

Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell

Volume 4



David Bellis

Sample

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**Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell
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First published in Hong Kong in 2020 by Gwulo,
www.gwulo.com

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ISBN 978-988-78276-3-4

Page-layout and cover design by Lilly Lam

Printed in Hong Kong by Moonchild Production Co.

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Introduction

In Cantonese the words ‘four’ and ‘die’ sound very similar, giving the number four a bad reputation. In this fourth volume I’ve tempted fate and chosen four sets of photos to explore.

We’ll start with several photos taken from a 1920s album. There are some fascinating scenes to investigate, though we’ll also discover that the source of the album’s photos isn’t quite what I expected.

The photos in the second set are from a mishmash of times and photographers, but they all show people carrying loads on shoulder poles. Shoulder poles, and the people who carried them, became a bit of an obsession while I was preparing this book!

Then it’s back to another album, this time one that was obviously produced professionally for sale. It’s from 1902, so it’s older than the first one, and its photos are larger with even more detail to explore.

Saving my favourites for last, we’ll finish with an assortment of photos taken in Kowloon from the 1950s right back to the 1910s. Old photos of Kowloon aren’t as common as photos of Hong Kong Island, so I especially enjoyed writing about them.

Open up that 1920s album and let’s get started ...



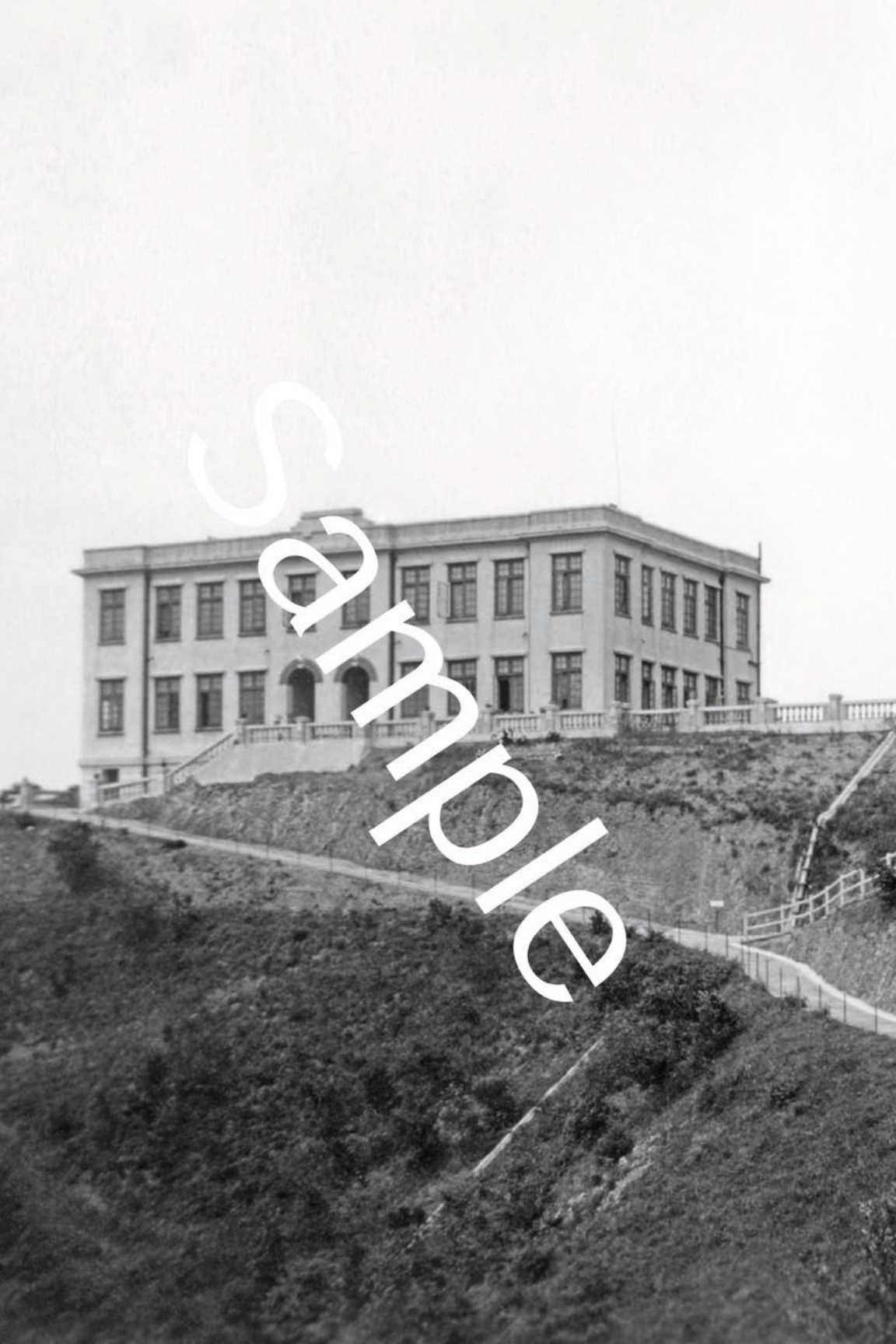




Photo ④ : Hilltop houses



Our last photo from the album shows these two buildings on a hilltop. The site also has a grim story attached, but our album owner couldn't have known that as the events didn't take place until the 1940s.

Back to 1929, and where was this taken? We've obviously left mid-levels behind as we're at the top of a hill. I drew a blank, and asked readers on the Gwulo website for their help. Regular contributor *Moddsey* pointed me to the hill between Wanchai Gap and Magazine Gap, and sure enough, it's a match! Now that we know where to look, I can also see the hill back on pages four and seven, and in this 1930 panorama from Volume 1 (p.90).

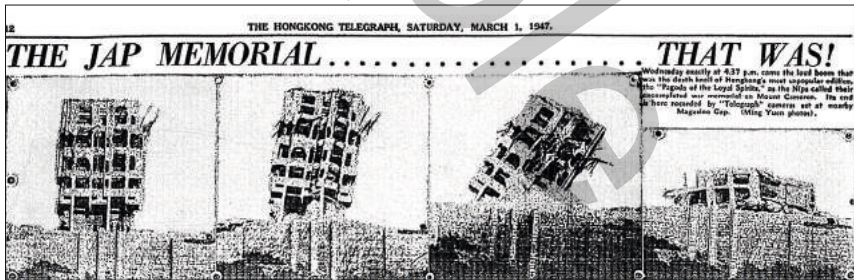


These buildings certainly had a fantastic view out over Hong Kong and Kowloon. Of course it also meant the buildings could be seen from most of Hong Kong's built-up areas. That would be their downfall.

Skip ahead to 1942, not long after Hong Kong had surrendered to the Japanese. The Japanese started work on a grand war memorial that would commemorate their victory, and honour their war dead. They wanted a location that was impossible to miss, so this hilltop was perfect. Down came the houses, and up went a large granite platform in their place, with the new memorial on top.

But Japan's fortunes soon changed, and the memorial took on a new, darker purpose. In post-war trials, Japanese Major Hirao Yoshio said that by 1943 they already knew Hong Kong would eventually be recaptured, and that the memorial was to be a tomb where all the Japanese would gather to die. Fortunately, Japan's sudden surrender in 1945 meant those plans were never put into action.

After the war, Hong Kong wanted this glaring reminder of the recent miseries removed as quickly as possible. It took longer than expected, as the engineers found that the memorial was an almost solid block of reinforced concrete. Finally, in February 1947, the wait was over.



The granite platform still survives, though. If you visit, you'll quickly spot its buttresses, i.e. the three vertical lines in the photos above. Also keep an eye out for buried treasure: legend says a rare 500-year-old Japanese sword was buried there in 1943, and is still there today!



Sample



Photo ⑩ : Pedder Street

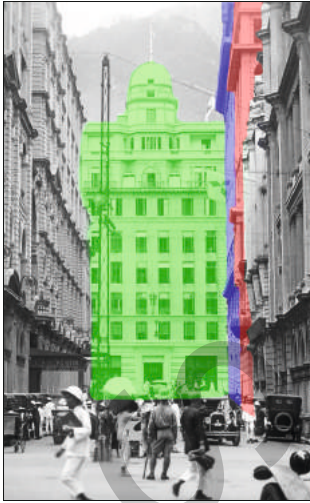


This time we're looking along Pedder Street in the opposite direction, across Des Voeux Road towards Queen's Road. That means the Hong Kong Hotel is on the left, where The Landmark stands today.

We're obviously several years later than the previous photo as Jardine House in the right foreground is all finished, and motor cars have appeared on the roads. The police have had to adapt to the changes: we can see there's now a traffic policeman at the junction, standing with his back to us.

He gives us two clues to help us date the photo. First, he's wearing the 'new' uniform, introduced at the start of 1920. Second, he is holding a black and white striped stick he uses to direct the traffic. These sticks, known as 'traffic staves', were first introduced in 1922, so the photo can't be older than that.





Four buildings will give us more clues. First are the three new buildings highlighted here. From left to right they're the Asiatic Building (later renamed as Shell House), the China Building, and finally Pedder Building, still with us and closing in on its 100th birthday. All three buildings were completed in 1924. Two years later, on New Year's Day of 1926, the nearest section of the Hong Kong Hotel was gutted by fire. This photo must have been taken between those events, likely in 1925.

Comparing the hotel with the previous photo, I noticed they'd changed their lamps. The 1908 lamps (left) were very attractive,



hanging from long cables to cast their light over the pavement. The 1925 design (right) kept the curved wall mounting, but used a plain, glass globe. I can't be sure why they changed, but I guess that heavy, glass lamps hanging from long cables lost their appeal when the first typhoon struck!



This photo's shoulder poles aren't easy to spot because the people carrying them are so small – they're probably just children. One carrier is at the very left edge of the photo and the other, even shorter but wearing the same style hat, is behind the rickshaw puller.





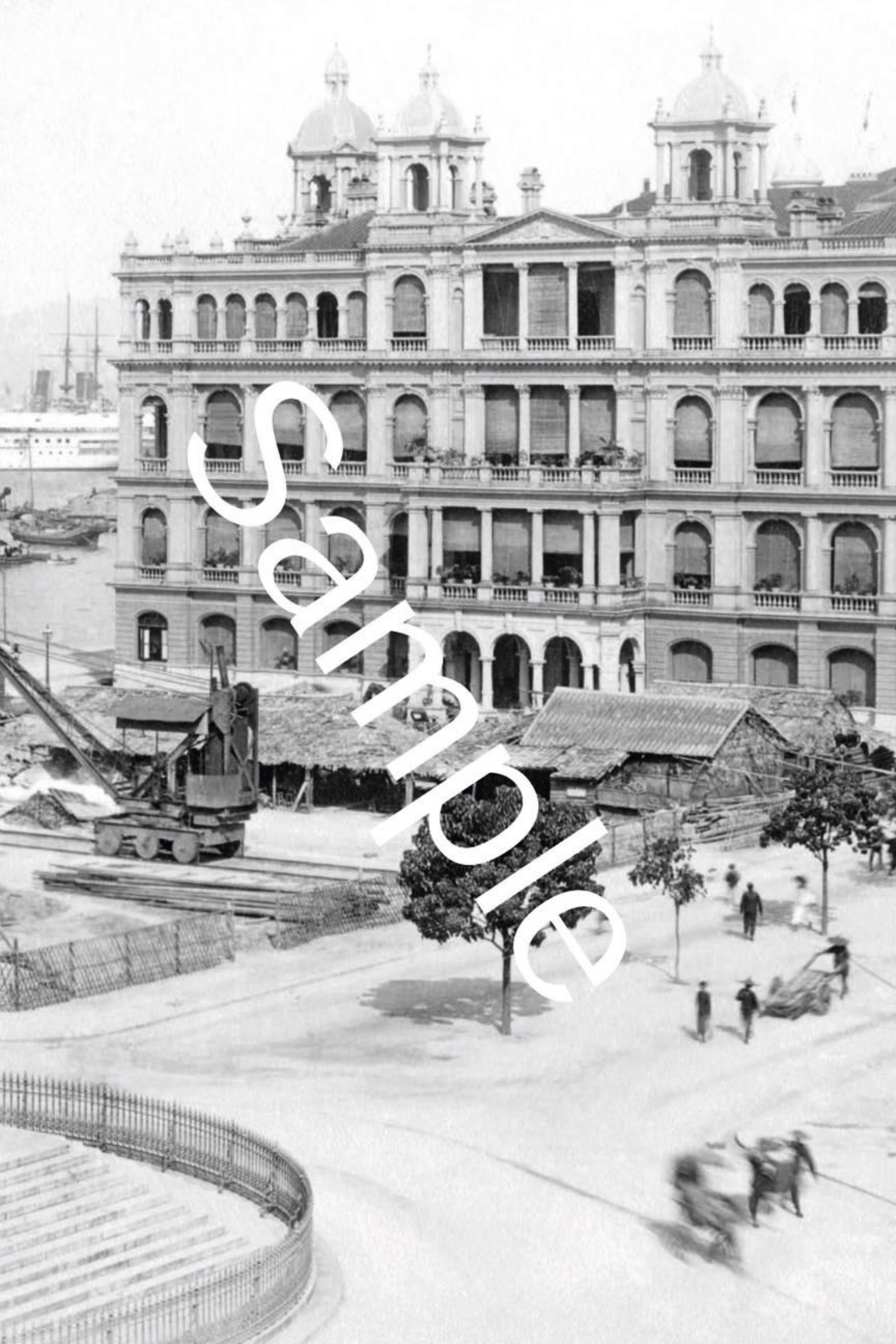


Photo 16 : Queen Victoria's statue



Hurley stuck with the patriotic theme, choosing a photo of ‘The Queen Victoria Jubilee Monument’ that was taken from Prince’s Building. Queen Victoria had died the previous year, ending a 63-year reign that began just a few years before Hong Kong became a British colony.

The monument, shown in the left foreground, was built to celebrate the Queen’s Golden Jubilee of 1887. It consisted of a stone shelter, housing a ‘disappointing’ statue of a seated Queen Victoria. The disappointment was due to a muddle in communication: Hong Kong thought it had ordered a marble statue, but the sculptor understood it was to be cast in bronze. The mistake wasn’t discovered until it was too late, so a bronze statue is what was unveiled in 1896. Victoria then spent the next four decades sitting peacefully in regal splendour, until the Second World War brought major changes.

After the Japanese victory in Hong Kong in 1941, the statue was shipped off to Japan to be melted down for use in Japan’s war effort.

The stone shelter remained, but now housed a copy of a proclamation given by Hong Kong's new Japanese Governor. In 1945 the British returned and the proclamation was quickly removed, but Victoria was considered lost forever, until ... in 1946 the statue was found in 'the murky shadows of the Osaka Army Arsenal'. It was returned to Hong Kong, but Victoria hadn't been treated gently during her visit to Japan, so the statue needed major restoration work. By 1952 the restoration was all done, but by then the shelter had already been demolished 'to improve traffic conditions'. Eventually the statue was re-erected in the new Victoria Park in 1955, and that's where you'll still find it today.

The patch of land behind the statue was known as 'Hong Kong's finest site' in the 1910s and 20s, but back in 1902 it was a builders' yard. In addition to its various sheds and stores, there was also this steam crane, set on rails that ran out to the water's edge. 1902 was a busy time for steam cranes, as there's another one on a barge near the centre of this photo, and a third in the centre of the cofferdam in the previous photo.



The grand building behind the steam crane is the Hong Kong Club, and hidden behind it is the club's annexe that we saw previously. Though the annexe was still under construction, the main building shown here was already five years old. It was a much larger building than the old clubhouse on Queen's Road, but though the members appreciated the larger accommodation, they weren't very impressed with the view from their new front door. If it was bad in 1902, it would get worse – by 1909 the builders' yard had also acquired a brick oven and two simmering cauldrons of coal tar, leading local businessman Mr Murray Stewart to complain about it at a Legislative Council meeting.

The Government replied that nothing could be done – Hong Kong was, as always, short of land, and there just wasn't anywhere else to put it. Fortunately the new Law Courts, the last of the yard's big construction projects, were nearly finished. The yard would soon be cleared away, and after being turfed the ground looked much more respectable.



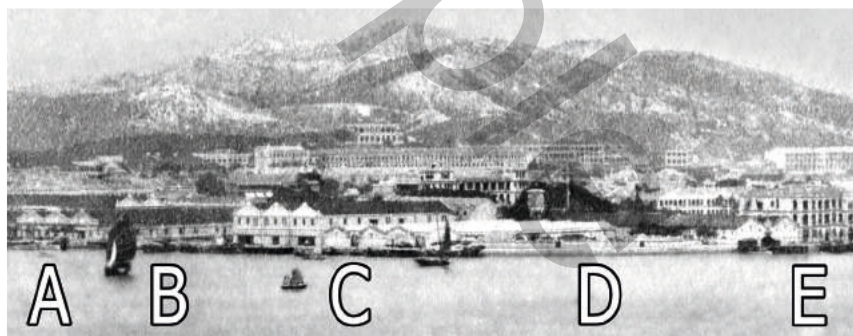
Builders returned to the finest site in the early 1920s, but this time they met with no objections. They were working on Hong Kong's new Cenotaph, which was completed and unveiled there in 1923 (see Volume 1, p. 28).

‘The Kowloon Peninsula’

In Hurley's next photo, shown opposite, he wants us to look at Kowloon. Instead, look at the bottom left corner, where there's an oddly plain wall, part of Prince's Building. I say odd because, as the Hong Kong Club building has shown, plain wasn't the fashion in 1902. The explanation is that this was an interior wall that was not meant to be seen. Prince's Building was bigger than its neighbours, and was built in several phases. We've caught it at the end of phase one, getting a rare glimpse of the wall before it was hidden by the next round of building.



Looking right from the wall, in the centre foreground there's a domed roof, but it isn't Queen Victoria's. Instead it crowned the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank's building. At far right there's the Hong Kong Club again, then look across the harbour to see Kowloon and Tsim Sha Tsui (TST). When we saw this area in 1886, TST was almost empty (see Volume 1, p. 79). Here in 1902 there are plenty of new buildings to be seen.



(A) and (C) are warehouses for the Kowloon Wharves, separated by (B), a boat basin for the Water Police. Next there's open land (D), then more buildings on the south shore (E). For a closer look at Kowloon's development, we'll leave Hurley's album and turn our attention to some newer photos instead.

Sample





sample

Photo 19 : Telephone House



This photo looks south along Nathan Road from near the junction with Kimberley Road. It was taken in the 1950s, and captures a new generation of buildings that were starting to appear.

Back in Volume 2 (p. 82), we saw the three-storey buildings in the distance in the 1920s when they were bright and new. They're still standing in the 1950s, but they're definitely showing their age.



The first of the post-war generation that replaced them was Telephone House, the tall building with the clock tower in the centre of the main photo. Here's how the newspapers described it in 1948:

Kowloon will see the beginnings of its first skyscraper when the first piles are driven this week for a twelve storey office building at the corner of Nathan and Cameron roads.

Though it pales in comparison with today's 108-storey International Commerce Centre, its twelve storeys were a big deal in 1948. The obvious news was the building's technological advance over its lowly neighbours, and how it would steal the Peninsula's crown to become Kowloon's tallest building. Readers would also have recognised another message behind the new building: Hong Kong was back on its feet after the lean war years, and was starting to grow again.

Other new buildings soon followed, including the Princess Theatre in the foreground. It was playing the movie *Salome*, dating the photo to August 1953, when the theatre building was less than a year old.



Kowloon's redevelopment was working its way north along Nathan Road. If we turned 180 degrees we'd see another tall, new building.

1890s

1900s

1900s

1910s

1920s



Central seafront



Pedder Street



The Naval Yard



Ma Tau Wai



Assorted views



Happy Valley



Queen Victoria's statue



Caine Road



Queen's Road



Blake Garden



Hilltop houses

1920s

1930s

1950s

1950s

1960s



The Peak



Queen's Road



Above Tai Hang



Nathan and
Jordan Roads



Causeway Bay



Wellington Street



Kowloon Station



Telephone House



Resettlement block



Pedder Street



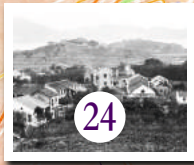
Peninsula Hotel



Shamrock Hotel



Prince Hotel



SHAM SHUI PO

KAI TAK

TSIM SHA TSUI

See upper enlargement

CENTRAL

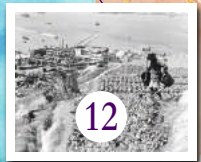
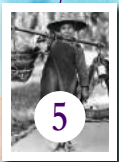
See lower enlargement

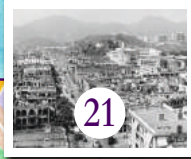
CAUSEWAY BAY

QUARRY BAY

THE PEAK

CHAI WAN





Not your typical photo book!

Revisit old Hong Kong through this book's collection of rare photos, many of them over 100 years old. Then join David to explore the photos' details, and so discover their hidden stories: the women who toiled up the Peak's slopes each day, carrying heavy loads of bricks and coal on their shoulders (p.27), buried treasure still waiting to be found (p.25), Kowloon's vanishing hills (p.106), and many more.

David runs the award-winning local history website Gwulo, home to over 25,000 photos of old Hong Kong.

After three great strolls down memory lane, this fourth volume provides not only a superb telescope into yesteryear, but through David's commentary, allows the images to jump off the page and really come to life. A must read for anyone who is interested in the storied history of Hong Kong and the people that helped shape it.

Helen Tinsley,
Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong

Ever wondered why a photographer took a picture of some building or landscape when it looks so dull? Then you need David Bellis to weave his magic and pull out the photo's stories of lost times, long-gone people and half-forgotten events. Join David on a fascinating journey that links Hong Kong's past with its present.

Patricia O'Sullivan,
Author of Women, Crime and the Courts: Hong Kong 1841-1941

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ISBN 9789887827634



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