

Tracing Pahang's three capitals

By [Alan Teh Leam Seng](#) - May 5, 2019 @ 8:15am



Kuala Lipis in the late 1880s.

"PAHANG is closest to my heart compared to the other states in my early Malayan postal history collection because stamps and postally-used envelopes from this state are very hard to come by these days, especially so for material from the late 19th century and the first few decades of the 20th century," quips my philatelist friend as he proudly places his album sheets on the table in front of me.

The multiple award-winning collection is well written up and offers a wealth of information about the postal development in what was considered by many as the poorest and least developed among the four Malay states that merged to become a federation in 1896.

Apart from marvelling at the striking stamp designs and colours, I'm also attracted to the postal markings on the postcards and envelopes. They give an added dimension by revealing the route travelled by each item between its place of origin and destination.

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Straits Settlements stamps bearing Kuantan postmarks from the 1890s are very rare.

By the time the last album page is turned, it becomes obvious that three towns – Pekan, Kuala Lipis and Kuantan – feature most regularly in the collection compared to the rest. When quizzed about this peculiar observation, my friend replies: "This same question surfaced when I was writing up this collection several years ago. It took me many trips to the state library before the riddle was solved."

Insisting that I should find the answer on my own, he hands over a thick file filled with scribbled notes and random photocopied pages, mostly works of W. Linehan and Tunku Shahrman Tunku Sulaiman that were published in the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* back in the late 1950s.

"Study these carefully. We shall meet up next week at our usual haunt to discuss this matter at length," my friend adds with finality as he walks me to the door.

Back in my study, I leaf through the file contents, eager to seek out the nuggets of information to solve the riddle. It takes a while before the jumble of papers start having some semblance of order. Once achieved, the story of Pahang's state capitals start to unravel right in front of my eyes.

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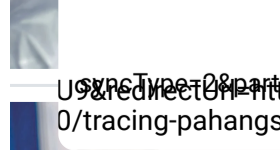
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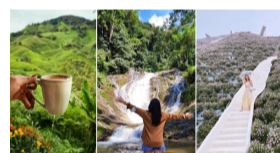
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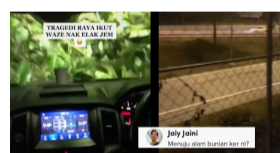
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Straits Settlements stamps bearing Raub postmarks from the 1890s are extremely rare.

Although the ancient settlements in Pahang have been recorded by early Chinese travellers since the 2nd century AD, my friend's notes begin just a year before the first overprinted stamps of the Straits Settlements made their appearance in Pahang. That time coincided with the appointment of John Pickersgill Rodger as the first British Resident of Pahang in October 1888.

Rodger made Pekan the first stop during his inaugural state tour. At that time, the state capital was nothing more than a village with a population size of about 5,000 and comprised a single row of about 100 Chinese and Malay huts. Primarily built of bamboo and thatched with attap, these simple structures served as residences as well as shops selling provisions.

Nearby was a brick mosque and a handful of larger houses constructed of sturdier building materials like bricks and thick hardwood planks. The latter belonged to the Pahang Sultan and was occupied by his wives and immediate attendants.



Sultan Ahmad and his entourage in 1897.

Right from the start, the transfer of power from the ruling monarch, Sultan Ahmad al-Mu'azzam Shah, to the British following the signing of the treaty on Oct 8, 1887 was both a very complicated and tense affair.

Humiliated that his power had been usurped, Sultan Ahmad concluded that his forced partnership with Rodger couldn't survive the strain of proximity. As a result, the ruler delegated powers to his eldest son, Tunku Mahmud, and appointed him as Regent before withdrawing some 321km up the Pahang River to Pulau Tawar.

With the intention of enjoying a prolonged holiday hunting seladang, Sultan Ahmad took the entire royal household with him and, during his three and a half year absence – from December 1889 to May 1893 – allowed his residences in Pekan to fall into disrepair.

At around the time of Sultan Ahmad's departure, Rodger began putting in place a British administrative system in Pahang. The state was divided into six districts: Pekan, Kuala Pahang, Kuantan, Rompin, Temerloh and Ulu Pahang. The new district offices facilitated tax collection, especially in Ulu Pahang where Sultan Ahmad had granted quite a number of gold and tin mining concessions.

MOVE TO ULU PAHANG



During the early days, the date stamp used at the Pekan post office was Ulu Pahang.

The rapid growth of the new economic hub in the interior prompted Rodger to consider moving the administrative centre to Ulu Pahang district and profit handsomely from the concessionaires. At the same time, the move would also allow the British to keep in check signs of rebellion demonstrated by the leading chiefs there who were fast gaining power and influence thanks to the comparatively prosperous environment.

Rodger was particularly uneasy with the defiance shown by the Jelai Malays, led by the confrontational tribal chiefs Dato Bahaman and Tok Gajah. Things came to a boil two years later when the former openly rebelled against the British in what was to become known as the Pahang Wars.

Although the rebellion was eventually quelled with additional soldiers brought in from Singapore and other neighbouring protectorates, the British felt that the continuous presence of a visibly large force in Ulu

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The names of several potential towns came up for consideration as the new administrative centre. Aware that time was of the essence, the authorities hurriedly decided on Kuala Lipis as a temporary choice while the search for a more permanent candidate continued.

No one at that time had any inkling that Kuala Lipis, which was supposed to be transitory in nature, would remain as Pahang's administrative centre for 64 long years as the transfer to its permanent home in Kuantan would only happen in 1955.



Clifford enjoyed a good relationship with the Pahang Malays.

The move to Kuala Lipis was due in part to Hugh Clifford's appointment as Acting Resident during Rodger's absence. In-depth knowledge of Ulu Pahang allowed Clifford to appreciate Kuala Lipis' strategic position at the confluence of the Jelai and Lipis rivers. Clifford also enjoyed close ties with the local chiefs, including the influential Maharaja Perja Jelai and Tok Gajah.

MITCHELL MURDERED

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An early gold mine in Raub district.

Unfortunately, Clifford couldn't make himself available as the first administrator at Kuala Lipis and W. C. Mitchell was sent in his stead. A major crisis soon surfaced when local chief Haji Wan Daud, who held the title Orang Kaya Maharaja Setia Raja, refused to vacate the premises meant for Mitchell even though his sons had already sold the land to the British for \$200.

Haji Wan Daud, whose favourite amusement at that time was to sit at the junction of the Jelai and Lipis rivers and shoot indiscriminately at passing boats, was reputed to suffer from homicidal mania. In the heat of argument, he shot and killed Mitchell. An armed party was then despatched by Tunku Mahmud to capture Haji Wan Daud, who resisted arrest, and was eventually killed during the chaos.

The inauspicious start for Kuala Lipis turned out to be a foreboding of more bad luck that was to follow. Promises of lucrative taxes from gold mining in Ulu Pahang began to fall short of colonial expectations. As the mines continued to close due to low output and high operating costs, the British found it an uphill task to attract more Chinese traders and miners to settle in Kuala Lipis. By 1908, Raub had replaced Kuala Lipis as the state's centre of industry.

The other contributing factor that led to renewed discussion to move the administrative centre elsewhere was the town's perceived strategic location. Its position right at the confluence of two major rivers turned out to be a curse rather than a blessing.

It's evident that the massive floods experienced throughout December 1926 were a drastic reminder of Kuala Lipis' precarious position. That year, the flood water almost reached the first floor level of many shophouses in Kuala Lipis and the calamity resulted in the collapse of a number of buildings.

Proposals to transfer the administrative centre from Kuala Lipis were raised as early as 1901 as widespread inundation had become a recurring

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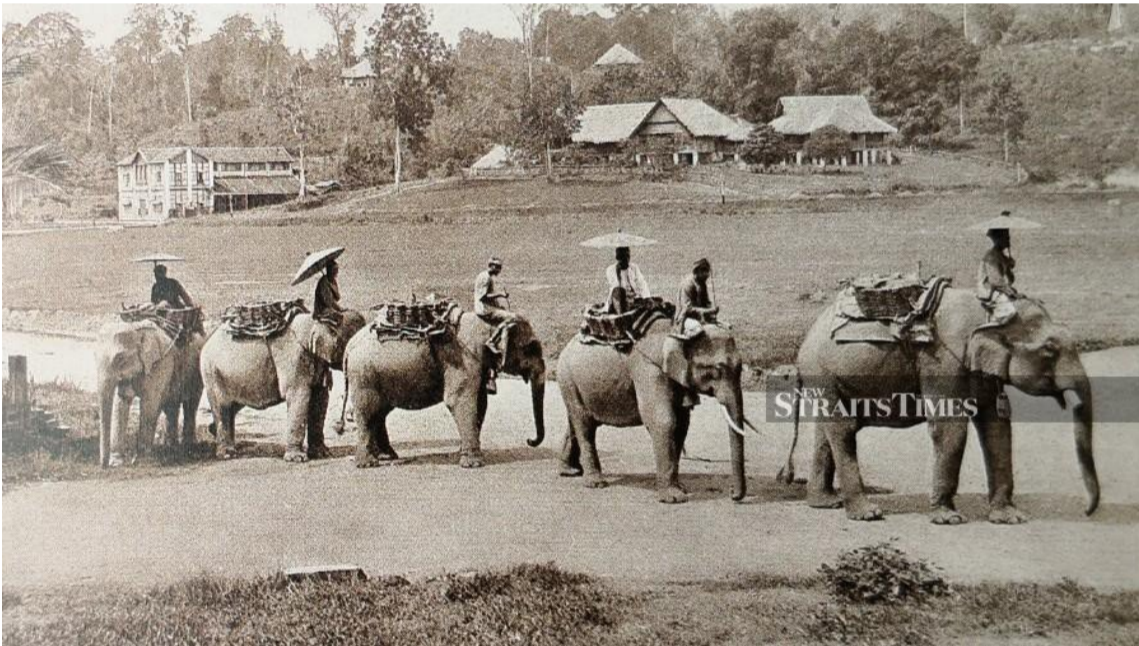
annual menace long before the severe 1920 devastation. Administrative officers began recommending the names of several towns as possible replacements. In 1911, a committee was appointed to deliberate on a

proposal made two years earlier by British Resident Edward Lewis Brockman for Jerantut to be considered but no conclusive resolutions on the matter were made.

In 1912, Brockman's successor, Edward John Brewster, deferred the issue until the completion of the Pahang railway lines which was ongoing at that time. By the time rail service finally came to fruition in 1920, plans to shift the administrative centre were already swept under the carpet and became a distant memory.

It took a further nine years before the Acting British Resident C.F.J. Green made a recommendation in his 1929 memorandum to move the administrative centre to an area between Karak and Mentakab which was not only larger and allowed for future expansion, but was also not affected by the great floods of 1926. The proposal was circulated to all departmental heads but the feedback received wasn't encouraging. Only two responded with one entirely opposed to the idea.

DEPRESSION, OCCUPATION AND EMERGENCY



Elephants were the main mode of transportation in Pahang during the 19th century.

A series of calamitous events that followed suit postponed the idea of leaving Kuala Lipis indefinitely. It began with the Great Depression which started after the October 1929 stock market crash on Wall Street. It sent investor confidence into a tailspin and wiped out millions of investment dollars.

The contagion then began spreading across the globe and eventually reached the shores of Malaya. Lasting a decade, it became the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialised world. All over the world, authorities initiated belt-tightening measures and avoidable public expenditure like changing administrative centres were out of the question.

In Pahang, as well as all of Malaya, the slump began showing signs of abating by the tail end of the 1930s, but the ensuing Second World War and Japanese Occupation prolonged the suffering until peace returned in September 1945.

The return of the British brought about renewed attempts to find a new site for Pahang's administrative centre. A proposal was discussed during a State Council meeting in October 1948 but, yet again, nothing concrete came of it.

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Road from Kuala Lipis to Raub in the 1890s.

Matters came to a head in 1952 when the Federal Government approved a substantial allocation for the construction of government servant quarters in Pahang. During a meeting, the State engineer pointed out that it was difficult to find suitable land for this purpose in Kuala Lipis.

MOVE TO KUANTAN, FINALLY!



A street in Kuantan during the first decade of the 20th century.

Realising that a decision had to be made, the Pahang government began putting thought to two shortlisted sites – the Termeloh-Mentakab area and Kuantan. Although the former was superior in terms of its location in the centre of the state and easily accessible by railway, it was the latter that garnered the most votes.

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as a seemingly unlimited amount of water supply. Coupled with its proximity to the royal town of Pekan and its claim to the only airport in the entire state, Kuantan was definitely the clear favourite.

The final decision to move from Kuala Lipis to Kuantan was made on March 2, 1953. Soon after, however, obstacles began to surface even though the decision was already made. There was strong opposition from state officers as well as their counterparts in the Federal Government to make the Temerloh-Mentakab area the state capital and develop Kuantan, which was renowned for its natural beauty and pristine beaches facing the South China Sea, as a major tourist destination.

The opposing faction finally gave in when Menteri Besar Tengku Panglima Perang Tengku Muhammad ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Ahmad who was aided by the efficient Acting State Secretary, Orang Kaya Indera Shahbandar Dato' Abdul Razak Hussein (later Tun) managed to proceed with the transfer.

Just two years later, Abdul Razak succeeded Tengku Muhammad as the third Menteri Besar of Pahang and then went on to become second Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1970.

Finally, after more than half a century, Kuantan was officially declared the state administrative by the Pahang ruler, Sultan Abu Bakar on Aug 27, 1955. The momentous event was celebrated with pomp and pageantry for two consecutive days. Relief could definitely be sensed as the transfer had taken so long that during the duration, Pahang had come under the reigns of four sultans and experienced the administration of 16 British Residents!

Returning all the materials back to the file, I start making mental notes of all the information I have just acquired. Surely, they'll make for interesting discussion points when I meet my friend next week.

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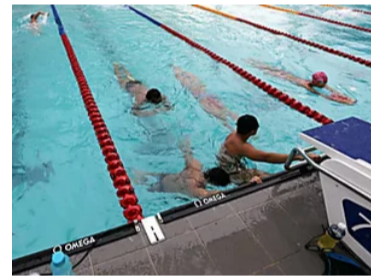
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