

Port Swettenham of the 1960s Revisited

By

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Port Swettenham was always a port call for us on our regular route between the Far East and the East and South African coast ports. Seldom did we go alongside at the jetties in Port Swettenham, which were always full, rather we moored to midstream buoys in the Port Swettenham Roads to load and discharge our cargo using lighters. Port Swettenham was always a peaceful and serene place. Even the speed at which the stevedores worked was correspondingly slower, in comparison to other regional ports, and when they boarded a ship one felt they had come to stay, setting up their cooking spots and the winchmen who built their little huts to keep off the sun, with bits of discarded dunnage and rush matting.



The Malay Peninsula depicting Port Swettenham (marked in Red) and its strategic location.

In 1901 Port Swettenham was developed by the Malayan Railways; previously Klang had been by coastal steamers, eventually becoming one of the important ports in Malaya, after Singapore and Penang. In the past, trading steamers that plied between the Straits Settlement and Selangor docked at Klang, about 12 miles upstream from Port Swettenham. Navigation to Klang was challenging due to the imposition of strict draft limitations.

When import and export trade increased in the early 1890s, jetties in Klang were unable to cope with the influx of ships. In discussions for a location to build a port, Kuala Klang was identified as the most suitable as it was in the coastal area and easily accessible from the sea. The construction responsibility and administration were handed over to the Works and Railway Traffic Department. The port was to be named Port Swettenham in honor of the Resident General and High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States, Sir Frank Swettenham.

Not only would Port Swettenham become a major international trading port, but it was intended to further facilitate trade within the Federation of Malaya. The new port was to provide 3 or 4 new berths suitable for larger steamships of the day. Construction of the new port and linking railway infrastructure commenced and development of what was to become Port Swettenham slowly became a reality, positioned about 4 miles southwest of the town of Klang, and 24 miles southwest of Kuala Lumpur, it held great promise for the region's future prosperity.

Both Klang and Port Swettenham were already known as notoriously malaria prone localities with the port itself located on a mangrove swamp. Port Swettenham got off to a bad start because the Port was closed in November 1901 due to a serious outbreak of Malaria, it was in danger of being abandoned. During 1901, the spread of malaria all over the coastal districts of Selangor affected the operation of the port. Almost all the laborers and the staff went down with the illness so that for several weeks no work could be done to load and unload ships. So serious was the outbreak, steamships were required to leave the port without discharging their cargoes while other steamers bound for the port were diverted to Penang or Singapore. Fortunately, these delays were only temporary, but it was a severe setback while it lasted. Malaria continued to plague the port for several more years until the surrounding swamps were drained in 1904.



Image of the old wharfs at Port Swettenham. Likely photographed during the early 1960s. Image shows what I believe to be a Williamsons' vessel alongside. Used until 1961s when construction commenced on the North Port jetties, which were later superseded by the Container Wharves

(Unknown Photographer)

The old jetty was where the boat would drop us off when we went ashore, and later pick us up when we had our fill of Tiger or Anchor, is now derelict and no longer used. Whilst the old jetty remains standing, only the steel and timber skeleton is all that can be seen. Nostalgic memories of the little restaurants that used to be around the area, (especially the waterside Port View Restaurant) come rushing back, where they would serve superb Tiger Prawns, Nasi Goreng and Satays, usually accompanied with more than an adequate supply of ice-cold bottles of Anchor Beer. Other than for the dereliction of the jetty, the old wharf area was unchanged at the time of my last visit, the humidity and heat, odors of Asia, sounds, monsoon nullars, and the relentless background music of cicadas, all exactly as they were.

One seldom ventured into the township of Port Swettenham since there was little to offer the visiting sailor, except dusty streets, market stalls, a limited variety of shops and sidewalk barbers. Besides, in most cases everything that was required could be obtained at the Mariner's Club, including Post Office.

The old Mariner's Club was always a favorite because it was relatively close to where the launches dropped us off when going ashore. By Asian standards of the era, it was quite good, a decent bar, reasonably priced eatery even if the menu was basic and limited mainly to local cuisine, and the kidney shaped swimming pool with tables, chairs and umbrellas surrounding its perimeter was always a favored venue. Port Swettenham Mariner's Club was always a good spot for playing soccer, and many matches between other ships and local port teams were played on their football field. It was a popular watering hole for most seafolk, including the officers of the Straits Steamships. Many hours were spent listening to their bar talk concerning the "little ladies" in which they served, their lifestyle, and conditions on board, and the ports they visited. As a younger person at the time, their stories made me envious, and I could be forgiven thinking to myself "this is the life for me". Then there was the infamous "Jungle Bar" which faded into obscurity over ensuing years, now replaced by modern buildings. It was always the last "outpost" on the way back to the ship.

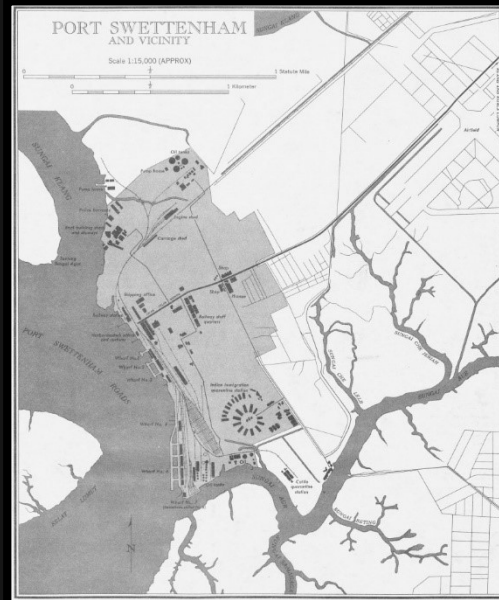
However, some things never change, the monsoons are the same, with the warm and sudden heavy downpours which stop just as suddenly and everything quickly drying out as if nothing had happened.

The quite shallow waters of the Malacca Straits were always generally calm, except in Monsoonal squalls, if not the brightest of blue, due to the sandy seabed and strong currents. In the 1960s before the stringent enforcement of overboard garbage disposal, the Malacca Straits were strewn with the usual flotsam, coconuts, palm leaves, as well as discarded dunnage, cargo mats or rubbish from a passing ship. Many of the areas were overrun with small fishing boats, at night many were unlit, which could cause challenges for the duty watchkeeper, particularly since the fishing fleets seemed to operate under their own set of "rules of the road".

One of my last recollections of old Port Swettenham (renamed Port Klang since 1972) was in late 1990s; seeing a Chinese owned SD 14 which had capsized and sank at the cargo berth in the North Port, whilst discharging. The only thing that was visible was the boat deck, funnel, bridge deck and masts. I seem to remember it lay at the berth for some time, certainly spanning over several visits of my ship to that port, before being salvaged and removed early in 2000s. I believe the vessel was named "An Tai" belonging to "An Tai Navigation Enterprises Ltd.", under flag of Belize. On Nov. 24, 1997, while at her berth at Wharf 14, North Port of Port Klang, Malaysia, with a cargo of fertilizer (caustic soda, magnesium sulphate, soda ash and sodium sulphate) from Xingang, China, in part destined for Pasir Gudang in Johor, Malaysia, the vessel listed due to the cracking of her hull. And sank the next day. The crew of 25 just stepped ashore. A modest spill of heavy bunker oil & diesel resulted. In Feb. 2001, the vessel was cut in two, in situ and the stern section was refloated.

Port Klang has since grown and now establishes trade connections with over 120 countries and dealings with more than 500 ports around the world. The port is part of the Maritime Silk Road that runs from the Chinese coast via the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean, there to the Upper Adriatic region of Trieste with its connections to Central and Eastern Europe. By 2012 (Port Klang) had become the 11th busiest container port in the world. A far cry from the swamps of 1901 Port Swettenham

Old chart showing the layout of Port Swettenham, at the head of the Selat Klang



Below, my ocean greyhound - “**MV Levernbank**”, 8694 GRT, built April 1961 by Harland and Wolff, Belfast, for The Bank Line Ltd., seen navigating up the long, Selat Klang channel towards Port Swettenham, flanked on each side by mangroves. The ship was on the Oriental – Africa Liner service during the 1960s and was a regular caller at Port Swettenham, both on north and southbound sectors. The photograph was likely taken in the early to mid-1960s. In 1973 **MV Levernbank** stranded in fog, 1nm north of Matarani, Peru. She refloated herself, but later sank whilst under tow. I served on this vessel for over 2 years as a deck apprentice between 1962-65 during which many calls were made to Port Swettenham.



(Unknown Photographer)

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