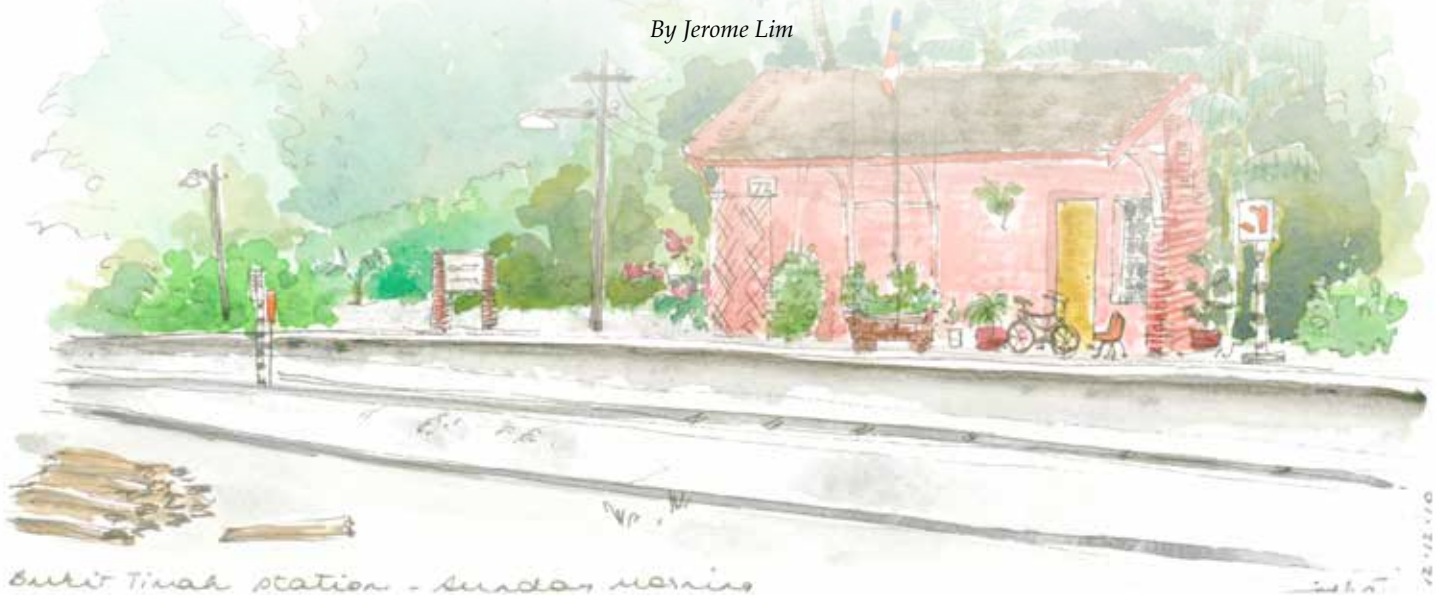


Preserving the Memory of the Rail Corridor

By Jerome Lim



Bukit Timah Station, sketch by Siobhán Cool

My earliest impressions of the Malayan Railway were of the two black truss bridges that I always identified with Singapore's Bukit Timah area. When I was a child in the back seat of my father's trusty Austin 1100, we often passed under these bridges during the many drives that took us across the causeway or to the Teck Whye area, where a friend of my mother's had an orchid farm. With little to do on those long outings, it was what we passed that caught my attention, such as the landmark bridges that broke the monotony of the journey.

During the frequent railway journeys I made later in life, I became familiar with much more of the rail corridor. The journeys provided views of a side of Singapore I would not otherwise have had much opportunity to see – views painted not by the grey of concrete and steel, but by the green and brown of a seemingly untamed world.

It was the sections of the rail corridor where the truss

bridges are that left a deep impression on me. While-travelling on the mail train in the dim light of a late evening, I first set eyes on a rather quaint red-brick station, one that spoke of a forgotten time. Only 20 minutes or so into my first journey, it seemed as if I had been transported to another world.

The station was to prove a fascinating place. I later learned that it had been part of the infrastructure created in 1932 when a deviation was built to Tanjong Pagar. Prior to that, the line (dating back to 1903) ran southwards from Woodlands, where in 1923 it connected with the rest of the railway via the causeway. From Woodlands, it cut a path to Bukit Panjang, then on to Bukit Timah, before running down today's Dunearn Road and turning at Newton Circus towards the first terminal in Tank Road.

The deviation, carried out at considerable expense, was motivated in part by the need to raise the line over flood-prone areas as well as to eliminate the large number of level crossings. It also gave us the two distinctive truss bridges. A grand terminal station was built so the nearby port could serve as the gateway to the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Bukit Timah Railway Station, used not just by human passengers, but also by race horses being transported to the nearby racecourse (the Bukit Timah Turf Club), became in its later years the last point on the Malayan Railway where an archaic signalling practice was still in use. To hand over track authority, the practice involved an exchange of key tokens between train driver and station master and was a necessary part of the single-track system.

The practice was made obsolete with the introduction of new technology and also a double-tracking project undertaken by the Malayan Railway. It survived at Bukit Timah only because there was little motivation to improve it – a 1990 Points of Agreement between the Singapore and Malaysian



The Truss Bridge close to Bukit Timah Railway Station



Postcard of a train on the railway line linking Tank Road and Kranji, ca 1913



Tank Road railway station (1900)

governments had meant that the days of the railway through Singapore were numbered.

It wasn't just at Bukit Timah that there was a parallel world to discover. The stretch a little beyond the first of the two truss bridges was equally fascinating. A series of stops and starts, necessary to move the mail train past the bridge so that it could be reversed onto a siding (to await the passing of the southbound train), provided an opportunity to look outside. The narrow strip of land wedged between the tracks and the Yeo Hiap Seng factory was crowded with tiny wooden shacks.

These were the dwellings of squatters – possibly among the last who remained in Singapore – living by the tracks. The Singapore government had very little control over this land since it belonged to the Malaysian government-owned Malayan Railways. With the lights turned on at night and the shacks literally an arm's length from the tracks, I could look right into the minuscule homes.

Left untouched over much of the 79 years since the deviation, parts of the rail corridor had retained much of their greenery, becoming havens where wildlife thrived. As early as the mid-1990s, the Nature Society Singapore (NSS) had seen the corridor's potential as a continuous green belt linking the central catchment area and Bukit Timah Nature Reserve with the Southern Ridges. The society made suggestions about maintaining a green corridor along the rail corridor and also the abandoned Jurong Line.

With the announcement that by July 2011 railway operations would terminate at Woodlands and the rail corridor land would be handed back to Singapore through a land-swap arrangement, NSS proposed retaining both rail corridors. The proposal (with input from the Singapore Heritage Society and a loose grouping of individuals from the Friends of the Railway), was that the corridors would not just be a continuous green link, but also serve the recreational interests of the communities alongside and where railway paraphernalia could be retained to preserve their heritage.

The proposal garnered widespread interest and support, evident from the participation levels on walks to raise awareness (organised by the NSS and non-affiliated individuals) and the interest generated on the various social media platforms. Soon after the handover, during a rail corridor walk he led, Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, the Minister of State (National Development), met representatives of the various interest groups and others who'd heard that their input would be considered.

To increase public engagement a Rail Corridor Consultation Group was formed, later expanded into the Rail Corridor Partnership with the participation of the interest

groups and various stakeholders. The aim was to provide input to the government's development plans for the Rail Corridor (a working name for the project).

An ideas competition, the 'Journey of Possibilities', was organised at the end of 2011. Both foreign and local teams participated in the Open and Youth Challenge categories. The winning ideas were announced in March this year and will be incorporated into design briefs for the Rail Corridor plan, as well as for the two former stations, Tanjong Pagar, which has since been gazetted as a National Monument, and Bukit Timah, which has conservation status.



A train passing through a very green part of the rail corridor

While the tracks along the Rail Corridor and some of the familiar structures have been (or will be) removed, it is comforting to see that some of what is familiar – the two stations and the two truss bridges will remain. They, along with a third bridge – the girder bridge over Hindhede Road – will be retained. The truss bridge over Sungei Ulu Pandan will be looked at as part of the Jurong Line from Clementi Woodlands. It will be interesting to discover how the Rail Corridor and all that is familiar about it can be put to use to benefit the wider community so that memories will not be lost.

Jerome Lim is a member of the Rail Corridor Consultation Group. He blogs on *The Long and Winding Road* (www.thelongandwindingroad.wordpress.com) about his impressions and experiences of life.

Colour photos by the author

Postcard and black-and-white photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore