

(Re)-digging, (Re)-filling

Within the 45-year span of 1820 to 1865, more than 600 burials took place at the two Christian cemeteries on the hill.

Today, no traces of the Forbidden Hill Cemetery can be seen. Every single remain had been moved to make way for buildings. The construction of the fort in 1895 was particularly destructive in this context.

After its closure in 1865, the Fort Canning Cemetery was neglected. The harsh tropical weather wore down the bricks and plaster used to construct the tombstones, resulting in a rapidly decaying graveyard. Cattle was even found roaming around the cemetery, overturning gravestones.⁹

By 1952, the deterioration was beyond repair, with about a dozen headstones falling every month. The Singapore Committee for the Preservation of Historic Sites decided to convert the churchyard into a public garden, and unusually for Singapore, through an organic process without a firm timeline. The crumbling headstones were left to collapse in their own time, whereupon they were collected and stored, to be used for building a perimeter wall around the new park.¹⁰

Within two years, most of the cemetery's gravestones and memorials had been removed. As many memorials as possible were salvaged and embedded on the perimeter walls.

The garden, now known as Fort Canning Green, is today a tranquil slope of trimmed grass, a favourite spot for outdoor concerts and arts performances.

FORBIDDEN HILL CEMETERY

1820 Opened. Sited near Raffles' (and also the governor's) residence
1822 Closed. Reason - too close to the governor's residence

FORT CANNING CEMETERY

1822 Opened. Sited on lower slopes, within 2 acres of land
1827 Full. Resident chaplain applied for a new burial ground
1834 Area expanded
1845 Area expanded (again)
1846 Enclosed by brick wall
1863 Full
1865 Closed

Chopped, Scooped, Sliced, Bored

“the patent truth before us, that the present very pretty grassy contour of the Hill was being rapidly destroyed and disfigured. A vast surface of bare red earth was being spread out before the eyes, where green verdure had previously flourished ... The cuttings that we now see... are not part of any paltry work, — they are the first steps in a gigantic undertaking which is to entirely transform the natural outline of a Hill some miles in circumference”

In December 1864, convicts were deployed to reshape the circumference of the hill, to make it safer against the lodgment of enemies at its base.¹¹

“We trust that the Municipal Commissioners and the private land owners who have recently been permitted to cut into Government hill at the junction of River Valley and Tank Roads to obtain soil for filling up their low-lying lands opposite, will, before concluding their excavations, round off the base of the shoulder where they have been cutting from, and slope it backwards, so as to restore the shapely form of the hill. We may mention that in General Cavenagh’s time, when military rule was the order of the day, to put a spade into the hill on which Fort Canning stands would have been looked upon as desecration of the worst character, and certainly never sanctioned by that grim old martinet.”

In 1874, 10 years after the hill’s slope was cut into for security reasons, it was again disfigured.¹²

“The hill was originally a cone-shaped eminence but when Fort Canning was built the summit was taken off and with the excavated earth a plateau of approximately 10 acres was formed... This plateau is now being excavated over an area of 7 acres to a depth of 10 feet for the building of Singapore’s new Service Reservoir.”

Butler, engineer involved in the construction of the reservoir that took place between 1923 and 1927.¹³

A tunnel now cuts through the north-eastern edge of the hill. Construction of the 350m short vehicular passageway, the Fort Canning Hill Tunnel, started in 2003 and was completed in 2006.

Its twin benefits are to maximise land use for the Singapore Management University campus located near the foot-hill, and to minimise journey time, from 5 minutes to 18 seconds, for vehicles traveling through Stamford Road.