

Shedding its notoriety

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THE younger generation may not know it, but Brickfields, known as the "mini India of Kuala Lumpur" at one time, has seen tremendous development since the early 50s.

Known for its notoriety and cheap accommodation for weary travellers and tourists from India, the Brickfields of today is not at all like in the early days. It has developed into a city within a city.

"No doubt, it was notorious for gangsterism at one time, but all this has changed in line with the rapid development and growth of Kuala Lumpur," says a resident.

He notes that from an area associated with the poor, Brickfields has developed into an area with expensive and luxury apartments found in any middle-class area in the country.

"Just look around... we have apartments such as the Crescent Court and Cuepacs apartments. Newer ones such as Palm Court are also under construction," he says.

Also known to the older generation as the 15th Mile, many do not know exactly how Brickfields got its name.

According to some elders, there were a number of factories manufacturing and supplying bricks to contractors for Kuala Lumpur's growth in the 1900s.

But they do not remember seeing these factories; instead they claim to have heard the story from their fathers.

Buildings which existed in the early 1900 are still standing. Side by side with these are places of worship such as a Buddhist temple, a Hindu temple, a few churches and the Vivekananda Ashram, which was built in 1904.

There are schools, offices, banks, numerous eating shops and mini-markets, and a number of recreational and entertainment centres.

Perhaps, its most notable landmark was the Lido cinema. Several fights used to take place here but it was the video craze that killed business. The cinema is now a snooker centre.

The other prominent building — if one can call it a building (it was actually a wooden shack) — was the Gajjan Singh petrol station that operated with a hand pump.

On the subject of notoriety, a church helper says it is like the saying "empty vessels make the most noise".

"There were no gangsters. There was a group of boys making all the noise but as far as I am concerned, they were a bunch of little boys."

She says nicknames were given to the boys, such as *Katte Puchi* and "Hercules Maniam", just to frighten others away and keep up with the notorious groups in other areas. But, she says, these boys have learnt the hard way.

"Many have been jailed more than once while others have gone through hard times in prison," she adds.

The centre of activity, she says, used to be the toddy shop which is located along Jalan Berhala and the Lido cinema.

She says there were many Indians residing in Brickfields in the early days and they consumed considerable amounts of toddy. And the toddy shops were where they gathered after work to drink and talk politics.

The church helper, who has been living in Brickfields for more than 55 years, also remembers when the Evangelical Lutheran Church was used as an air-raid shelter.

"When the siren went off, people from all over would gather at the church and stay there until the raids were over."

She says Brickfields started beautifully in the early days, with development moving at its own pace and allowing ample time for



The Evangelical Lutheran Church which used as air raid shelter during the war
INSET: Lido Cinema, the scene of many fights, is now a snooker centre



GAJJAN SINGH: Still operates the Shell station



The toddy shop which used to be the centre of activity in the early days

the residents to adapt themselves.

However, many massage parlours and vice dens have sprouted up behind the former Lido cinema, cashing in on the increasing number of low-budget travellers and visitors to the area, says bank officer K. Krishnakumar.

"The cinema was well-known among the Indians because it never failed to screen Tamil movies every weekend.

"But video became easily available and the theatre was converted into an amusement centre four years ago," he says.

"But whatever it is, Brickfields is still the best place to live in.

"It is only about two kilometres from the city centre and we can get almost everything we want," she adds.

Gajjan Singh, who started business in 1931, still runs the petrol station but this is now within in a modern building.

"There used to be only attap houses and secondary jungle around my petrol station but in the early 40s, the hundred-quarters and red apartments replaced the attap houses."

Gajjan Singh, 78, who has been living in Brickfields for more than 60 years, says the hundred-quarters were built mainly to cater for Government servants and the red apartments were flat units.

The other buildings, which are still found in Brickfields are a row of double-storey shop houses, located opposite the petrol station.

"Even with the rapid development, Brickfields was still a slum area until the late 1950s when new buildings sprang up to replace the attap houses and secondary jungle," he adds.

From then on, he says, there was no turning back for Brickfields. Newer, better and more sophisticated building were soon built.

He notes that now, there are even banks and fast food chain outlets in the area.

When he first opened his petrol kiosk, there were not many vehicles and he used to sell only about 60-70 gallons of petrol per day compared with the hundreds today.

"During the Japanese Occupation, my station was converted into a Japanese depot to distribute petrol for Japanese vehicles.

"The KTM warehouse used to be an air raid shelter and we used to hide there during bombings," he adds.

Liquor shop owner Chua Swee Heng, 61, says his shop was built before he was born.

"My grandfather used to run a provision shop then. Business used to be brisk in those days because there were not many shops around here. But now the competition is stiff and we can hardly survive."

He feels that Brickfields has developed to its maximum.

"At the back of the hundred-quarters is the railway tracks and at the other end the river. Development has reached both ends and that is the end," says Mr Chua.

