

# Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell

Volume 3



David Bellis

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# Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell

**Volume 3**



**David Bellis**

**Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell  
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First published in Hong Kong in 2019 by Gwulo,  
[www.gwulo.com](http://www.gwulo.com)

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ISBN 978-988-78276-2-7

Page-layout and cover design by Lilly Lam

Printed in Hong Kong by Moonchild Production Co.

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## Introduction

Have you noticed how so many old Hong Kong photos have a harbour-related theme?

The harbour is still important today, but it had a much greater impact on the people shown here, photographed in Hong Kong in the early 20th century.

Today, almost all international visitors fly into the airport, but back then you sailed into the harbour. Today we shuttle between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon through one of the several tunnels. Then, you crossed the harbour by boat.

Hong Kong's international trade happened right in front of you, along the shores of the island and Kowloon, not out of sight in a distant container terminal. The harbour even kept you cool – in those days before air-conditioning, one of the few times you felt really cool during Hong Kong's long summer was when you jumped in the sea for a swim.

Finally, for tens of thousands of Hong Kong's residents, the harbour was home. They lived on the countless junks and sampans dotted around Hong Kong's bays and typhoon shelters.

So in this third volume, we'll look at the harbour through the eyes of these different groups of people, and see what stories they have to tell us.

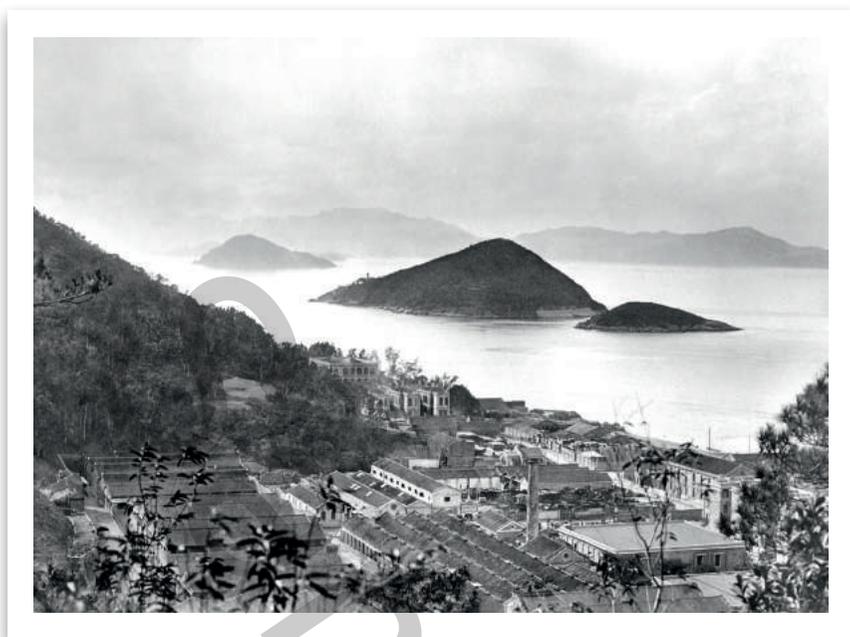
We'll start with tourists. They'd have arrived by ship, so what did they see as they first sailed into Hong Kong's harbour?







## Photo ① : Sulphur Channel



Our first photo comes from a small, commercially-produced album that was sold to tourists in the 1920s. It has a printed description:

This photograph, taken from the recreation ground of Hongkong University, gives a glimpse of the beautiful western entrance to Hongkong's famous harbour. Most of the big passenger ships to and from the South sail via this deep and narrow passage which separates Green Island from Hongkong, while vessels to and from the North use the more magnificent eastern channel, Lyemun Pass. The buildings seen in the foreground here are at the extreme West of Victoria City.

Green Island is the conical island roughly in the centre of this photo. We can just make out the shape of its lighthouse on the left, at the entrance to the 'deep and narrow passage' known as Sulphur Channel. The buildings in the foreground are in Kennedy Town, though the district doesn't get a mention in the 1920s write-up.

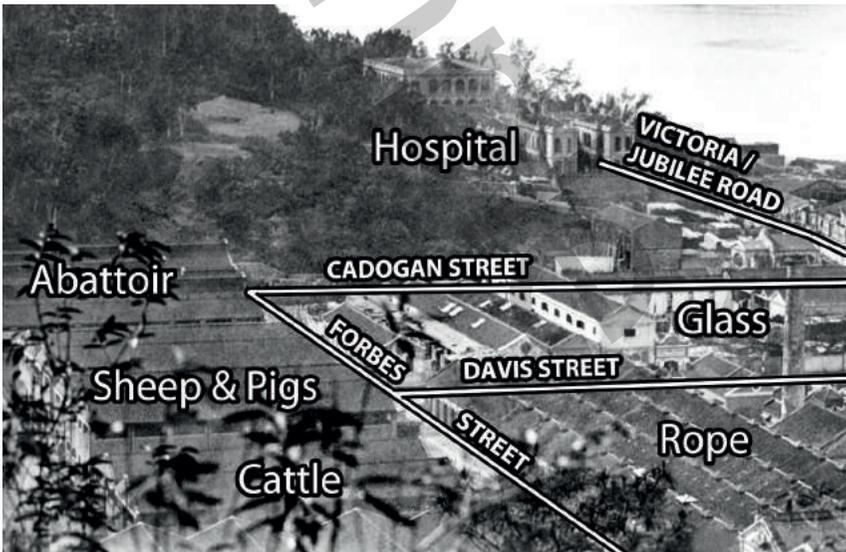
Kennedy Town wasn't considered worthy of a mention as it wasn't on any of the tourist trails – but what *would* tourists have seen if they'd visited in the 1920s?

'Ladies and gentlemen, as you descend from the motor carriage, please step carefully, as you are in the middle of an industrial district. Directly ahead is the glassworks, while on our left is the rope factory.

The animal noises? Don't be alarmed, Madam! That's just the nearby abattoir. You may have also noticed a certain aroma in the air. That'll be from the sheep and pig depot next door, or possibly from the cattle sheds on Smithfield Road.

Not a place for deep breaths? Quite right Sir, especially as we're only a cough and a sneeze away from Hong Kong's infectious diseases hospital.'

Hmmm, maybe there was good reason that few tourists visited!

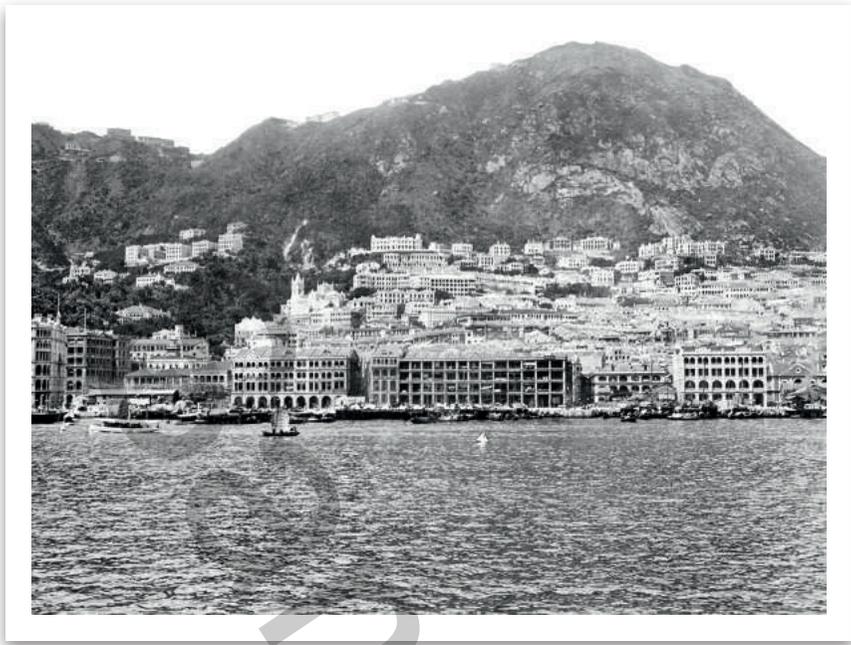


We'll let our visitors sail on by in blissful ignorance, then catch up with them again when their ship moors off Central.





## Photo ② : Central and the Peak, c. 1906



What a dramatic sight this must have been – such a contrast to the visitors’ ocean voyage. Their last few days had been spent looking at the featureless horizon, but here the sheer face of the Peak rises high above the city. The clean sea breeze is replaced by the smells and sounds of the city, and the open sea traded for a harbour that’s busy with boats of all shapes and sizes.

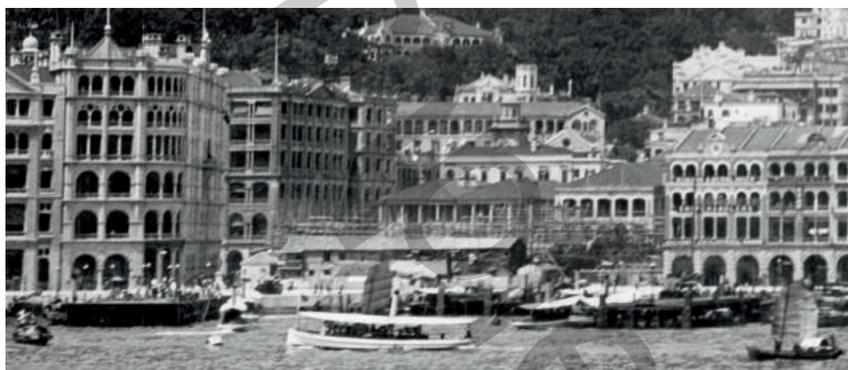
Let’s take a closer look, starting at the top of the photo. If you follow the skyline from left to right, you’ll see it forms a shallow ‘V’. The bottom of that V is Victoria Gap, where the Peak Tram line ends.

Continue right, rising up over a low hill, then dipping to reach a long building. If the tourists had arrived a few years earlier they could have stayed there, as the long building was built as the Mount Austin Hotel. But by this time the hotel business had failed. The building became the Mount Austin Barracks, so in 1906 the residents were British soldiers.

Below the barracks are the steep slopes of the Peak, barren until we reach these grand houses along Conduit Road.



The grandest of them all was Marble Hall at top left. It was Sir Catchick Paul Chater's house, and it had a fantastic view over the city to the seafront and the harbour beyond. The seafront held a special interest for Chater. He was the driving force behind the recent project to reclaim land along Hong Kong's north shore, creating the new Connaught Road. By 1906 the reclamation was all finished, but Chater could still admire the new buildings rising up along the water's edge.



The tall building on the left was Hotel Mansions, completed in 1905. In front of it, Blake Pier extends into the harbour from the end of Pedder Street. The pier is where our tourists would first step ashore, ferried there from their ship on a launch like the one in the foreground above. Above the launch is an open area, showing a mass of bamboo scaffolding. It's a sure sign that a large construction project was underway. In this case they're building the new General Post Office (GPO). That's our clue that dates the photo to around 1906.

At the right edge of the photo, Connaught Road has two empty plots.

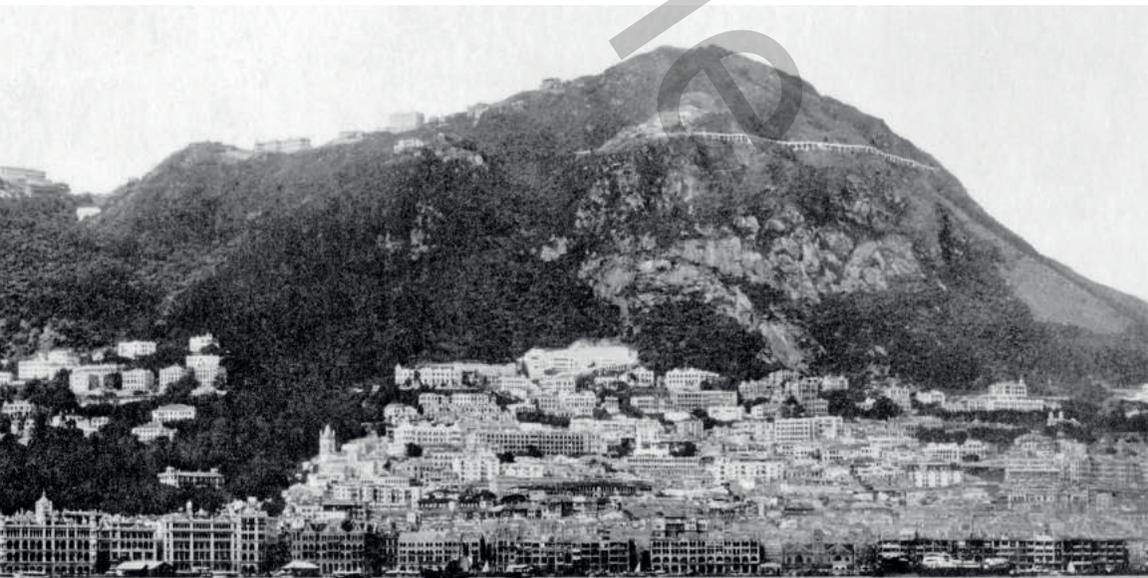


We know they're empty because we can see through to the shorter, older buildings back on Des Voeux Road. The older building on the right with a circle in its gable is an earlier version of Central Market.

Back on the main photo, draw a line between the GPO and Marble Hall. About half way along, you'll see this pair of buildings: the Roman Catholic Cathedral, and its free-standing bell tower. They'll have their own story to tell later in the book.



We're going to stay with this view for the next few photos, but you'll see how it changes over the years.



Comparing this view with the previous photo, an obvious change is the white line running across the face of the Peak: that's Lugard Road. Most new roads in Hong Kong were built to open up new land for sale and so turn a profit, but Lugard Road was to be different:

Though a few building sites will be rendered available on a spur below the signalling flagstaff, the road will be principally used as a promenade, a wonderful panoramic view of the City, Harbour and surroundings being obtainable from it.

The new road fulfilled its promise of 'a wonderful panoramic view', and has been one of Hong Kong's most popular walks ever since.

The mood isn't so happy down in mid-levels. Chater is probably feeling a bit grumpy that new buildings overlook his Marble Hall.



On the bright side, this was the limit – any higher up, the slope is just too steep to build on. Even today, the buildings above Conduit Road stand on the same sites as these grand old houses.

What about a date for this view? Lugard Road is our first clue. It was built in two halves, east and west. The east section could be cut into the hillside, so was easier to build. It was finished first, in 1914. The west section passes over much steeper hillside. It had to be built as a raised pathway on concrete columns, forming that white line we can see. This section was finished in 1921. The photo wasn't taken much later than that, though, as I can still see two empty plots along the seafront. They'll be filled in by the mid-1920s, so I'll go with 1922 or thereabouts.

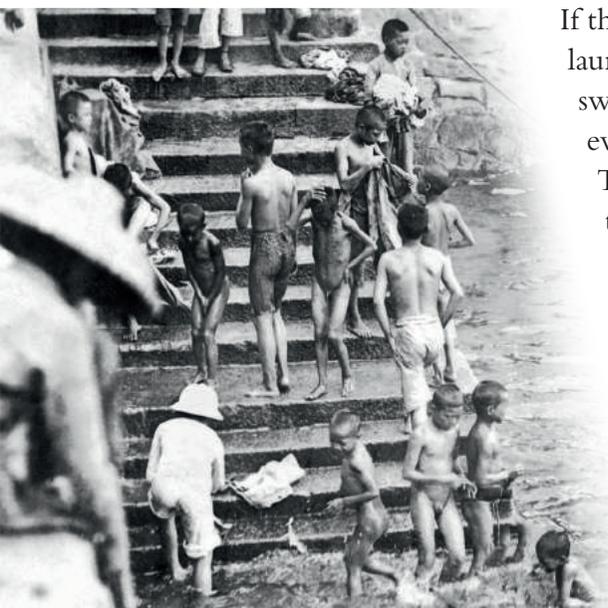


## Photo 21 : Kowloon City Pier

One of these happy chaps kindly wrote this note on the back of the photo: ‘Taken at Kowloon Pier (old city). A Company’s swimming test, July 1907.’

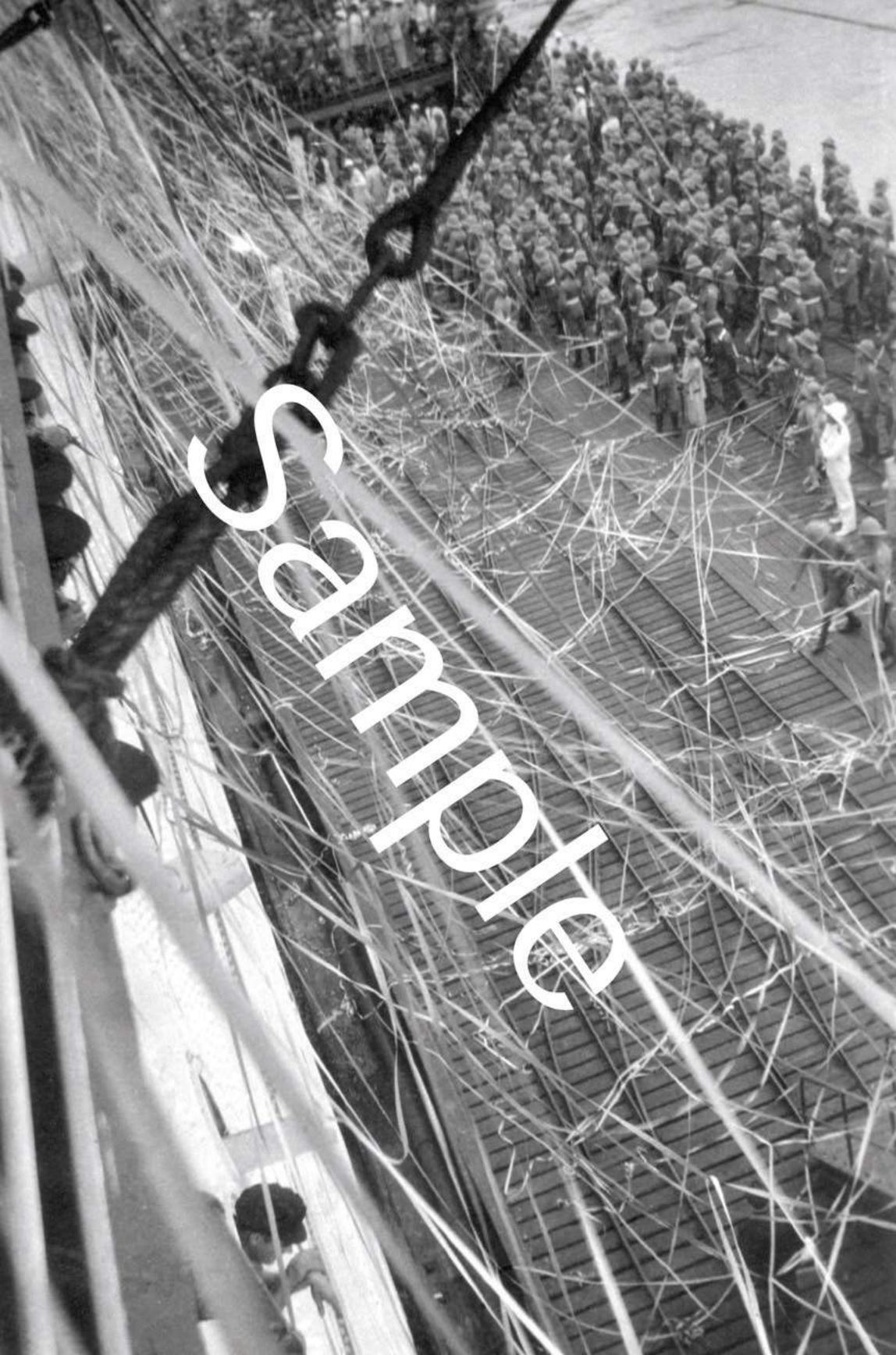
The pier, also known as the Lung Tsun Stone Bridge, extended far out into the shallow waters off Kowloon City. The first section, finished in 1875, was 210 metres long and built from granite. These men are sitting on the 80-metre-long timber extension that was added in 1892. The pier was thought to have been lost when the bay was reclaimed to create Kai Tak. But during Kai Tak’s recent re-development, the granite section of the pier has been found. It is mostly intact, and will be preserved.

The note doesn’t say which organisation ‘A Company’ belonged to, but fortunately one of the men has his cap on. We’ve seen his style of cap badge before, back in Volume 1. It identifies him as a soldier in the Middlesex Regiment. The men were likely competing for a place on the team that would take part in the Water Polo Shield Competition later that month. They’d face teams from many of the groups we’ve met earlier, including the Royal Engineers, the 87th Company of the RGA, and both the Corinthian and the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Clubs.



If the soldiers didn’t need a car, launch, or seaplane to enjoy their swim, the boys to the left didn’t even need a swimming costume. They’ve stripped off for a dip in the harbour at Yau Ma Tei.

All good fun, unless you’re the boy at the top of the picture. He drew the short straw, and got left holding his friends’ clothes!



## Photo 22 : Farewell!

For our last photo, we've come full circle and returned to passengers on a liner. We're on the RMS *Empress of Russia* in 1928, preparing to leave Hong Kong. In the earlier photos we imagined the tourist's view from a liner in the harbour, but here we're clearly moored alongside a pier. Those narrow railway tracks show we're at the Kowloon Wharves.

This ship belonged to Canadian Pacific. They advertised their service as the 'shortest and quickest route across the Pacific', taking 17 days to reach Vancouver. They encouraged passengers to continue on from Vancouver to the UK by catching the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) to Montreal, then crossing the Atlantic on another of their ships. Sailing east might seem an unlikely route today, as we're used to flying west from Hong Kong to reach London. But it turns out the ship-rail-ship journey via Canada took about the same time as sailing west from Hong Kong to Britain, and was a popular choice for the journey.

This new route became possible after the cross-country CPR opened in 1886. The very next year, Canadian Pacific started regular sailings between Hong Kong and Vancouver. In peacetime they carried passengers, cargo, and mail ('RMS' stands for 'Royal Mail Ship'). In wartime they'd carry troops. Britain wanted to be sure it could still get troops to its 'Eastern Possessions', even if an enemy blocked the usual route via the Suez Canal. It was one of the reasons that the British Government provided financial support to Canadian Pacific.

Returning to 1928, your thoughts are on less weighty matters. You'd been having a farewell drink with friends in the ship's lounge, when the stewards called out 'All visitors ashore!' Your friends joined the throng heading down the gangway and onto the pier. They're down there now, holding the end of a streamer you threw to them. The ship starts moving, the streamer pulls tight ... and finally snaps. A last wave goodbye, and you're on your way. Farewell Hong Kong!

1890s

1900s

1910s

1920s

1920s



The Naval Yard



Central and the Peak, c. 1906



Royal Engineers



Sulphur Channel



HMS Tamar



Kowloon Wharves



Ah-King's Paula



Staunton Creek



Taikoo dry dock



Wanchai looking west



Connaught Road



Dragon boat



Kowloon City Pier

1920s

1930s

1940s

1950s

1960s



20

Repulse Bay



3

Central and the Peak, c. 1935



12

Naval wedding



17

Wanchai looking east



4

Central and the Peak, 1969



22

Farewell!



6

Aberdeen Harbour



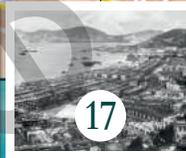
7

Cheung Chau

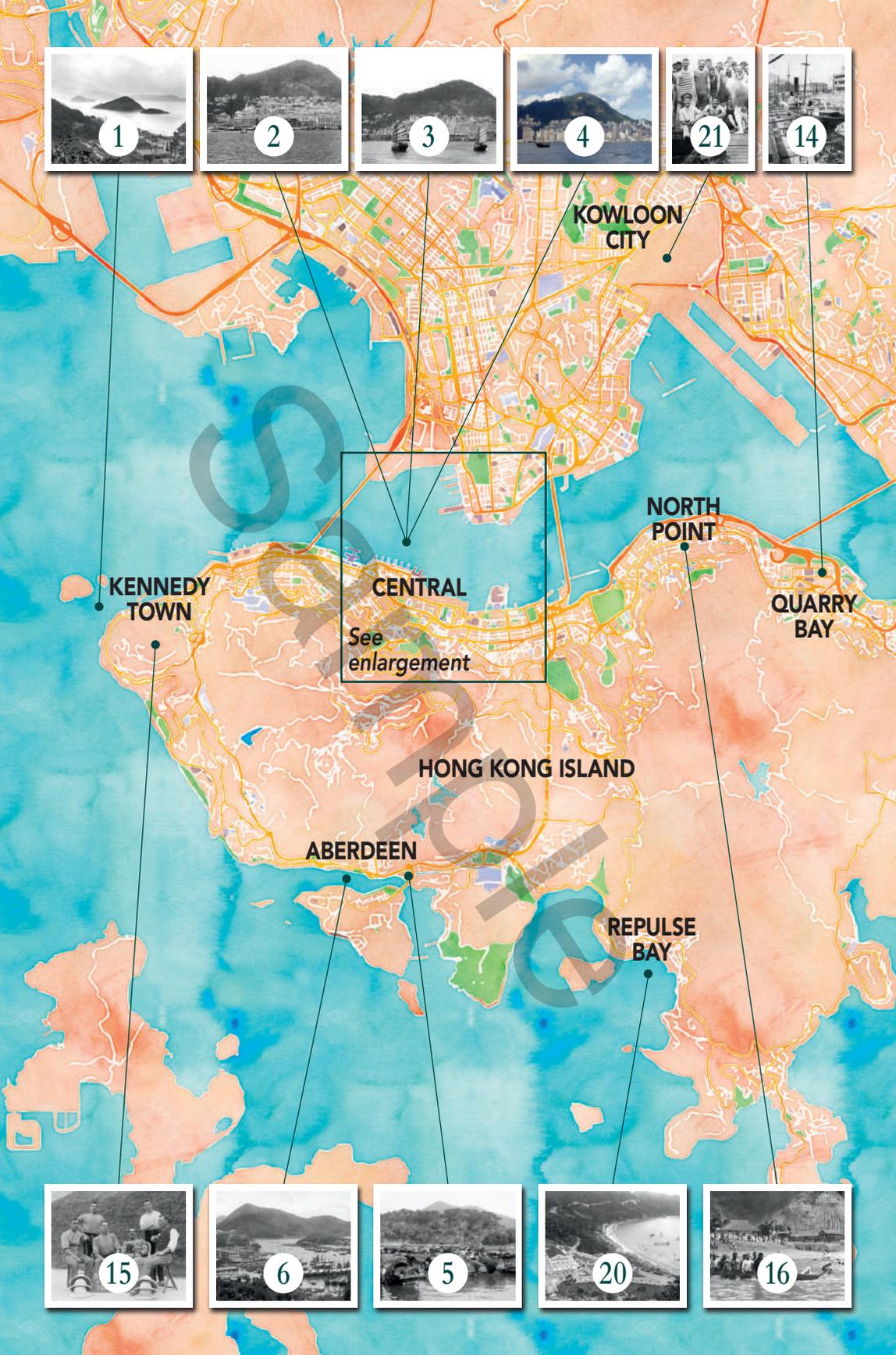


13

Naval dry dock



**CHEUNG CHAU**



# Not your typical photo book!

Grab your flippers, mask, and magnifying glass – Volume 3 is full of old photos of people in, on, under, and around Hong Kong's famous harbour. Many of the photos are published for the first time, and although they're old, they are sharp and packed with detail. So join David in uncovering the photos' secrets, deciphering their stories, and meeting the people of old Hong Kong.

David runs the award-winning local history website Gwulo, home to over 20,000 photos of old Hong Kong.

Spend an hour in David's company, and you'll look at old photos with new eyes. His engaging description of a photo's details sharpens how you yourself look at it, and what was just an old picture becomes an engrossing story. Hurrah for Volume 3 ... and let's hope for 4, 5 and more!

Stephen Davies,  
*University of Hong Kong*

When David Bellis examines historical photographs of old Hong Kong, he sees things that the rest of us miss. In this new volume of never-before-seen images, accompanied by an informed and lively commentary, the creator of Gwulo.com brings us yet more fascinating stories from Hong Kong's past.

Peter Cunich (author of *Old Hong Kong*),  
*Department of History, University of Hong Kong*

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