

# The Birth and Growth of Kluang

by

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Kluang town, with its population of more than 25,000, is the area of most recent settlement in the whole of Kluang district. Layang-Layang, Nyior and Mengkibol, Paloh, Rengam and Kahang were all settled many years earlier, beginning with Layang-Layang in about 1905.

Kluang town and the outskirts came into existence as the direct result of the policy of the State government to develop Central Johore and establish a centre of communications in the area. At one time, between 1916 and 1918, the Sultan and Council considered a proposal to transfer the capital of Johore from Johore Bahru to Kluang, — the geographical centre. The idea of establishing Kluang as a centre was mainly inspired by Campbell, the General Adviser, Glendenning, the State Engineer and J.W. Simmons, the Commissioner of Lands. In 1915 the three officials had walked from Johore Bahru and had selected Kluang as the ideal site for a centre. In 1918, the Sultan and Council decided not to transfer the capital on account of the historical and economic ties of Johore Bahru with Singapore, and the long connection of the Royal House with Johore Bahru.

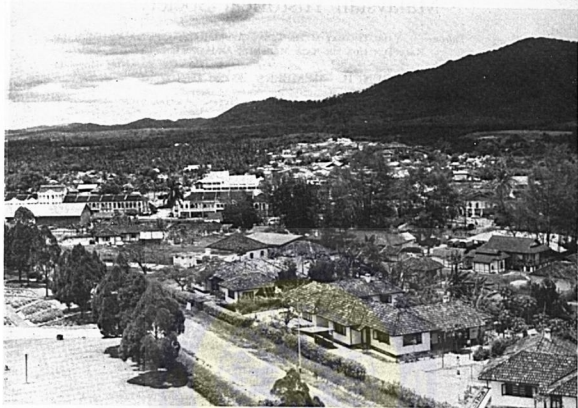
In 1915, most of the area selected for development had already been alienated to Mengkibol Estate, which had been founded by a man named Blair, who had been responsible for building the section of railway between Nyior and Gemas. The land required by the State Government was exchanged with Mengkibol Estate for land between the 2nd and 6th mile on the present Kluang-Ayer Hitam road.

Chinese came to Kluang in 1915 in quite large numbers when the Public Works Department opened a depot. The department employed Kwongsai, Kow-

chow and Hakka labour to fell hardwood for railway sleepers, which were sent to Gemas for use on the railway trace from Gemas to Pahang. The areas which had been cleared of timber were made available on favourable terms for alienation, but the Chinese labourers specialised in timber working and had no intention of settling permanently. Not long afterwards the Public Works Department began a programme of road construction spreading out from Kluang in the centre to Rengam, Mersing and Ayer Hitam. For the work of jungle clearing and road construction, the Public Works Department recruited indentured labour (mostly Hakkas from China). The labourers later became squatters, following a shifting cultivation.

It was not until many years later that a 'Squatter problem' was officially recognised. Government was remote. The first District Officer Kluang was only appointed in 1919 and a Land Office was not opened in Kluang until 1931. Until that date, the Land Office for the district was in Johore Bahru. The Government policy of developing Kluang as a centre, and of attracting population, succeeded, but the absence of effective land administration opened the door to large scale 'squattling' and the Land Office in Kluang was opened too late.

Most of the rubber estates around Kluang were originally opened by Chinese, — usually Eng Choon Hokkien. These estates were interplanted with tapioca, and until European firms bought them up, there were three sago factories in Kluang, at the 2nd and 5th mile Mersing road and the 5th mile Batu Pahat road. Most Chinese estate owners in the area, taking advantage of the good price offered by European companies after the 1932-36 slump, sold out and invested the money



*Modern Kluang.*

*Photo Jabatan Penerangan.*

from the sale of estates in property in and around Kluang town, and opened estate supplies shops and provision stores.

The Chinese used local clay to build their houses and shops. There were two small brick works in Kluang, one in the area known as 'Yap Tau Sah', (named after the first owner of the brick works) and the other in the area known as Kampong Haji Manan, though the works were owned by the father of Cheah Kheat Seng, a well known Kluang business man.

During the later part of the Japanese occupation many of the residents of Kluang decided to escape from the rigorous control in the town by moving out into the countryside and seeking a frugal existence by farming. The outbreak of the Emergency and the subsequent policy of Resettlement reversed the trend and led to a new influx of Chinese into the town, which then reached its peak population figure.

