AN EARLY RAILWAY PROJECT IN KEDAH

by

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Railway enterprise during the later part of the nineteenth century in most of Southeast Asia was largely the by-product of imperialist rivalry. It is not be to unexpected then that the first railways into Kedah should have been viewed among official circles as purely strategic necessities while private commercial interests regarded them as essentially financial ventures. The years that followed British intervention in the Malay States in 1874 witnessed the ever-increasing growth of colonial power and the relentless extension of British control in other parts of Southeast Asia. While Britain’s political commitment in the Malay peninsula necessitated a zealous vigil on the part of the Straits government in Singapore against any foreign enterprise “at any point on either side [of the peninsula], from the boundary of the province of Tennaserim to Singapore,” there was an equally conscious desire that the whole region “must be worked and developed by English agency.” One particular area of immediate concern to Britain was the narrow isthmus of Kra where a spate of ill-fated projects had envisaged the construction of a ship-canal during the 1880’s. After the Siamese débâcle at the hands of the French in July 1893, the British government had been unduly alarmed by persistent rumours of a French attempt to extort a canal concession from King Chulalongkorn.

The story of the first railway attempt in Kedah had its rather strange beginning late in November 1893 at the British Foreign Office in London. Fully aware of British fears, one Mr. R. W. Perks, M.P., approached the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Edward Grey, on behalf of the Malay Railway and Works Construction Company. The Company had been formed to take over a concession granted by the Siamese government in March 1891 to a Mr. Charles Dunlop for the construction of a railway eighty miles in length from Singora on the east coast to Kota Sta on the Kedah river, continuing southwards for another sixty miles or so to Kulim in south Kedah. Being, in fact, a company “designed to

1. Colonial Office to Foreign Office, 29/8/93, no. 349, Foreign Office Confidential Print, Further Correspondence respecting the Affairs of Siam, (hereafter referred to as FOCP), Part III, University of Malaya Library.
2. E. T. S. Dugdale, Maurice de Bunsen, London, 1934, p. 132. De Bunsen, who was British Chargé d’Affaires at Bangkok from November 1894 to December 1896, commenting on the Anglo-French Declaration of 1896, wrote that Britain did not want “to annex anything” belonging to the Siamese kingdom in the Malay peninsula but merely expected that “it must be worked and developed by English agency.” Ibid., pp. 131–2.
4. Cf. Nos. 307 and 477, FOCP/III. In August 1893, the British government learnt of a Russian attempt earlier that year to obtain the cession of the island of Junk Ceylon or Puket from Siam. No. 14785, Colonial Office Records, Series 273, (hereafter referred to as CO 273), Vol. 192. In microfilm at the University of Malaya Library.
5. Perks to the Foreign Office, 1/12/93, No. 574, FOCP/III. The Company had been registered in London on 22nd February, 1892.
6. Ibid.
produce shares and nothing else,”7 its real purpose in turning to the Foreign Office was to obtain official financial backing by threatening otherwise to sell the concession to a French company.8

By late December, 1893, the British government was convinced that the Malay Railway and Works Construction Company should not receive its financial support9 but, before it could formally reject the Company’s request, Mr. Perks came up with an alternative suggestion.10 He proposed that, as Dunlop’s concession authorised the construction of branch railways as well, another line linking Province Wellesley with Perak might be considered favourably.11 Quoting as his authority, the 1892 Administrative Report for Penang by the Resident Councillor, Mr. A. M. Skinner, Perks envisaged the line to run from Prai to Kulim and thence to Selama in Upper Perak.12 Unfortunately for the Company, the Crown Agents deprecated granting a guarantee of interest for the proposed railway connection13 and an official in the Colonial Office believed that the Penang members of the Straits Legislature “would greatly prefer a Harbour for themselves” with the necessary funds.14 Thus, despite the highly irregular efforts of Dunlop himself to win the favour of the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir C. B. H. Mitchell, in Singapore during May 1894, the Company’s railway project remained temporarily quiescent.15

Nothing further was heard of the Singora-Kulim railway scheme until February, 1895, when Governor Mitchell, during the course of a visit to the Sultan of Kedah, reported that the “agent of the concessionnaires…… was at Kota Sta…… for the purpose of turning the first sod of the line.”16 Mitchell himself was favourably inclined towards the scheme and considered it “of great importance to British interests in the peninsula” although he confessed that the concessionaires were trying “merely to keep the concession open.”17 This was the last that was heard of the Malay Railway and Works Construction Company in Kedah and with the establishment of the Federated Malay States in 1896, it is conceivable that private railway enterprise received hardly any encouragement. A railway from Prai to Bukit Mertajam was not opened until

7. A term apparently used by the Secretary of the Board of Trade to describe similar business ventures which lacked the financial resources for their undertaking. Minute by Sir R. Meade, No. 543, CO 273/200.

8. The threat was never directly made by Perks but it was nevertheless his undisguised intention. No. 574, FOCPIP/III, No. 20794, CO 273/192.

9. Colonial Office to Foreign Office, 19/12/93, No. 605, FOCPIP/III.

10. Perks to the Foreign Office, 27/12/93, No. 618, FOCPIP/III.

11. Ibid.

12. Perks to Sir Edward Grey, 30/12/93, No. 323, CO 273/193. It is, however, doubtful that Skinner advocated the Prai-Taiping line to run via Kulim and Selama.


15. Dunlop had told Mitchell that the Crown Agents were actually preparing an Ordinance for the necessary grant of land in British territory besides supplying the Governor with misleading particulars about the Company’s finances. Further, he had hinted darkly of special favours from the Home Government by referring to Perks’ former association with Henry Fowler in a legal firm. Fowler had been appointed the new Secretary of State for India in the Cabinet reshuffle of March 1894. No. 10104, CO 273/195.


17. Ibid. The concession stipulated that if operations were not begun by 4th March, 1895 then it would expire.
July, 1899, and extended southwards to Nibong Tebal in September 1900.18

With the consolidation of British colonial power in the Malay peninsula by the turn of the century, the attitude of the Siamese government at Bangkok became one of overt suspicion of Singapore’s ambitions in the northern Malay states of Kedah, Patani, Kelantan and Trengganu. British interests were safeguarded by the Secret Anglo-Siamese Convention of 1897 which required Siam to obtain the prior approval of London before sanctioning any foreign application for concessions in the northern part of the peninsula. Inevitably, reasons were not lacking for the colonial officials at Singapore to question Siamese policy in the northern Malay states off and on and Governor Sir John Anderson (April 1904–March 1906) was no exception to the rule. It was in such strained circumstances that the question of railway extension into Kedah again came to be considered.

There can be no more accurate indication of the changed political circumstances in the Malay peninsula by 1904 than the fact that the proposal for the Federated Malay States railway system to be extended into Kedah came, on this occasion, from the Singapore government itself. On 21st January, 1904, the Officer Administering the Government, C. W. Kynnersley, asked the Acting British Charge d’Affaires at Bangkok, W. R. D. Beckett, to obtain the views of the Siamese government regarding the proposed construction of a line from Bukit Mertajam in Province Wellesley to Kulim, “a mining town”, described as “the natural terminus of the proposed branch.”19 There was no problem over the construction of the line up to the Province Wellesley boundary but, from there, it would continue for about two and a half miles to Kulim in Kedah territory. The Sultan of Kedah had already been asked whether he would prefer to grant a concession to the Federated Malay States government “on the same basis [of construction] as that portion of the trunk line running through Province Wellesley” or to construct the line himself at his expense “under the management of the Federated Malay States’ Railway Department.”20

The British Legation at Bangkok immediately took up the matter with the Siamese Government21 and despite a reminder from Anderson in May22 there was no reply from Prince Devawongse, the minister for foreign affairs. As early as in January itself, however, the Sultan of Kedah had informed the Acting Resident Councillor, Penang, J. K. Birch, that his suzerain, the King of Siam, considered the proposed extension too short and of no immediate use to Kulim which was supposed to be adequately served by “bullock carts and gharries.”23 This indirect means of making their views known caused Anderson to inquire if they really meant what the Sultan had alleged.24 After further representation by the newly-appointed British Minister, Ralph Paget,25 Devawongse finally

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19. Kynnersley to Beckett, 21/1/04, Encl. 1 in Beckett to Lord Lansdowne (Foreign Secretary), 21/7/04, No. 92, FOCP/XVI.
20. Ibid.
21. Paget to Devawongse, 26/1/04, Encl. 5 in No. 92, FOCP/XVI.
22. Anderson to Beckett, 10/5/04, Encl. 2 in No. 92, FOCP/XVI.
23. Birch to the Colonial Secretary, Straits Settlements, 27/1/04, Encl. 3 in Colonial Office to Foreign Office, 1/10/04, No. 95, FOCP/XVI.
24. Anderson to Beckett, 19/5/04, Encl. 4 in No. 92, FOCP/XVI.
25. Paget to Devawongse, 28/5/04, Encl. 6 in No. 92, FOCP/XVI.
replied on 15th July that the Siamese government would “arrange to construct the line from Bukit Matayam to Kulim, at a sum to be agreed upon,” and lease it out to the Federated Malay States. The British were asked for “an estimate of the cost of the extension” from “the constructors of the railway to Bukit Matayam.” Beckett informed the foreign secretary, Lord Lansdowne, that the Siamese proposal was “a rational compromise between the two alternative courses proposed to the Sultan of Kedah” and had only been possible on account of the “considerable insistence” of the American General Adviser to the Siamese Government, Strobel.

Probably confident of bringing the Siamese around to accepting their original proposals, the Federated Malay States Government went ahead with practical plans for the extension. The General Manager of the Federated Malay States Railway included $9,600 in the draft Estimates (Special Services), 1904, for a survey of the Bukit Mertajam-Kulim line and began collecting statistics of the traffic between those two places. He visited Kulim on 31st July and learnt that it handled 3,500 piculs of tin and tin ore a month besides finding that there were about a hundred and twenty brick and semi-brick houses while “several substantial brick houses” were “in the course of erection.” Apparently, a “considerable traffic” along the cart road from Kulim to Bukit Mertajam was transferred to tongkangs at the latter place and conveyed to Penang. The General Manager foresaw that “this traffic would be diverted to the railway” if it was built “as it would then be the cheaper route” and hopefully predicted, after inspecting the country, that the cost of construction would not be very high. Finally, an immediate survey of the line was recommended so that the estimated cost could be framed.

In view of the encouraging report of the General Manager, official opinion at Singapore was undoubtedly disappointed at the Siamese Government’s reply to their proposals. On 31st August, Anderson wrote strongly to the British Legation at Bangkok alleging that Siam had, in fact, submitted “a third course for the consideration of the Federated Malay States Government.” As Siam was “well aware” that the Federated Malay States Railways were constructed and maintained by the government itself, Anderson rejected the offer of a lease of the line “for the construction and stability of which it [the Federated Malay States government] has not the guarantee furnished by its being built by its own railway department.” In asking for a “more direct reply”, he hoped the Siamese did not “desire to use their influence with the Government of Kedah to place difficulties in the way of the construction of the line, to the obvious detriment of the interests of that State.”

Seeing his plans being frustrated, Anderson also wrote to the Colonial Secretary, Alfred Lyttelton, sharply criticising the Siamese attitude as “indicative of the policy pursued for some time of encroaching on the independence in regard to internal

26. Devavongse to Beckett, 15/7/04, Encl. 7 in No. 92, FOCP/XVI.
27. Ibid.
28. No. 92, FOCP/XVI.
29. General Manager to Resident-General, 26/8/04, Encl. 2 in No. 95, FOCP/XVI.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Anderson to Beckett, 31/8/04, Encl. 4 in No. 95, FOCP/XVI.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
deferred.45 Later in the year, Anderson revealed his real motives for the proposals he had made to the Sultan of Kedah in January, 1904. Conveying his opinions on affairs in Kedah to Lyttelton on 30th November, he confessed that the railway extension to Kulim had been “pressed......for the time mainly with a view to ascertain the disposition and attitude of the Siamese Government [towards the growth of British influence in Kedah].”46 Although the proposed branch line would have formed “a useful feeder to the Federated Malay States’ Railways and would have been of considerable advantage to the mining district of Kedah”, Anderson did not believe it to be “intrinsically of any importance.”47 Nevertheless, the episode had firmly convinced Anderson that the Siamese government “looks with jealousy and distrust on any extension of British enterprise in that State [Kedah].”48

Indeed, there was good reason for a natural anxiety in the Federated Malay States at the course of events in Kedah during the latter part of 1904. There was a steady increase of foreign commercial activity in that state backed mainly by German financial interests based at Penang and elsewhere. The persistence of these concession-hunters was becoming extremely embarrassing for the Siamese who had to consult the British government on every application for prospecting or mining leases. As Siam did not desire other nations to become aware of her secret commitment to Britain in the peninsula, the officials at Bangkok showed a marked tendency to disapprove of the British policy of rejecting even the most insignificant foreign enterprise in Kedah. Thus, the understandable jealousy which characterised the attitude of the colonial government towards non-British commercial enterprises in Kedah combined with the Siamese abhorrence for the extension of British influence into one of their more prosperous dependencies, effectively worked against the economic development of the state.

There can be no doubt that, had the proposed railway extension to Kulim been built, the whole of south Kedah would have stormed ahead of the rest of the state both in urbanisation and financial prosperity. Ample evidence for such a hopeful prospect might be found not only in the highly enlightening report of the General Manager of the Federated Malay States’ Railways but also from the comparatively high percentage of farms leased out by the Sultan for such a small area as Kulim. The Table49 below gives the revenue accruing to the Sultan at the expiry of nine farms in the Kulim district. As a matter of interest, the northern railway route to Alor Star and Perlis was undertaken only late in 1912,50 whereas Kulim does not have a railway connection even to this day. The other towns which had found such a prominent place in the Malay Railway and Works Construction Company’s plans, such as Singora and Selama never lived up to the great expectations of the nineteenth century capitalists. It was Haddyai, about twenty miles inland from Singora, that became an important junction in the Prat-Bangkok railway when it was opened in 1922.

45. Anderson to Lyttelton, 3/11/04, Encl. 1 in No. 121, FOCP/XVI.
46. Anderson to Lyttelton, 30/11/04, Encl. 1 in No. 2, FOCP/XVII.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Extract from List of Names and Dates of Expiration of Thirty-nine Farms in Kedah, Encl. 6 in Paget to Lansdowne, 31/3/05, No. 56, FOCP/XVII. The list was submitted by the Rajah Muda of Kedah, Tengku Abdul Aziz, to Prince Devavongse as surety for a Siamese loan to Kedah.
affairs enjoyed by Kedah.” He warned Lyttleton that the success of Siam’s policy would be “detrimental to British interests in the peninsula.” There was spontaneous sympathy for the Singapore cause at the Colonial Office and Lyttleton advised Anderson to withdraw his proposals to the Siamese Government and proceed to construct that part of the line which would lie within Province Wellesley if no satisfactory reply was received from Bangkok. The officials in London had been apparently confused by the Siamese reference to Bukit Matayam and Lyttleton presumed that Beckett had been mistaken in identifying it as Bukit Mertajam as he could “hardly suppose that the Siamese Government proposed to construct the portion of the line in British territory.”

Meanwhile, Beckett had wisely decided to inform Strobel of Anderson’s strongly-worded letter of 31st August before communicating it officially to the Siamese Government. Consequently, Beckett wrote again on 10th September to Singapore conveying the General Adviser’s rather surprised reply that Anderson had probably misunderstood the Siamese proposal. Apparently Strobel maintained that, while the Siamese Cabinet had rejected Anderson’s first proposal for a concession to the Federated Malay States by the Sultan of Kedah for the construction of the entire line “as a matter of principle and for reasons of policy,” he had, with some difficulty, succeeded in persuading the Siamese to accept the second proposal that the line from the Province Wellesley boundary to Kulim should be built at the expense of Kedah under the management of the Federated Malay States Railways. Thus, the Siamese reply was supposed to have accepted Anderson’s second proposal completely and Strobel admitted that since the Federated Malay States railways were constructed by the government itself, the reference to “constructors” in Devawongse’s note of 15th July could be taken to mean the Federated Malay States’ Railway Department. In view of this clarification, Beckett naturally asked the Governor if he still wanted the Siamese government to be pressed for a proper reply and warned that it might merely irritate and annoy them.

In spite of Strobel’s generous assurances and Beckett’s calm advice, Anderson had already decided on an independent course by 29th September. He informed Beckett that, after consulting the Resident-General, he had changed his mind about the Bukit Mertajam-Kulim line, and instead, proposed to proceed with railway extension elsewhere in the peninsula. The Siamese government were thus delivered a very prompt rebuff by the Singapore authorities although it might be reasonably supposed that the former were not unduly disheartened by the temporary diversion of colonial interest in Kedah. On 3rd November, Anderson notified the Colonial Secretary of the circumstances in which further discussion of the question had been

36. Anderson to Lyttleton, 31/8/04, Encl. 1 in No. 95, FOCP/XVI.
37. Ibid.
38. Lyttleton to Anderson, 1/10/04, Encl. 5 in No. 95, FOCP/XVI.
39. Ibid.
40. Beckett to Anderson, 10/9/04, Encl. 2 in Colonial Office to Foreign Office, 13/12/04, No. 121, FOCP/XVI.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Anderson to Beckett, 29/9/04, Encl. 3 No. 121, FOCP/XVI. The Survey Staff were to be employed in the Johore Railway Survey.
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while Selama in Upper Perak has been completely by-passed by the Malayan railway system. There seems to be no explanation, at present, to the intriguing question of precisely why Kulim came to be ignored in the railway network of Malaya particularly after the Anglo-Siamese treaty of 1909 by which Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu were incorporated into the British protectorate. Admittedly, the whole of south Kedah, at least, was a sufficiently thriving district in the 1890’s to have merited the attention of a private constructor and with the dawn of the twentieth century the need for a railway connection had, if anything, become urgent from an economic as well as a strategic stand-point. Kulim was not lacking in official representation at Alor Star for there is evidence of a Tengku Mohamed Saat who attended a meeting of Kedah officials to discuss the question of a loan from Siam in early 1905.\(^1\) With the available information, however, exceedingly little is known about the condition of most of Kedah during this period and no considered opinion can be advanced at this stage on the implications of why a “cheaper route” to Kulim was never built.

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51. Encl. 3 in No. 56, \textit{FOCP/XVII}. No doubt this is the same person after whom a road in Kulim is named Jalan Tengku Mohamed Asaad.

### TABLE OF FARMS LEASED OUT IN THE KULIM DISTRICT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE OF EXPIRY</th>
<th>REVENUE</th>
<th>TYPE OF FARM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd April, 1908</td>
<td>$ 7,000.00</td>
<td>Tin farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st July, 1908</td>
<td>$ 500.00</td>
<td>Reserved Timber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27th September, 1908</td>
<td>$ 7,000.00</td>
<td>Tapioca farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30th July, 1908</td>
<td>$ 600.00</td>
<td>Carriage Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23rd March, 1909</td>
<td>$ 500.00</td>
<td>Timber farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th March, 1910</td>
<td>$ 1,000.00</td>
<td>Pig farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19th December, 1914</td>
<td>$ 1,000.00</td>
<td>Pawn shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th December, 1917</td>
<td>$ 7,000.00</td>
<td>Spirit farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th August, 1918</td>
<td>$15,000.00</td>
<td>Gambling farm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>