

Singapore old Straits and New Harbour.

BY WARREN D. BARNES.

It has long been a tradition that the old straits of Singapore were the Selat Těbrau between the Island and the Johore mainland and a new tradition is now springing up that the passage through New or Keppel Harbour was discovered by the late Admiral Keppel. The object of this paper is to show that both these traditions are without foundation of fact and that the old Straits of Singapore are none other than the present Keppel Harbour.

It is unnecessary to point out in detail how ill-adapted are the Johore straits for sailing vessels making a passage; the western entrance is by no means easy, the distance is long and ships using the channel would be exposed to strong tides, be liable to be becalmed and, most important of all, be at the mercy of the pirates who haunted these waters for centuries. On the other hand the passage through the New Harbour is short and not particularly difficult. If it had not been used in former times some explanation of so singular a fact would have to be found.

The most convenient way of examining the question will be to deal in chronological order with the principal historical references to these Straits.

A. D. 1436.

Hsing-ch'a Sheng-lan

(W. P. Groeneveldt, Notes on Malay Archipelago and Malacca in Essays relating to Indo-China, Second Series Vol: I. page 203).

The strait of Lingga is situated to the North-west of Palembang (San-bo-tsai), high mountains face each other as the teeth of a dragon and between these the ships pass.

(Earlier than 15th century)

Charts from Wu-pei-pi-shu with sailing directions (The Seaports of India and Ceylon by George Phillips) China Branch R. A. S. New Series vols. XX. and XXI.)

Starting from Malacca with a course of 120° to 135° , in five watches the ships will be off Arrow-shooting Hill; then with a course of 120° to 135° in three watches Pulau Pisang will be reached and with a course of 135° in five watches more Carimon. Thence with a course of first 100° to 120° and later 120° Long-waist Island is reached and the ship comes out of Dragon-teeth Gate left. From Dragon-teeth Gate with a course of 75° to 90° in five watches the ship will reach Pedro Branca.

The words Lêng-gê-mûy (Amoy dialect) translated by Groeneveldt "the straits of Lingga" mean dragon-teeth gate; strait, or passage and in the Amoy dialect "dragon-teeth" is the name given to the two upright pegs in the bows of a ship through which the cable runs. The passage in question cannot be the Straits of Ling-

ga which lie much too far away for the second quotation and I suggest that it is the New Harbour. The western entrance to this harbour has been altered since old times, as is evident from the quotation below from "Prisoners their own Warders." I suggest that owing to the similarity of names the Chinese accounts confuse the island of Lingga with the dragon-teeth passage.

A. D. 1598

Linschoten. I translate from a French translation "Le grand Routie de Mer," Amsterdam 1619 pp. 40-42.

In Chapter XX. Linschoten gives sailing-directions from Malacca to Macau. Having brought his mariner down to Pulau Pisang and Tanjong Bulus he says:—

"At a league from this Cape is a river [Sungei Pulai] and a short league further another river [Selat Tébrau] with a large mouth in which lies a little island called Sincapura [a mistake for Merambong] where the bottom is good and clean. This river empties itself at the port of Iantana [Ujong Tanah, Johore] the place where Antonio de Meno went once by mistake with a ship of eight hundred 'casses,' each 'casse' being three and a half quintals Portuguese weight, and got out again. From this river the land trends to a point to the South and at this point begins the entrance to the first straits [Selat Sembilan] through which you must pass. On the North of this bay the land lies higher than on the South, where it is low and uneven, with a tree covered hill showing above its surroundings. This is the end of the land. For on the East you find islands and rocks stretching first to the South and then to the East in the form of a bay. From the above mentioned Cape of Tanjamburo [Tanjong Bulus] to the entrance to these straits the course is due East and the depth seven or eight fathoms.

"Any one wishing to sail to China by Sincapura [Singapore] should if he comes by Pulo Picon [Pulau Pisang] at the beginning of July keep close to the island of Carimon; for the Java monsoon which is on then always blows from the coast of Sumatra. Also if you keep on the Carimon side when you leave it you come right on to the entrance of the straits. The depths differ on this course and when you come from the Tanjong Bulus side the country at the entrance of the strait 'a l'apparence d'un tronc' which is a certain sign of the said entrance. Here you should tack (tiendrez vostre course en l'ouyant) so as to make the entrance easier.

"These first straits [Selat Sembilan] have at their entrance two shoals [Basses] which come from the Cape one on each side. On the South side at the beginning of the straits is a long range of islands stretching to the East which forms the straits. To enter you must all the time keep closer to the South side than to the other. At first entrance you will find twelve ten and nine fathoms and when you have got so far in that the land to the South, that is the islands mentioned, are in

one, you will see in front of you on the other side a cape with a little red hill. You will do well then to bear over a little to that side until you have passed the first island [Pulau Pesek] between which and the second [Pulau Ayer Limau] lies a shoal which can be seen sometimes at low water and which stretches half way across the channel; however you will be careful always to have the lead in your hands to know where you are. Having come close to this cape and hill bear off again to the right, for this is the only shoal between these islands, and in this way you will carry on to the East for about half a league with this same depth of eight or nine fathoms. Thence this range of Islands along which you are sailing trends to the South-east and immediately afterwards you will see a little further on to the right of these islands a round island stretching a little behind from one to another, [the French is not clear] you will carry on along this leaving it on your right. You will always have eight or ten fathoms with a muddy bottom. On the left hand, that is on the North side, the land has many bays among them a large one which trends to the South. On this South side is another round island which you will leave on the same side. You will beware of this North side as it is full of shoals and will hold on your course on the other or right hand side. When you come close to the above mentioned small round island on the right hand side you will see straight in front of you, that is to say, at the end of the range of islands along which your are coasting, another small low island with a few trees and a shore of white sand [? Cyrene shoal]; this is directly opposite the East and West straits of Singapore. You will bear down on this island and when you come close to it you will see the straits, towards which you will steer keeping off a little both to avoid the shoals and reefs to the North and also so as not to be carried by the tide to the South side of the entrance of the straits. On the North is a sandy beach [Pasir Panjang] about a cannon-shot long having a kind of bay at the end of it where fresh water can be got. The whole way along this beach you will find a good bottom fit for anchoring if necessary. Coming up to the beach you will find currents which will carry you down to the entrance of the straits but you can avoid them by keeping off. You will do well also not to pass the end of these straits on the North side as there are reefs and banks there.

“The entrance of the straits is about a stone’s throw across between two high mountains and runs a cannon-shot length to the East. The least depth in the straits is four and a half fathoms. At the entrance at the foot of the Northern mountain is a rock which looks like a pillar. It is commonly known as Varella del China [Lot’s wife]. A little further on in the straits and on the South side is a bay in the middle of which is another rock below water and a shoal with reaches from this

rock to the middle of the channel. About an arquebus-shot further on, on the same South side, is a passage reaching to the sea on the other side thus making an Island [Selat Singkeh]. It is too shallow for any but small craft (*petites fustes*) to use. In the middle of the bay opposite the opening of this passage is a rock or rocky shoal two fathoms under water which reaches a little out of the bay to the middle of the channel. When you are up to this bay you see a straight hill which forms a cape at the end of the straits. Having doubled this cape you see a red hill near which the bottom is good and clean, after which the land trends to the South-east.

On the North side of the straits there are in all three bays, of which the first two are small and the third, which lies opposite the cape of the red hill at the end of the straits, large. This third bay has a bank of rock which is uncovered at low water and reaches from headland to headland; care must be taken of it. Everything on the North side outside this bay is throughout the channel clean and good from one headland to the other.

At the exit from the passage are two reefs, one of which is opposite to the mouth of it about a cannon-shot away (*a la portée d'une pièce de fer*) running North and South; the other is to the South of the mouth and a short cannon-shot away (*a la portée d'un canon mediocre*) stretching to the East so that the two make a cross; both can be seen at low water. The channel between them has barely four fathoms with a muddy bottom; outside the channel the bottom is sand whereby many ships have come in danger of shipwreck. If therefore you have to go that way take care when leaving the channel not to steer due East, and if you wish to anchor bear to the South, for if you stop in the current of the straits you may lose an anchor or two through the violence of the ship's motion.

When clear of the straits bear to your right along the land but not coming closer to it than a depth of four fathoms, and when you have passed the first beach, together with a hill and a rock at the end of it, and a bay which lies opposite the hill, and have reached half way to another hill, which is at the other end of the above mentioned passage from the straits, you should then shape your course to the East, not coming within four fathoms on either side for fear of falling on banks and shoals. The bottom of the channel is muddy. You must always have the lead in your hand until you have got a greater depth, which you will soon do. It is safest to use a small boat to sound the channel. When you have reached twelve or fifteen fathoms beware of the South side until you are a league to the East of the Straits, for from fifteen fathoms you would get ten and then would find yourself on some shoal, for there are many shoals and sand banks just there.

These Straits (of Rumenia) have six small Islands [Pulau Lima] on each side of Iantana [Johor] which is on the North

of it and along which the course is East and West (the French is not clear). They are about eight leagues distant [from the Singapore Strait]. You will beware of passing between two of them. The sea near here, that is for half a league to the South, is quite clear and fair with a sandy bottom in fifteen fathoms. Half way between the Straits [of Singapore] and the said Islands is the river of Iantana which has a very wide mouth, the entrance to which lies on the East side where large vessels often enter. On the West side, where there is a hill of red earth [Tanah Merah on Singapore Island] just beyond the mouth of the river, is a sandbank which stretches to sea for a league and a half and has been touched by many ships, you should beware of it. At the end of the said islands a reef [Rumenia shoals and North Patch] stretches for a full two leagues to sea East-North-East over which in fair weather only a little foam can be seen but where a heavy sea breaks in rough weather.

Between this reef and the islands is a large channel with a rocky bottom; the greatest [?smallest] depth which I have found is five and a half fathoms, from that seven and a half and again six and eight and a half are found. The width of the channel is a good cannon-shot across. If you wish to use this channel you must turn off your course half a league from the islands without coming closer to them for fear of coming on the banks as happened to Francisco Dagner who nearly lost his ship. Two leagues to the South-East of these islands is another small island which is a reef or rock of white stone and hence called Pedra Branca [Pedra Branca and Horsburgh Light] and near and to the South of it are other rocks and reefs. To the South also lies the island of Bintan" [Bintang].

In the above translation the remarks in square brackets are my own. These sailing directions are wonderfully clear seeing that they are a translation from the French of a translation from the Dutch of a translation from the Portuguese and there can be no doubt that the route which Linschoten taught to his fellow country-men lay through the Selat Sembilan and Keppel Harbour. It may be of value to note that Linschoten never visited the Further East; he arrived in India in 1583 and left it in 1589; his account of the passage from Malacca to Macau must therefore have been drawn from Portuguese sources and it is evident that some of the Portuguese pilots had a competent knowledge of their profession.

A. D. 1599.

Viaggi di Carletti vol. ii. 208-9

quoted in Yule's "Hobson-Jobson" s. v. Singapore.

In this voyage nothing occurred worth relating.....except that after passing the straits of Sincapura.....between the mainland and a variety of islands.....with so narrow a channel that from the ship you could jump ashore or touch the branches of the trees on either side, our vessel stuck on a shoal.

This is a very fair traveller's description of a passage through the narrows of New Harbour but it is not applicable to one round Singapore Island. That a traveller should not have appreciated that Singapore is not a part of the main-land needs no explanation. Linschoten regarded the Sêlat Těbrau as a river.

A. D. 1604

Emanuel Godinho de Eredia in his *Declaracam de Malaca*, written in 1613 and published with a French translation by M. Leon Janssen at Brussels in 1882, gives three sketch maps of the end of the Peninsula.

The one on page 61 is headed *Discripsao Chorographica dos estreitos de Sincapura e Sattam Ano 1604*, and gives the following places: Tanion buro (Tanjong Bulus) Pulo Cucob, Rio Pule (Sungei Pulai), Salat Tubro (Selat Tebrau), Pulo Ular, blacan mati (Blakang Mati), estreito novo (new straits), estreito velho (old straits), Xabandaria (on Singapore island probably near the mouth of the Singapore river, meaning Shabandar's i.e. Harbour Master's office), Tanjon Ru, Sune bodo (Sungai Bedoh), Tana mera (Tanah Merah), and Tanjon Rusa (at Changi). Additional names are given on the other sketches as follows:— *Estreyto Sincapura* (Singapore Straits in the same position as *estreito velho* above) *Siquijam* (Pulau Sakijang St: John's Island), *Pedra Branca* (Horsburgh light) *Rido de Jor* (Johore River), *Cotabatu* (Kota batu), *Batusawar*, and *Ponta Romania*.

The sketches clearly show that three passages were known:— the old and new straits and the Sêlat Těbrau and that the old strait was New Harbour and the new strait the present main straits. It should be noted that no place names are given near the last, whilst on the South of Singapore are noted the residence of the Malay official and the places where wood and water were obtainable. Valentyn (J. S. B., R. A. S. Vol: XV p. 134) says "on the 5th of May (1606) two prahus of the king of Johor with the Shahbandar of Singapore Seri Raja Nagara reached our fleet," and it is interesting to note that in the *Sejarah Malayu* (page 250 Shellabear's Romanised edition 1910) we are told of the stout defence offered by the "penglima raayat Raja Nagara batin Singapura," against attacks by Portuguese from Malacca. The presence of a Shahbandar implies visits by foreign ships and traders.

A. D. 1615

Bocarro 428. Yule op: cit: s.v. 'Governor's Straits.'

1615. The Governor sailed from Manilla in March of this year with ten galleons and two galleys.....On arriving at the straits of Sincapur.....and passing by a new strait which since has taken the name of *Estreito do Governador*, there his galleon grounded on the reef at the point of the strait and was a little grazed by the top of it.

The Governor came to grief in the present Singapore straits.

A. D. 1700

A new Account of the East Indies by Captain Alexander Hamilton...
...who spent his time there from 1688 to 1723.....Edinburgh 1727.

Vol II. page 93

Johore has the benefit of a fine deep large river which admits of two entrances into it. The smaller is from the westward called by the Europeans the Straits of Sincapure but by the Natives Salleta le Brew (Selat Tëbrau). It runs along the side of Sincapure Island for 5 or 6 leagues together and ends at the great river of Johore.

Vol: II. page 123.

Upon the East side of the great Carimon is the entrance of the straits of Drions [Durian] and between the small Carimon and Tanjong bellong [Tanjong Bulus] on the continent is the entrance of the Straits of Sincapure before mentioned and also into the Straits of Governadore, the largest and easiest passage into the China seas.

This is probably the 'locus classicus' whence the tradition that the Selat Tëbrau forms the old straits of Singapore was derived. It would seem that between 1600 and 1700 the passage through Keppel Harbour fell into such complete disuse by European vessels that its very existence was forgotten. It was probably convenient for those ships only which could be worked with sweeps or towed with reship's boats in case of lack of wind, and hence as the size of shipping increased it went out of fashion.

1826

Singapore Chronicle August 1826

(quoted in Moor's Notices of the Indian Archipelago Singapore 1827, page 276)

These (remarks) are from the Notes of Captain Rous and the officers of H.M.S. Rainbow and may be relied on as correct. [After a recommendation to stand closer in shore from Formosa Point to Pulau Pisang than Horsburgh approves of, the passage continues.] On reaching Singapore straits if a vessel is unable to weather Barn Island with the wind to the Southward she should bear up for the passage through the Selat Sinki or New Harbour. This will be found safe and expeditious for vessels under 600 tons burden but for ships of a larger size it is narrow and confined. The entrance to the passage bears E.N.E. from Sultan Shoal and is bold on each side, the only danger being a two fathom bank on the South side. After clearing the narrows and opening Singapore Harbour steer along Trumba Trumbaya reef a cable's length off and when well to the Southward edge away for the anchorage.

The passage above described was effected with success by H.M.S. Rainbow, the first vessel that has ever come through intentionally. The 'William Parker,' a free trader passed through by mistake some time ago and it was generally considered a very dangerous experiment. The enterprise of Captain Rous has however established its practicability and these notes and observations which were taken with great care will render the passage easy and safe for navigators. In these operations we understand

that Capt. Rous was ably assisted by Mr. Bernard, Agent of Lloyd's, who came in the *Rainbow* from Malacca and whose practical knowledge of the Straits and Islands made his suggestions and information highly useful in exploring this unfrequented track.

It will be noted that the name New Harbour was in use in 1826.

1841.

"Horsburgh" 5th edition vol: ii. 264.

Singapore Strait called Governor Strait or New Strait by French and Portuguese.

The name Straits of Singapore was first applied to Keppel Harbour then (see Hamilton above) to the Selat Tébrau and lastly to the Straits now so called.

1843-4

Voyage of H.M.S. *Samarang* by Sir Edward Belcher, London 1848. Vol: II. page 186.

Upon a cursory examination of the Chart of this Channel (constructed by Mr. Thompson in 1842) I observe that a *safe* and *short* channel would be available by night and day provided that a light were established on the hill above the Malay village. That a leading mark seen clear of the point of Blakan Mati would bring a steamer from the fairway fork (to either Channel) into the New Harbour by a *direct course* of *twelve miles*.

It will be noted that in 1842 Keppel Harbour had been surveyed.

1848.

"Prisoners their own Warders," McNair and Bayliss, London 1899 page 66.

In the year 1848 we find that the Indian convicts were employed in blasting some considerable part of a mass of rock known to the Malays as Batu Belayer or "stone to sail to" and by Europeans as "Lot's wife." It was a dangerous obstruction to navigation being situated on the Singapore side of the Western Entrance to the New Harbour. It is reported as known to old navigators, of these seas and was shown on old charts over two hundred years ago.

The Government evidently took in hand in this year the improvement of this channel, which they had caused to be surveyed by Mr. Thompson in 1842.

1848.

An anecdotal History of old Times in Singapore. C. B. Buckley Singapore 1902. page 493.

It was in May 30th of this year (1848) that Capt. Keppel wrote in his diary on board the "*Maeander*":

"On pulling about in my gig among the numerous prettily-wooded islands on the Westward entrance to the Singapore River I was astonished to find deep water close to the shore with a safe passage for ships larger than the "*Maeander*." Now

that steam is likely to come into use this ready-made harbour as a depot for coals would be invaluable. I had the position surveyed and sent it with my report to the Admiralty. As it was, a forge was landed and artificers employed under commodious shades all under the eyes of the officers on board."

These repairs on the *Maeander* were therefore the first repairs done in New Harbour . . . **so it was Keppel who first sailed through New Harbour** and Singaporeans often said that it should not have been called New Harbour, which meant nothing, but Keppel Harbour. This was eventually done on the 19th April 1900 when the old Admiral was on a visit to Singapore.

A visit to the Indian Archipelago in H.M.S. *Maeander* Capt. the Hon. Henry Keppel, London 1853, page 16,

While preparations were making [May-August 1848] for the establishment at Labuan the *Maeander* refitted in the snug and picturesque New Harbour which appears to have been overlooked in selecting the first points of settlement; the only objection to it as a harbour is the intricacy of the Eastern entrance; a difficulty which by the introduction of steam has become of little consequence. No place could be better adopted for a coal depot; and as a harbour for a man-of-war to refit it is most convenient. The forge can be landed, boats repaired and artificers employed under commodious sheds and all under the immediate eye of the officers on board. It has another great advantage over Singapore Roads, in the latter anchorage a ship's bottom becomes more foul than in any other I know of, perhaps from the near proximity to the bottom; this is not the case in New Harbour in which there is always a tide running. Although it has the appearance of being hot and confined, surrounded as it is by high land we did not find it so in reality; generally there is a current of air inside while the ships in the stagnant and crowded roads are becalmed.

It will be seen from the above quotations that the gallant Admiral made no claim to have been the first to sail through New Harbour. He doubtless knew of the number of ships which had used the passage and he does not even say that he used it himself on this occasion. In fact it appears probable that he did not.

A. D. 1857.

Anecdotal History of Singapore page 649.

On the 19th of March H.M.S. *Raleigh* Capt. Turner bearing the broad pennant of Commodore Keppel C.B., sailed into New Harbour . . . As the old admiral was in Singapore when this chapter was being written he was asked . . . if he remembered how it came about that he sailed the *Raleigh* into New Harbour instead of into the Roads. He said that it was because he had surveyed New Harbour while he was in the *Maeander* and had the same Master (navigating officer) with him in the *Raleigh* who had

* The italics are mine.

surveyed it with him so he felt quite confident about it although others had been afraid to go in.

There can have been no difficulty in sailing into New Harbour in 1857 seeing that P. and O. offices there were opened in 1852 (Anecdotal History page 566).

A. D. 1900.

Singapore Free Press 3.1.00.

It was Sir Henry Keppel who first of all in H. M. S. Raleigh in 1856 sailed from the Westward through the new channel which his examination and recommendation created as the New Harbour Singapore.

This is an absurd mis-statement. Hundreds of ships must have passed through New Harbour before 1856.

Straits Settlements Government Gazette Extraordinary 19.4.00. Notification No. 401.

In order to perpetuate the remembrance of the fact that the capabilities of the New Harbour at Singapore as a passage for ships of the deepest draught and an excellent Harbour were first demonstrated by the Hon. Capt. Keppel, R.N. of H.M.S. *Dido* now Admiral of the Fleet Sir H. Keppel G.C.B., D.C.L.

It is hereby notified for public information that the New Harbour will in future be called and known by the name of Keppel Harbour Singapore.

Singapore 19th April, 1900.

Keppel Harbour is a good name and the late Admiral deserved all the honours conferred upon him, but the reasons given for bestowing this particular one are very unconvincing. Captain Keppel was here in the *Dido* in 1842-1844 but it was not till his next visit in the *Maeander* in 1848 that he discovered all that he himself ever claimed to have discovered namely that New Harbour was an excellent place wherein to lay a ship up to refit and afforded great natural advantages for a coaling station.

The tradition that the Johore straits are the old Singapore straits will probably never die, but the new legend that Admiral Keppel was the first person to take a good sized ship through Keppel Harbour has got so short a start that it should be possible to overtake it.



Barnes, Warren D . 1911. "Singapore old Straits and New Harbour." *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 60, 25–34.

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