



▲ A street scene of early Sitiawan in the Dindings.

When Penang and the Dindings were One

In colonial times, Penang's territory once stretched south to the Perak coast. But a global economic depression changed all that.

By Luke Ng

Penang today consists of the island and the mainland (Province Wellesley), but at one time its territory extended all the way south to the Manjung district in Perak. For 60 years, Manjung, formerly known as the Dindings, was governed from Penang, from 1874 to 1935. Needless to say, undeniable social and economic links were established between Penang and the Dindings during that time.

The Dindings is located in south-west Perak and is made up of several major settlements such as Lumut, Beruas, Sitiawan, Pangkor Island, Pantai Remis and Ayer Tawar. The origins of the name "Dindings" come down to a few possibilities. "Dinding" means wall or partition in Malay, and since the hill in the Dindings was the most conspicuous object in the area, it could have been natural for the place to be called after it.¹ The other theory is

that the Dindings was named after Dindings River (Sungai Dindings).

The Dindings district was clearly defined by the British: after the Larut War, the British drafted the Treaty of Pangkor, which was created and signed between the British and

¹ S. Durai Raja Singam, "Port Weld to Kuantan: A Study of Malayan place names", *Malayan Press*, 1939.

the Sultan of Perak in 1874. In the treaty, Article 11 stated that "Pulo Dinding and islands of Pangkor were to cede to Great Britain ... Thereof, it is hereby declared that the boundaries of the said territory so ceded shall be rectified as follows. From Bukit Sigari in a straight line to the sea, thence along the sea coast to the South, to Pulo Katta on the West, and from Pulo Katta a line running North East about five miles, and thence North to Bukit Sigari".

The Dindings thus officially became part of the Straits Settlement and was under the administration of Penang. However, even before the signing of the treaty, the British had already acquired the area through the mechanism of the East India Company; in 1828 the Dindings was nominally ceded to Britain; the later signing of the treaty simply confirmed that Britain officially had sovereignty over the Dindings.

It would seem that the British had strong aspirations to convert the place into a naval base. From the military point of

Table 1: Ethnic Groups in the Dindings between 1891-1901

Ethnic Group	1891	1901
Chinese		
Cantonese	66	93
Hokkien	205	188
Hailam	220	93
Kheh	50	111
Straits-born	34	120
Teochiu	357	340
Hokchiu (Foochow)		8
Total	932	953
Malays and other natives of the archipelago		
Aborigine	31	-
Achinese	-	28
Boyanese	-	1
Bugis	-	3
Javanese	16	39
Jawi-Pekan	4	3
Malays	2,350	2,793
Total	2,401	2,867
Indians		
Bengali	16	16
Tamil	212	261
Total	228	277
Total	3,561	4,097

Source: Straits Settlements Blue Book 1891 & 1910

view, the Dindings' strategic geographical location could serve as a naval refuge as well as command centre over the Straits of Malacca; the British could have more efficient control over the strait, especially when it came to fighting piracy. Furthermore, it could act as a sentinel over Pulo Way, which was Dutch territory at that time. Some officers even considered that Lumut had the capacity to be Malaya's very own Port Arthur.¹

While Pangkor may have been strategically located, diseases were rampant there, affecting the troops and the local population. Thus, in May 1889 the capital of the Dindings was moved from Pangkor to Lumut.

Demography of the Dindings

In 1891 the number of Malays there was 2,401, the Chinese 968, and the Indians 228. By 1901 the Malays had increased most, to 2,888, the Chinese decreased to 953, and the Indians rose to 277.² Until 1902, the Malays formed the largest community in the Dindings and this changed only with the influx of Foochow immigrants from southern China from 1901 onwards.³ The Foochow Chinese soon became the largest Chinese group there.

What happened was that in 1902 the British Resident of Perak persuaded an American-German missionary of the Foochow Methodist Church, Reverend Leuring, to settle 1,000 Fukien Chinese in Sitiawan to farm the land. Foochow Methodist Church minister, Pastor Ling Ching Mi, accompanied Leuring to Foochow and other districts to recruit members of the Methodist Church to migrate to what was known as "southern Canaan".⁴

The migration of the Foochow Chinese did not happen overnight; the first batch consisted of only 363 people. Most of them were Christians and the desire to practise their religion freely prompted the migration: they viewed Sitiawan as their new "Promised Land" where they could evade persecution in China and worship freely.

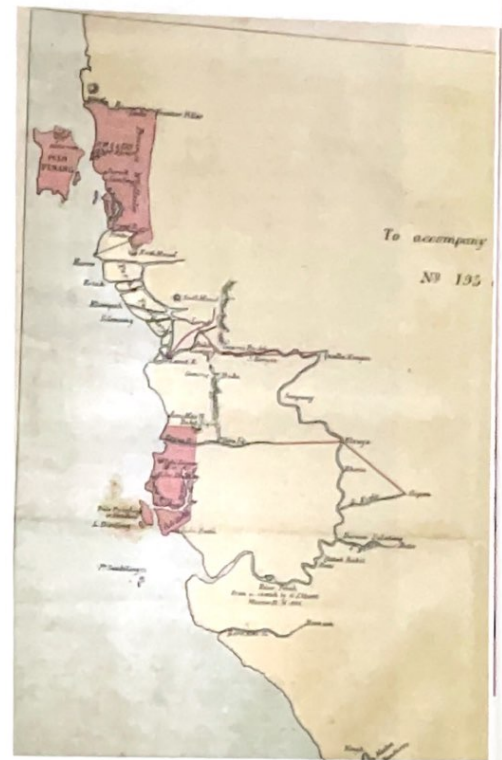
¹ "A Day at the Dindings", *The Straits Times*, 27 April 1905, p.6.

² *The Straits Settlements Blue Book 1910*, p.86.

³ Chiang Liu, *Glimpses of Chinese in Sitiawan*, *Journal of the South Seas Society*, Vol. VIII, Pt 1, 1952, p.4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1891, p.623.



Map of Penang, Province Wellesley and the Dindings.

Economic Activities

Economic development began a couple of years after the Pangkor Treaty was signed, and the prime movers were the local population. Pangkor Island was the first to be developed; with revenue coming mostly from timber royalties, and from opium and spirit farms. Expenses in the district were in military expenditure, such as placing new forces in Trans-Kerian and Pangkor.

Immigration helped develop agriculture further. For example, some Achenese settled in the Dindings to plant pepper and patchouli. Wan Mamat, an influential Malay, brought in several families from Kelantan and established a kampung at Telok Murah. Wan Mamat's brother Haji Sahid also formed a colony consisting of 20 men in Sungai Lumut Kiri. These settlers can be considered the earliest group of immigrants in the British-controlled Dindings.⁵

window into history

The early 1900s saw the coming of rubber. A Mr Bratt sought to acquire 200 acres of land – the largest block applied for at that time. His estate was then turned into the Sandycroft Rubber Company, which enjoyed significant success. A Mr Mulinghal of Dresden obtained two large plots of land (4,000 acres) for rubber cultivation, while Mr Foo Choo Choon of Perak took up 400 acres.⁷ Other companies in the rubber industry in the Dindings included Pondut Estate, and Messrs Shellabear & Harding. The British were offering land to investors, facilitating an expansion of rubber cultivation in the area.

From 1911 to 1913, however, the price of rubber dropped. Even so, the government continued to spend on roads, drainage and conservancy leading eventually to a deficit in their balance sheets. The First World War began in 1914, and the British imposed war taxes on the Straits Settlements. This put a burden on the Dindings. Despite many prospecting licences for tin being issued, no mining activity was actually carried out – possibly because prospecting revealed that the tin reserves were located at a depth of 90 feet. This put grave challenges on the available technology, labour skills and water supply.

In 1924 there was a slight increase in taxes collected under The Rubber (Restriction) Ordinance,⁸ but this was soon followed by the Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression of 1929-1934. The decline of the automotive industry in the US affected the demand for rubber significantly. (Malaya was the largest rubber exporter at that time; and rubber was the staple product of the Dindings).

With the district now facing an uncertain future, the idea of returning the Dindings to Perak arose.

Return to Perak

In the House of Commons, British MPs discussed the matter. The Dindings Agreement (Approval) Bill received a lot of attention from the MPs during the second reading stage, particularly supporting views on handing the district back to Perak:

- 1) Tax collection on goods in the Dindings was inconvenient for the Penang administrators.
- 2) The Sultan of Perak insisted that the



His Highness Sultan Iskandar Shah at the ceremony of the retrocession of the Dindings and Pangkor Island at Lumut in 1935.

- Dindings was a part of Perak.
- 3) Singapore served well enough in controlling the Straits of Malacca.
 - 4) The British Empire was facing financial difficulties.
 - 5) The British were worried about the building of the Kra canal, which would allow ships to bypass the Straits of Malacca. Since Siam was very friendly to the Japanese, aid from Tokyo for the project seemed likely at the time, and it was very likely that the latter would provide financial assistance for the project.

The Bill was passed⁹ and on May 10, 1935 the Dindings was officially returned to Perak.¹⁰ This move marked the end of a 58-year relationship between Penang and the Dindings. The British and immigrants laid the foundations for the Dindings' future growth. For example, they built roads from the Dindings to other parts of Perak, developed the land and exported local products to Penang.

Today, the Dindings – or Manjung, as it is now called – is the fastest growing district in Perak. It is known as Perak's economic capital, with rapid industrialisation spurred

by the strategically located Lumut Port Industrial Park. With a bright future ahead for the Dindings, it is important to look back at its past, and at the Dindings' ties with Penang which marked a crucial point in the history of both places. ■

⁷ Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1907, p.611.

⁸ Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1924, p.324.

⁹ 'Dindings Bill', The Straits Times, 10 November 1934, p.11.

¹⁰ 'Lumut's Big Day', The Straits Times, 16 February 1935, p.16.



Luke Ng Yi Lang is a third-year law student at the University of Essex. He was an intern in the History Studies department of Penang Institute. He has a strong interest in South-East Asian history, particularly Malaysian history.

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