the threads by talking to people as we walk the ground, researching archives in libraries and reading recent studies that have emerged from academics because of renewed interest in Bukit Brown. In collating these stories, we reach out to the larger community engaged in WW II history to help us connect the dots, identify the characters and provide more information to help tie up the loose ends for their families.

There is always information out there, somewhere on Bukit Brown. Some were obtained as a result of serendipity, others by design.

In one poignant case, the magnificent tombs of Tok Cheng Tuan and Oon Tuan Cheng in Hill 2 were always the main draw due to their unusual size with two enormous benches, intricate carved panels and huge art deco portraits of the deceased couple making their presence felt at the tomb. Yet little was known of them except for a notice of Tok's death, on 6 May 1927. His widow outlived him for 24 years until her death on 28 August 1951. The popularity of this tomb on the guided walk of Hill 2 meant many photos of this serene knoll appeared online, which one day caught the attention of the Tok descendants. A chance comment at the Peranakan Museum to a descendant brought her attention to the Brownies, and it was at this meeting that the remarkable wartime story of the widow Oon was unravelled. Hers was a life of loss after loss, but through it, a glimmer of hope emerged through the story told by her granddaughter in this book.

It was, in another instance, more than fortunate that Jon Cooper, a Scottish battlefield archaeologist, was to pop up in Singapore about the same time the campaign to raise awareness of Bukit Brown's intrinsic value was underway. Coincidentally, the Cooper family chose to stay near Adam Park, and Jon chanced upon a heritage marker that alerted him to a battle fought in the backyard of his new home. His Youtube video where he discussed the possible whereabouts of missing British soldiers lost in battle at Sime Road and Bukit Brown prompted an attempt to contact him. We met up with him, and with several of the volunteers, took him across Bukit Brown to try to find the possible resting places of the lost lads and mass graves which was recorded in the Bukit Brown Burial Registry. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. As he familiarised himself with the terrain and we



Top: Building Communities: Temasek Junior College student volunteers

Right: Touching history, a badge found by student volunteers during the Adam Park digs
Photos courtesy of Jon Cooper

got to know Jon, a guided walk was curated which would bridge the gap in knowledge between the battle at Adam Park and the spillover to Bukit Brown Cemetery, and ultimately, the prisoner-of-war camp at Sime Road.

Jon's ongoing, dogged research since 2012, aided by volunteers participating in the Adam Park digs, enriched our understanding of Bukit Brown as one of the last unmolested battlefields of WW II (until the highway project started and scythed its way through the landscape).

Again and again, this journey has brought communities together, and this book on the war narratives has been planned to honour the memory of the deceased and help mark the 75th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore next year.

We are not historians or academics; what we as a community endeavour to do is to reflect the stories from the ground, and allow the voices of ordinary people to be heard, in their own words. Descendants have entrusted their stories to us, and we have chosen to present them in this book to safeguard their memories but also to reach out to members of the public to help families flesh out their stories. We welcome more information that can help the community and advance our understanding of the war and recount the impact on lives.

We have included, where we are able to verify information, the location of tombs of ancestors related to descendants, to our "orphaned" stories. We hope to develop this into a DIY guide later.

This book is a community effort by design, inspired by Bukit Brown. We have always believed Bukit Brown as a landscape of memory markers that can lead you to places in the past you have never been, and into a future you can now begin to reimagine.

Claire and Catherine

Co-founders, All Things Bukit Brown

www.bukitbrown.com



The Hill is A Life and Alive

By Ong Hui Lin

That Hill—Bukit Brown
is A Life Alive,
has always been
will always be.

yes, often forgotten
but never beaten

though souls beneath soles
are trodden by men, dogs, horses
to be further ridden by Drivers

that Hill has a will
to live even as some leave
defeated by death in this world

Good will have its way!
buried or burnt or reburied
truth will out!

that Hill is teeming with life
ants, insects, reptiles, birds...
ferns, trees, flowers, herbs...

dead people don't really die
like the living, many just lie
stories and lessons

all around,
silent sounds abound
though men lie beneath the ground
true greatness hover and will hound.



The Beginning of
the End



It was Chinese New Year—the Year of the Horse—but it did not herald the usual joy and fireworks to welcome the lunar new year. The country was in a shambles. The foreboding fear of the encroaching Japanese military, preceded by tales and rumours of their atrocities in China, portended the unknown that lay ahead.

15 February, 1942. Eight Days

Eight Days: 7 February to 15 February, 1942

Countdown to Surrender

By James Tann

Prelude to Invasion

The American-led embargo and seizure of all Japanese assets in the United States, in retaliation for the Japanese occupation of Indo-China in July 1941, caused a dilemma for Japan. It had lost three quarters of its external trade and almost all its oil imports. The Japanese had to decide whether to pull back from the Occupation in hopes of a lifting of the embargo or to take control of the resources from Southeast Asia—tin from Malaya, rubber and oil from the Dutch East Indies, to name but a few. The military option meant that it would have to face the British, the Dutch and the Americans who controlled the Philippines.

The Pacific War began on 8 December 1941 with coordinated bomb attacks on Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila and Pearl Harbor in Hawaii (where it was 7 December on the other side of the International Dateline).

Due to high waves in the Gulf of Thailand caused by the northeast monsoon, the Japanese began the bombing in Kota Bahru, Malaya, an hour earlier than planned. The Pacific War was first launched in Kota Bahru at 12.30am on 8 December 1941. An hour later, Pearl Harbour in Hawaii was bombed. Three hours later, Singapore took her first hits in the pre-dawn hours.

7 February 1942

It would take two months of bombing raids before the Imperial Japanese 25th Army, which was commanded by the battle-hardened Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita, made landfall in Malaya.

As Yamashita scanned the besieged island of Singapore from the top of the Johor Palace at the southern end of the Malayan peninsula, his ambition was to boost troop morale by capturing Singapore by 11 February, a significant day on the Japanese imperial calendar, Kigentetsu, in honour of the ascension of the first Japanese Emperor of the Chrysanthemum Throne.

His troops were supposed to cross the Straits of Johor that night, but faced a day's delay due to logistical challenges. Even then, he was pleased with the progress of his 25th Army Group—the Southern Expeditionary Army.

In just 62 days since the first troops landed in Kota Bahru in northeastern Malaya and in Singora, Thailand, Yamashita was on the verge of his final objective, which came much quicker than the 100 days planned initially. However, he was concerned that victory on Kigentetsu, the day in honour of the Japanese Emperor, might just slip through his fingers.

8 February 1942

The invasion of Singapore Island began with the crossing at Lim Chu Kang in northwestern Singapore at 10pm. A poorly defended line meant that landing was relatively easy after subjecting the Allied troops to almost 24 hours of artillery shelling. Japanese boats ferrying the first troops started making for the safe zones between the scattered shore defences. The 22nd Brigade of the Australian Imperial Forces was thinly strung out to defend the entire northwestern coast. The Japanese ruse of an invasion at Pulau Ubin on the northeastern shores had drawn the more experienced British units to await the battle on the wrong side of Singapore.

From the onset, the Australian defenders were on the retreat from the surging Japanese troops being transported ashore in waves. Two whole divisions, the 5th and the 18th, were to be ferried across by the following day.

9 February 1942

By the afternoon of 9 February, Tengah Airfield fell into the hands of the invading Japanese troops. Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, the British General Officer Commanding (GOC), began to dispatch some additional forces from the reserves but continued to station his main forces in the east

in the belief the real invasion would come from the northeastern Serangoon area. Falling back from the western coastal region that was now overrun by the invaders, the Allied forces formed a position called the Jurong Line stretching from the Tengah River to the Jurong River. This would create a fortified blockade to contain the Japanese within the western sector of Singapore.

Due to miscommunication and misread orders, however, the main Australian 22nd Brigade retreated from their position on the Jurong Line, resulting in a domino effect which led to other units also retreating. By late afternoon, the Jurong Line had completely collapsed. However, the Japanese forces did not press their advantage as they had to wait for reinforcements and logistic supplies to follow up across the Straits to sustain the momentum of the invasion.

The Japanese Army then opened a 2nd battlefront by landing the Imperial Guards Division at Kranji. This division was to move east heading towards the Sembawang and Thomson regions. Their initial objectives were to capture the Naval Base and the airfield at Seletar.

10 February 1942

The Capture of Bukit Panjang and the Massacre in Bukit Batok.

With the overnight collapse of the Jurong Line blockade, the Japanese 5th Division easily manoeuvred down Choa Chu Kang Road and overpowered the defences of the Argylls & Sutherland Highlanders and the Hyderabad Regiment at Keat Hong, pushing them back all the way to Bukit Panjang Village. It was the first encounter with Japanese tanks in Singapore by the British. By the early afternoon, Bukit Panjang Village had fallen to the Japanese.

Intending to re-establish the Jurong Line, the British Command dispatched two battalions from Ulu Pandan to West Bukit Timah (today's Bukit Batok). The X Battalion made its way to the 9th milestone Jurong Road, while Merret Force dug in at Hill 85 (today's Toh Guan area).

Major Battle Lines

