

Preparing for the onslaught

With parts of Klang Valley already grappling with flash floods in the past two weeks, local authorities are ramping up efforts to meet the expected increase in rainfall due to the north-east monsoon, including installing water pumps, increasing river-level monitoring and removing blockages from drains. >4



Mining the past

With its rich 80-year history, Kuala Lumpur's Pekan Sungai Besi, once part of the world's largest open cast tin mine, has a lot of potential as a historic destination. However, locals lament that plans to redevelop the town and preserve its heritage have stalled. — JAROD LIM/The Star >2&3

Town with pre-war appeal



Colonial-era, heritage buildings are characteristic of Pekan Sungai Besi. — Photos: AZMAN GHANI and JAROD LIM/The Star

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ONCE a thriving mining town in Kuala Lumpur, Pekan Sungai Besi is struggling to preserve its past.

Locals in the town are hoping more can be done to attract visitors to the town, which has a rich 80-year history and was part of the massive Sungei Besi Tin Mine.

During its heyday, the town's pre-war buildings built during the British colonial period were occupied by local businesses such as sundry shops, cobblers, clothing stores, mining company offices and eateries, to cater to the residents.

But the echoes of its tin mining past have been silenced over time with economic shifts and urbanisation. The town has mostly lost its appeal.

Trades that could once be found at the pre-war buildings have died out and have been replaced with new businesses.

Efforts by authorities to revive the area with infrastructure upgrades and beautification projects have not had much effect, and further redevelopment plans appear to have stalled.

Pekan Sungai Besi residents are grappling with fading nostalgia for a bygone era.

Should its heritage carry on being unpreserved, the town itself will continue to decline.

Pekan Sungai Besi was developed in the 1930s to accommodate massive tin mining activities in the area and house miners relocated from temporary quarters near where The Mines development is now located.

The town is known as "Xin Jie Chang" (new thoroughfare) among Chinese speakers.

It was part of Sungei Besi Tin Mine, which was once the largest and deepest open-cast alluvial tin mine in the world.

Stakeholders call for more effort to draw tourists to former mining jewel that is Pekan Sungai Besi



The nearby Sungai Besi MRT station facilitates visits to Pekan Sungai Besi.

Historian JM Gullick in *A History of Kuala Lumpur* said the enormous Sungai Besi mine covered almost 5ha at surface level and 1ha at the working level, 24m below.

The town and surrounding areas used to be predominantly Chinese.

However, the Chinese population declined significantly when Pekan Sungai Besi was fenced off by the communists in the late 1940s and 1950s during the Malayan Emergency.

British authorities displaced the community to new villages such as Serdang New Village, Salak South New Village and Balakong New Village. The demographic for Pekan Sungai Besi slowly changed.

Under Kuala Lumpur City Plan 2020, Pekan Sungai Besi has been labelled a Secondary Heritage Zone, which refers to an area that is less contiguous and contains a mixture of

newer and older buildings with significant historical merit.

In 2015, Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) spent about RM10mil to upgrade and beautify the place.

This included upgrading Pasar Sungai Besi as well as road widening works and painting pre-war buildings that date back to the 1930s.

Murals of tin mining activities were painted in the back alleys of the town while multi-functional gazebos were built along the walkways, which were also widened to accommodate more pedestrians.

Former mayor Tan Sri Ahmad Phasal Talib once said Pekan Sungai Besi's pre-war era character had the potential to attract more visitors.

Limited impact

However, according to some business owners in the area, the beautification projects lacked

functionality and did little to attract visitors.

Optician EY Chen, who owns a business in the area, said the upgrade works in the area did not have a focus.

"The murals are nice and tell the story of the town's history, but it's not enough."

Citing the impact of murals in Ipoh and how it made Concubine Lane a tourist attraction, Chen said the ones in Pekan Sungai Besi had not had the same effect.

"Perhaps what the town needs is a visitor centre that explains the local history to locals and tourists."

"With more tourists visiting, the town would thrive."

Chen said with the town being near the Sungai Besi army camp, there had been a surge in tailoring demand in recent years.

"Many army personnel come here to have their uniforms altered and foreigners, some



Chuow Khiew (left) showing Chew around the Sien See Sze Ya temple.



Murals depicting tin mining activities can be found along a back alley that is now a Heritage Walk area.



Sien See Sze Ya temple will soon have a mini museum to showcase antiques and history of the area.



EY Chen says there should be a visitor centre to explain the history of the township to tourists.



A road divider with classic lamp post in Pekan Sungai Besi.



Some traders have been misusing the gazebo built as part of the town's beautification project as storage areas.

from Bangladesh, have been hired as workers at these tailoring shops."

Grocery store owner Tan Chor Pin, 60, reminisced about the olden days when there were many Chinese businessmen.

"Back then, there were a lot of wooden houses in the area.

"There were a lot of old buildings – now one is left as an abandoned premises near the Sungai Besi MRT station.

"This was one of the more popular towns in the Sungai Besi Tin Mine area where people conducted their trades," Tan said.

According to Bandar Tun Razak MCA chairman Chew Yin Keen, the beautification and upgrading of Pekan Sungai Besi had yet to be completed.

"Back in 2018, the Barisan Nasional-led government had discussed plans with Ahmad Pheal to beautify and upgrade the place in phases.

"The plans included redevelop-

oping the food court, a square for weekend performances and even having a health clinic that would serve as a specialist centre for treating diabetes, kidney and heart disease – all geared towards driving visitors to the area.

"After the 2018 General Election and ensuing change of government, there was no interest in developing the place."

Chew said Pekan Sungai Besi was unique because it was one of the last remaining former tin mining towns, adding that it had the potential to be turned into a tourist attraction.

"With the MRT station, visitors can get here easily. If Pekan Sungai Besi's history is not preserved today, it will be forgotten over time and younger generations will not know about it."

On old businesses moving out, Chew said this was inevitable.

"Businesses have to cater to the market demand and when business is not good, they tend

to be replaced.

"Since the population in the surrounding areas are predominantly Malay, food options and grocery stores would have to cater to that demographic.

"Also, ageing entrepreneurs are retiring and are forced to shut their businesses when there are no successors or their children move elsewhere.

"The shops might still belong to them but they are more likely to rent them out."

Now, the paint covering the pre-war buildings have faded or started to peel off.

The multifunctional gazebos, which were supposed to house recycle bins and potted plants, are damaged.

Some traders have even used the gazebos as storage areas. Wooden platforms that served as a rest area for pedestrians have also gone missing.

Recently, DBKL said in a statement that it had checked on such complaints and acted on

unscrupulous traders.

"We have verbally warned traders not to place chairs and tables at the gazebos or on the sidewalk.

"If the problem persists, we will issue compounds to the traders.

"DBKL also always acts against premises run by foreigners without permits by closing down these shops."

Landmark building

While most of Pekan Sungai Besi appears stuck in a rut, one place of worship here has managed to buck the trend.

Standing the test of time, Sien See Sze Ya Temple has witnessed the town's transformation over the decades.

Established in 1901 in Sungai Besi Old Town, the temple was shifted in 1937 to Pekan Sungai Besi, where it still stands as a focal point for the Chinese community.

Persatuan Penganut Dewa Sien See Sze Ya chairman Chen Chuow Khiew, 80, said the temple hosted cultural events during various occasions such as Chinese New Year and deities' birthdays.

"The temple used to be bare with only a few statues of deities but now we have

developed Gong Jiao Yuan Fairyland Park to attract visitors.

"Construction work on the park started on Jan 30, 2011 and was completed by end of 2020.

"It features a garden, deities' statues and the 12 zodiac animals that are popular photo locations for visitors," he said, adding that visitors were welcome to enjoy temple grounds.

Chuow Khiew said the temple was also taking charge of preserving the history of Pekan Sungai Besi through its plan to develop a mini museum.

"There are some vacant spaces in the temple where we have planned to showcase the town's history, antique items from the tin mining period as well as other temple objects such as divination slips used in the olden days.

"This allows visitors to check out some of the items that were used back then which tell the story of Pekan Sungai Besi.

"If everything goes smoothly, we plan to open the mini museum next year."

The association was recognised by Malaysia Book of Records for having the biggest "Wong Tai Sin" statue, measuring 7.31m tall and 4.57m wide, at Fairyland Park.