

Context



103° 51' 0" E / 1° 18' 0" N

Fort Canning Hill is a slight swell of 50m, and there are other hills nearby of similar height. However, due to its location, the hill towered large in Singapore's early history as the seat of rulers and political powers.

John Crawford, the second British Resident of Singapore, noted in his journal in 1822:

“the walls and limits of the ancient town of Singapore ... in reality had been the site of our modern settlement ... The inclosed space is a plain, ending in a hill of considerable extent ... The whole is a kind of triangle, of which the base is the sea-side”¹

The ancient town to which Crawford referred belonged to the Malay kings that ruled the island in the 14th century, and by the 15th, deserted it. When the British re-discovered the island in 1819, their settlement occupied the same site at southern Singapore, a triangular plain that had the sea at its foot, and the hill, about 800m away, forming the apex. The triangle was enclosed on its two sides by a defence wall and the Singapore River, both running from the coast to the foot of the hill.

From the hill, one could survey incoming ships at the Singapore Straits, as well as the island's settlers trading and living near the coast. Underlining its strategic location

were Hindu-Buddhist beliefs of the time, which associated hills with divinity and royalty. The hill rose to prominence as the ground for the king's palaces and tombs in the 14th century. When the British took power in the 19th century, the hill was used as residence for Sir Stamford Raffles and later governors, and also as a military command centre.

As each new power or function was established on the hill, its name changed. Singapura Hill was its first documented name, pinpointed in the literary-historical Malay Annals as the burial place of powerful ancient kings. By the 1800s, the hill took on the aura of Bukit Larangan, or the Forbidden Hill, amongst the locals. The English quickly established their power on its summit. Reflecting the rapid changes during the period between 1822 and 1858, the hill was labeled Singapore Hill, Government Hill, Bukit Bendera (Flag Hill), Bukit Tuan Bonham (Sir Bonham's Hill) and Fort Canning Hill in quick succession. The last has endured till today.

More numerous than the names given to the hill were the physical disturbances to its soil and the stories embedded within.

CLIMATE

Singapore's climate is equatorial - highly humid (average of 84.3%), with an abundant rainfall (annual average at 2340mm) and a diurnal temperature range of 23 °C to 31 °C. June is the hottest month of the year followed by May. There are two monsoon seasons, and frequent thunderstorms in between.

PHYSICAL

Singapore is an island country in Southeast Asia, one degree north of the equator. It is at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, separated by the Straits of Johor. And to its south are the Indonesian islands and the Straits of Singapore. The country is made up of 63 islands, including its main diamond-shaped island measuring 42m from east to west and 23km from north to south. Land reclamation projects have increased Singapore's land mass by more than 20% since the 1960s. Its land area is 704km² today, and reclamation works are ongoing, with another 50km² to be added by 2030.

Besides increasing its land mass through reclamation, Singapore builds upwards to create one of the densest cities in the world. Its recent government housing developments reach 50 storeys. The city centre, at the island's south-east, has a height limit of 280m, and three buildings share the title of the tallest building in Singapore touching that restriction. 49 other buildings are taller than 150m.

Singapore's highest natural point is Bukit Timah, at 163m. The rest of the island is relatively flat, with short, rounded and gently-sloping hills. A number of these hills have been moved or reduced in height for reclamation and construction projects.

HISTORY

Singapore's early history and its political struggles were played out on Fort Canning Hill and the ancient coastal town at its foot; the hill was the site of ancient palaces, the governors' residence, and the island's fortification.

The first reliable records of Singapore are found in 14th-century Chinese text, referring to maritime landmarks. At that time, Singapore was known as Temasek, meaning land surrounded by water. Javanese records describe Temasek as a vassal state of the Majapahit empire; and Malay chronicles state that Temasek was given a new and grander name sometime in the 1300s — Singapura, or the Lion City — and was a flourishing port city. By the end of the 14th-century, Singapura may have been abandoned. Its fall was sealed by a large fire that razed the city in the 17th century.

Records on Singapore between the 17th to the 19th century are scant, until 1819, when Sir Stamford Raffles established a British trading post on the island and William Farquhar was put in charge as the first British resident of Singapore. And thence began the trajectory of Singapore's modern history.

In 1826, Singapore became part of the Straits Settlements and was under the control of British East India Company. During World War II, the island was ruled by the Japanese from 1942 to 1945. Control reverted to the British after the war, and in 1946, Singapore was established as a Crown Colony. Calls for full internal self-government in 1955 were successful except in the areas of defence and foreign affairs. In 1963, Singapore declared independence from Britain and joined Malaysia, a federation which included Malaya, Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei. Two years later, Singapore seceded and became the Republic of Singapore.