

# Kampong Wak Hassan

## Memories of Times Past

By Jerome Lim



*Kampong Wak Hassan, photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore*



*The sea wall at Kampong Wak Hassan*

“It is sad to see that all that remains of it is just a road sign”, sighs Yunos Osman about the village of his birth, where he lived for the first three decades of his life. The sign bears the name ‘Kampong Wak Hassan’, now a 150-metre stretch of road named after the village, and except for that there is indeed little to remind us of Yunos’ *kampung* by the sea.

This *kampung* was one of several coastal villages situated along a stretch of Singapore’s northern coastline along what is today Sembawang Road and southeast of Tanjong Irau, at the mouth of Sungei Simpang. The oldest of the villages, Kampong Wak Hassan, has a history that goes back to before the 1920s, when it was moved to the area.

The village had its origins in a coconut grove established in 1914 by Wak Hassan bin Ali, who lent his name to the village. Located where Sungei Sembawang had originally spilled into the Johor Strait (just west of what today is Sembawang Shipyard), it was relocated during the construction of the huge British naval base which stretched some 6.5 kilometres along the coast from Woodlands to Sembawang.

The village was also the area’s longest surviving one, cleared only at the end of the 1990s. For Yunos, who left it in 1994, and other former residents, the attachment they have to the area is still strong. Many return from time to time to sit by the former village’s sea wall. A narrow strip of public land between the road and the wall serves as a place where bygone days can be relived.

Most of the village’s former residents now live in new *kampungs*, public housing estates with modern amenities. Another former resident, Yazlyn Ishak, and descendant of the village’s founder, enjoys the convenient aspects of her new home. However, despite the conveniences they now enjoy, many would have preferred to not trade the days when the sea was their playground, when they woke to the sight of fishing boats returning to waters coloured by the sunrise, when their doors did not have locks, for the urban world they now live in.

For both Yunos and Yazlyn, who moved to Yishun in 1987, it is the ‘*kampung* spirit’ that set village life apart from their new environment. Yazlyn’s fondest memories are of the times the village came together during preparations for festive occasions and weddings.

The sea wall, now partially collapsed, is a physical reminder of their former home that both Yunos and Yazlyn hope will remain. The area is currently in the throes of redevelopment and the sea wall is the only remaining physical part of the *kampung*. On part of the land where it once stood, a luxury residential development has already taken shape.

The sea wall still welcomes visitors very much in the same way as the village it protected once did and also serves to remind us of what walls in villages such as Kampong Wak Hassan were – they offered privacy and protection, but were never a barrier to the development of a community; something we find lacking in the new ‘villages’.



*New luxury housing development*

The changes we see taking place around the former Kampong Wak Hassan are perhaps also a reflection of how society has changed. In former times many would have lived by the sea out of necessity because it provided a livelihood. Living by the sea has now become a measure of the material success that the new society so craves.

NB. ‘Kampong’ is the former spelling of the modern version - *kampung*. In the naming of the area, the original spelling was retained.

---

**Jerome Lim** blogs on *The Long and Winding Road* ([www.thelongandwindingroad.wordpress.com](http://www.thelongandwindingroad.wordpress.com)) about his impressions and experiences of life.

---

*Except where otherwise noted, photos courtesy of the author*