

How the Mental Hospital was Renamed Woodbridge Hospital in 1951

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Abstract

This essay consists of three parts. The first, based on Woodbridge Hospital records, explains how the Mental Hospital was renamed Woodbridge Hospital in 1951, an issue which had received intermittent press publicity, though its full details have not been published before. The second part of the essay traces the exact location of the wooden bridge after which the hospital is named. The last part concerns a missing photograph of a Woodbridge Hospital outside Singapore.

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In the 1920s, the government embarked on an ambitious programme to build hospitals, staffed largely by graduates of the King Edward College of Medicine.¹ The “Mental Hospital”, commissioned and built by the British in 1928, was sited at Yio Chu Kang and spread out over 80 hectares of sprawling land 12 kilometres by road north-east from the city centre. It was the largest medical facility with 24 wards to provide custodial care for the mentally ill patients. The siting of the mental hospital in the premises of Trafalgar Estate, near to a home for the lepers,² to house 1800 patients was in conformity with the belief that mental patients were dangerous and should be locked away and kept as far as possible from population centres.

What’s in a Name?

This account of how Woodbridge Hospital got its name was chronicled by Mr S Wickramariyaratne, Secretary of Woodbridge Hospital (1976 to 1977).³ In 1950, the then medical superintendent Dr James Browne did some soul-searching about the hospital’s tradition of 22 years and its name. Should it be renamed? On 24 October 1950, he wrote to the Director of Medical Services informing him that in advanced countries the modern practice was to abolish the use of the words Mental Hospital and Lunatic Asylum when referring to a hospital for the mentally ill. He requested that the Governor be approached and approval sought to re-name the Mental Hospital as The Prince Charles Hospital, Singapore. The Director of Medical Services wrote accordingly to the Colonial Secretary and suggested the Governor be ap-

proached with a request to the Secretary of States for the Colonies that H. R. H. The Princess Elizabeth be asked to give her gracious consent to rename this hospital in honour of Prince Charles.

On receipt of the memo, the Assistant Secretary in the Colonial Secretary’s Office referred the matter to his Public Relations Secretary with the comment that he saw no connection at all between the Mental Hospital and Prince Charles. He added that if a Royal name was desired, there was a connection, perhaps with Princess Anne as the change of name would occur in the year of her birth. The Public Relations Secretary agreed entirely that there was no connection between the Mental Hospital Singapore and Prince Charles but added that the suggested link between the Hospital and Princess Anne was a very tenuous one. He counter-suggested the eponymous designation of “Gilmore Ellis Hospital” for, according to the book “A Hundred Years of Singapore”, Dr Gilmore Ellis was for 20 years the Medical Superintendent, Lunatic Asylum Singapore and from 1910 to 1917 was the Principal Chief Medical Officer of the Straits Settlements. [“A Hundred Years of Singapore”, edited by newspaper editor Walter Makepeace and others in the 1920s, involved the painstaking efforts of close to thirty British officials and academics.] He further added that Dr Gilmore’s twenty years’ service connected with the Lunatic Asylum and his seventeen years’ service in Singapore fully qualified him and his name should be perpetuated by associating him with one of the hospitals in Singapore.

This matter was then referred on 8 November 1950 to

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the medical superintendent of the Mental Hospital, who commented that he did not think that any connection between Prince Charles and this hospital was necessary. He further added that the use of the previous medical superintendent's name was not acceptable for two reasons. First, none of the local population or anyone else knew anything of him. Second, other ex-medical superintendents also had a claim, on length of office and, more so, on the advances they made for the status of the hospital. As non-personal alternatives to the use of the name of Prince Charles, the medical superintendent suggested several names. First, "The Bukit Atas Hospital for Neuropsychiatric Disorders", considering that the hospital was on a hill. Second, "The East Side Hospital for Neuropsychiatric Disorders", in view of the fact that the hospital was on the east of Singapore Island. Third, "The Punggol Hospital for Neuropsychiatric Disorders", as the hospital was beside Ponggol River. Fourth, "The Pang Kio Hospital for Neuropsychiatric Disorders". The last suggestion was the local Chinese name for the Hospital area and means "wooden bridge", derived from the fact that there was a wooden bridge in the vicinity of the hospital.

The Colonial Secretary was informed of the suggestion on 22 November 1950 and there was some agreement that "Woodbridge Hospital" would be a good title. Further suggestions, nevertheless, were called for and one of these was to call it the Yio Chu Kang Hospital after the locality of the hospital. This idea was dropped when the possibility of the hospital being rebuilt in another part of the island was considered. On 24 January 1951, the idea of naming the Hospital after British Royalty was again given currency. Humorously, a senior officer in the Colonial Secretary's office wrote: "Would it be out of order to associate it with past royalty? If not, what about calling it the King George III Hospital. He was, I believe, the reigning monarch when Raffles founded Singapore, and he was mad anyway!"

On 30 January 1951, the Colonial Secretary was informed that the only name which appeared acceptable was Woodbridge Hospital and his approval was thus sought to make that change. After a three-month period of voluminous correspondence the historic reply came thus: "Yes-(signed) SGD, Colonial Secretary, 31.1.51". The Director of Medical Services was accordingly informed on 2 February 1951. So in 1951, the Mental Hospital was renamed Woodbridge Hospital.

In Search of the "Pang Kio"

The exact location of the wooden bridge after which the hospital was named has been a matter of controversy as few written records are available. Two views have repeatedly been considered, the more popular one being that the hospital was named after a wooden bridge across a stream of Sungei Seletar which runs on the

outskirts of the hospital, a view that was documented in the hospital's 50th anniversary publication in 1978.³ Clarification with the editor of that publication revealed that this view was essentially based on hearsay. Mr Douglas Hiorns, a former property developer familiar with the development of the area, believed that contrary to popular misconception, the actual bridge spanned Sungei Tongkang (both Malay words-Sungei means "river" while Tongkang means "barge" or "lighter") which flows into the Punggol River. Unlike the so-called "Pang Kio" near the hospital, the actual "Pang Kio" was a 3 metre-wide and 5 metre-long wooden beam structure near the present Ang Mo Kio Avenue 5.

"The name Woodbridge was a translation of the Hokkien "Pang Kio" which referred to a bridge in this area. However, this bridge was some distance away from the hospital drive. Neither the Seletar River nor any of its tributaries flowed anywhere near the hospital as they are located several kilometres to the north-west. The rivers draining the "Pang Kio" area were and are the Sungei Tongkang (now canalised) which, in turn, flows into the Ponggol River. The bridge in front of the hospital drive was a minor crossing over a drain from the hospital grounds and this flowed into the Sungei Tongkang near Lorong Buangkok, a few hundred metres to the North. The drain from the hospital ran along the east of Jalan Woodbridge whereas the Sungei Tongkang ran along the West side. The wooden bridge "Pang Kio" was an important crossing over the Sungei Tongkang carrying an earth track later known as Jalan Hwi Yoh. The bridge was located west of the Yio Chu Kang Road near to the present Seagate factory along Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1" (D Hiorns, personal communication). The claims that Mr Hiorns made could be verified by old plans and maps held by the Government Survey Department.

Literally, Hwi Yoh means "porcelain kiln" in the Hokkien dialect, so Jalan Hwi Yoh is a reflection of the kind of industry that was prevalent in that area. The availability of white clay in the area led to the establishment of five kilns. Ang Mo Kio is the first and largest of Singapore's second-generation new towns. Incidentally, it was popularly believed that the name Ang Mo Kio means "red-haired man's [the local Chinese reference to Europeans] bridge" in the Hokkien dialect, the bridge referring to one or both of the two bridges once located in the area. Both these bridges were built during the British colonial period. Could this bridge be named after a particular European, the colonial government surveyor of the 19th century, Mr Thomson? Mr Hiorns believed otherwise and offered an alternative explanation: "There were two main tracks crossing the Ang Mo Kio area and giving access to the farming land. These tracks, as rough as they may have been were vital to the villagers. Due to the large expanses of swampy land, it was difficult to cross the two streams and the bridges

carrying the tracks assumed an importance far in excess of their appearance. The bridge carrying the track Jalan Hwi Yoh over Sungei Tongkang was constructed with wooden planks and was known, in Hokkien, as “Pang Kio” or “wooden bridge”. The bridge carrying the track Jalan Cheng San over the Kallang River tributary was constructed of cement in the Western style. As local population referred to this cement as “Ang MO he” (the Hokkien words for cement), the bridge became known as Ang MO Kio.” (D Hiorns, personal communication)

Instead of referring to the bridge, “Pang Kio” could also refer to a locality, the village and farms that used to be found at the present Ang MO Kio Avenue 5. It is interesting that the two descriptions, “Ang MO Kio” and “Pang Kio” were used to differentiate between two bridges which were an important part of life in this remote part of Singapore in the past.

The Mystery of Woodbridge Hospital

Another controversy of the hospital concerns a missing black-and-white photograph, which some senior staff of the hospital claimed was hung at the Admission Room of the old Woodbridge Hospital, by the then medical superintendent, Dr James Browne. This was a photograph of a Woodbridge Hospital outside Singapore. Some senior staff claimed that this other hospital was located in Australia while others believed that it

was in the United Kingdom. Whether Dr James Browne had worked there before and if he did work there, whether his past experience could have influenced his choice of a new name for the Mental Hospital in Singapore, remain unclear.

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