

Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell

Volume 1



David Bellis

Sample

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**Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell
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Introduction

I collect photos and stories of old Hong Kong.

Sometimes the story comes first, and I'll go looking for a photo to illustrate it. But mostly I start with the photo, and see what story it has to tell.

In this book we'll look at a selection of my favourite photos, and together we'll work out their stories. We'll look for clues to help answer the basic questions: 'Where and when was this photo taken? Who and what does it show?' Then we'll go deeper, zooming in to each photo's hidden details to see what surprises we can find.

Take this little photo as an example – what do you see?



There's a larger copy overleaf to give you a closer look. Then turn the page again and we'll uncover its story.





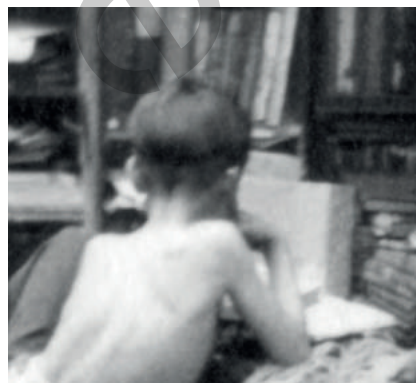
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Photo ① : Hawker • Book stall • Rat bin



There's no great mystery about this photo's *where* or *when*. It shows a street market near Hollywood Road, and it's one of a set that was taken in the 1930s.

The *who* is straightforward too: a hawker with his wares and a young lad reading his way through the contents of the book stall.



In this photo, it's the *what* that caught my eye. Look at the lamp-post on the left and you'll see this.



It looks like a rubbish bin, but it was actually a government-issue rat bin, number 109.

At that time, rat bins could be found all over Hong Kong. The idea was that if you came across a dead rat, you'd do your civic duty by picking it up and dropping it in the nearest bin. Twice a day, a government rat collector visited each bin to take away the little rat corpses. They were certainly widely-used, as a 1934 report recorded 153,711 dead rats were collected – over 420 per day!

Why did rats get this special treatment?

A 1913 government report explains that the rat collectors would take them 'to the Government Bacteriologist. Each rat is labelled with the number of the bin from which it is taken, and if found to be plague infected, a special survey is at once made of the block of houses in the immediate vicinity of such bin.' So the rat bins were part of an early-warning system to raise the alarm as soon as plague infections appeared in Hong Kong.

The plague in Hong Kong

Plague first hit Hong Kong in 1894. It infected 5,000 people that year, and over 90% of them died. (To understand how devastating that was, if an equivalent disease hit Hong Kong today it would cause over 120,000 deaths.)



The temporary Plague Hospital in Kennedy Town, 1894

In 1895, with just 44 cases of plague, it seemed the crisis had passed, but next year it was back as the number of cases jumped to 1,204. That set the pattern for the next few decades, as the number of cases each year swung between the low hundreds to over a thousand.

By the mid-1930s, plague had vanished from Hong Kong. That would seem like good news, but the worry was that no-one could explain why. The government's report for 1934 says: 'For the last five years no cases of plague have been reported in Hong Kong. The disappearance of this disease not only from this Colony but from the greater part of China and its decline throughout the world are due to factors which are not understood.'

Since then, and whether by luck, better health care, or a bit of both, Hong Kong has remained plague-free.

Rat bins in the 21st century

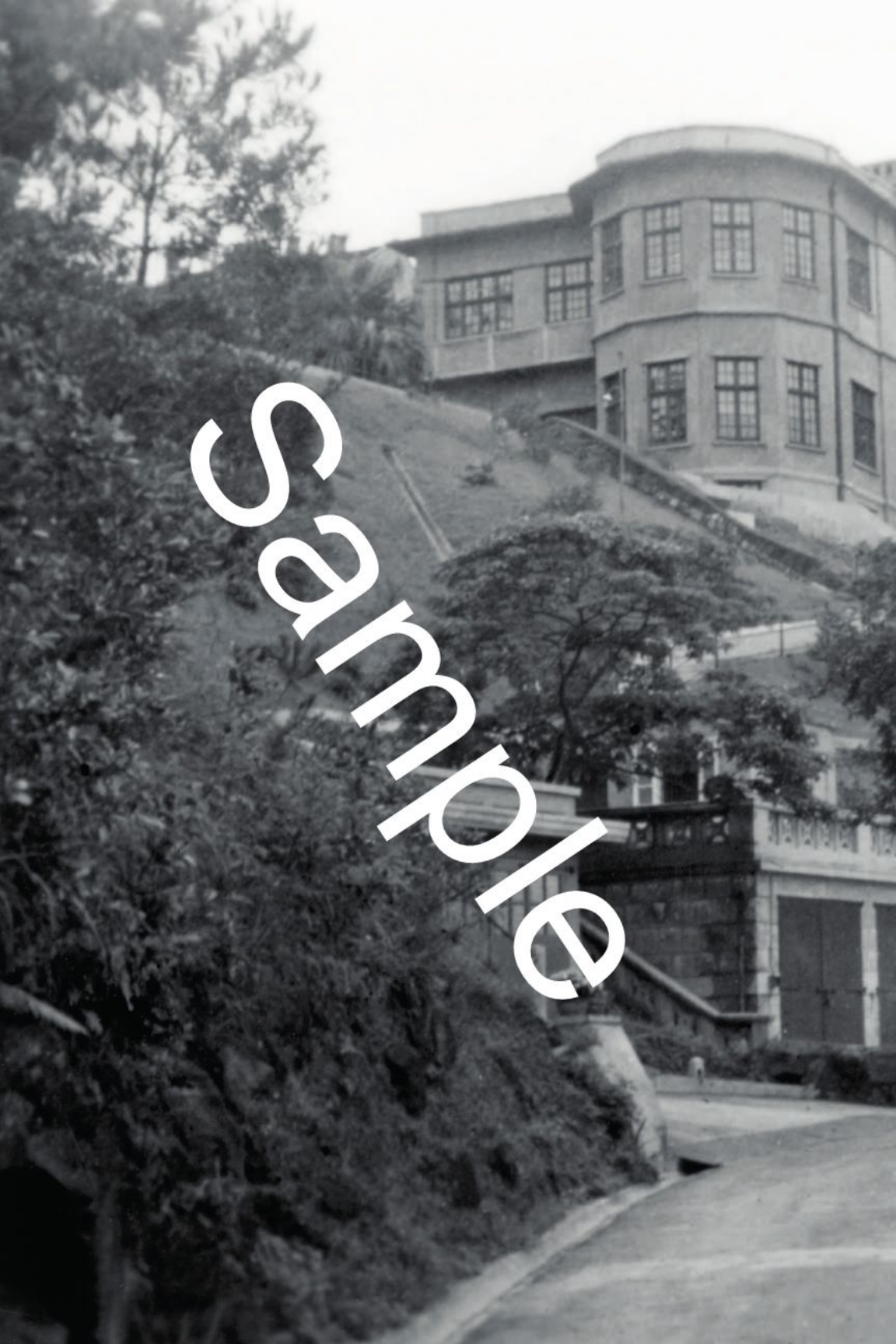
Keep an eye out and you'll find rat bins in other old photos. There's one on the lamp-post at the left of this 1920s view of Queen's Road, Central.



They were obviously still in use in the 1930s, when the main photo was taken. After posting the photo to the Gwulo website, I've been surprised to hear from readers who remembered seeing them around Hong Kong as late as the 1970s.

We don't see them anymore, but you might still hear them. There's a Cantonese saying: 電燈柱掛老鼠箱 (deen dang chu gwa lo siu seung). Literally it means 'a rat bin hanging on a lamp-post', but it is slang to describe a couple where the man is tall and thin, and his girlfriend is short and round!

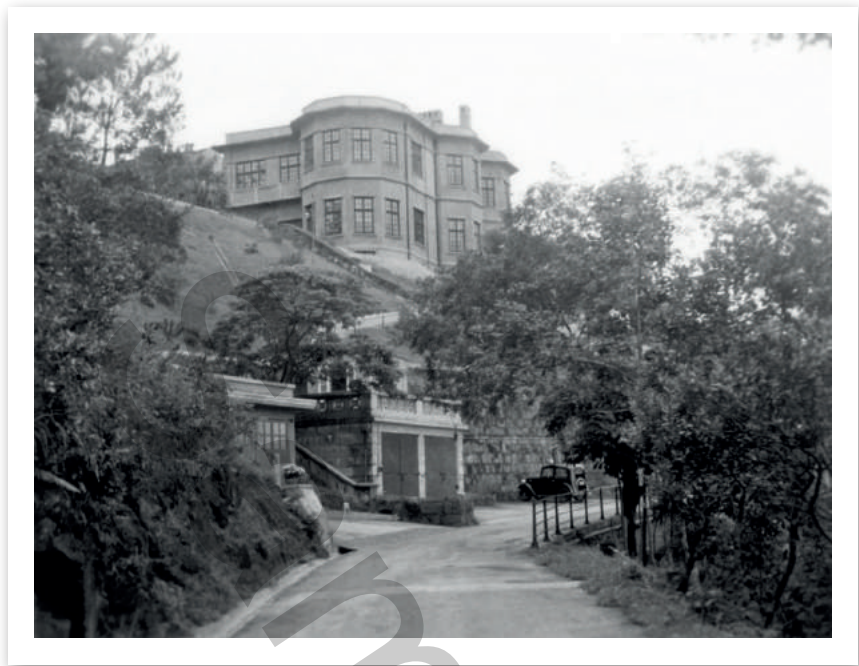
Samples



Sample



Photo ② : Altadena



This came from the same collection as the previous photo, dating it to the mid-1930s. Whereabouts was it taken?

Other photos in the collection show views over Victoria Harbour, suggesting it was a building somewhere up at the Peak.



I took a walk along Barker Road, and found this.



That building at the side of the road looks familiar!



So there's no sign of the main building today, but the garage remains, re-purposed as an electric substation. It's not exactly a listed building, but still, it's good to see at least something from the old photo still standing.

Maps from the 1930s show the house was called Altadena. It is mentioned in a couple of wartime memoirs, which say it was owned by the Standard Oil Company, and housed several of their staff. Maybe whoever took these photos was one of them?

Altadena in wartime

After telling this story at a talk in London, an older gentleman came up to speak to me. As a young boy he was at the Peak during the fighting in 1941, living in Peak Mansions. That area was heavily shelled by the Japanese, so his family had to leave at short notice and take refuge in Altadena. Even there, several shells crashed in through the windows, but fortunately they didn't explode.

He described the men drawing lots to decide who would deal with them. The 'winners' would each hold the corner of a bed sheet, gingerly roll a shell on to it, then carry it outside for simple but effective bomb disposal – they dropped the shells into the swimming pool!



Altadena staff in front of the swimming pool

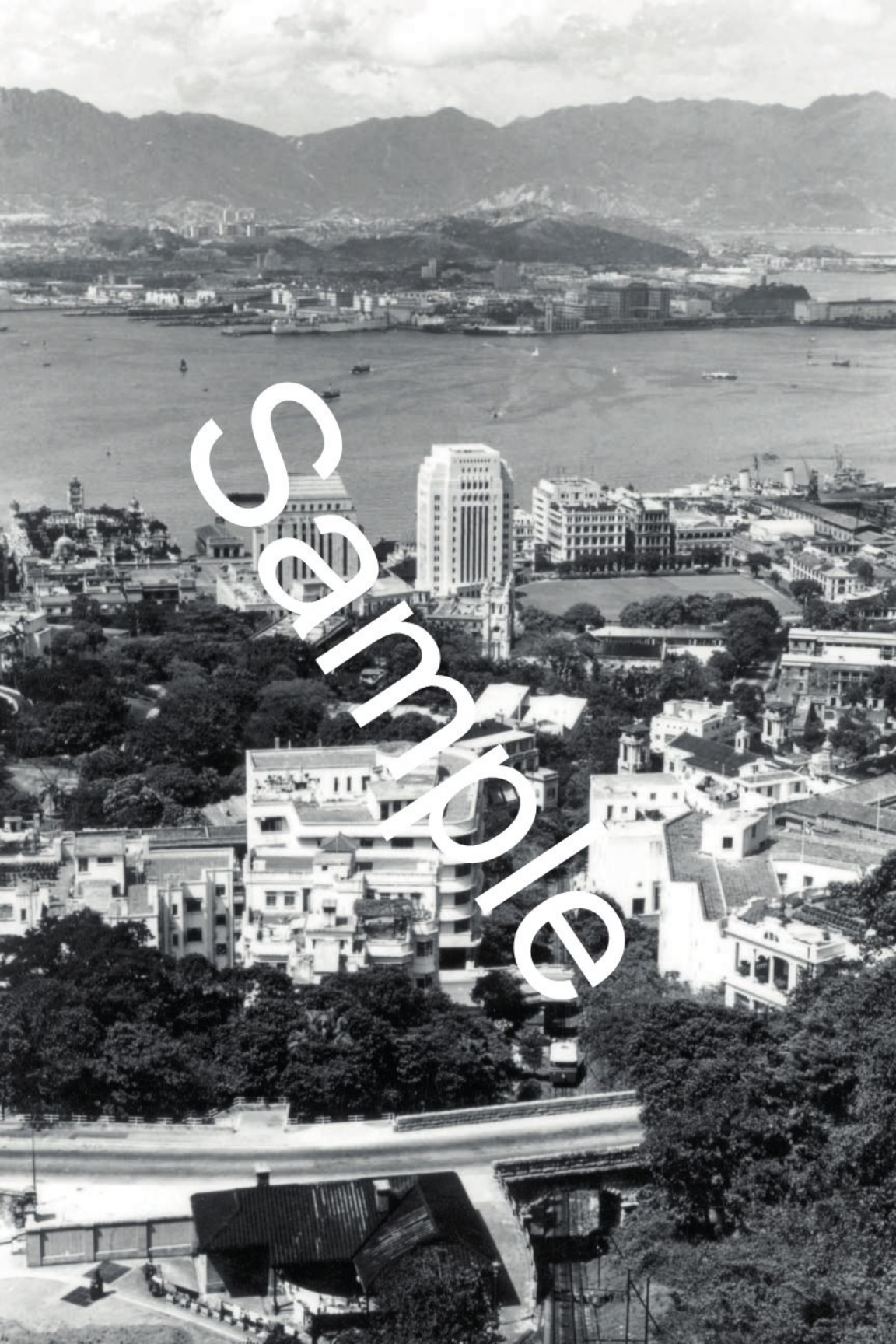
A puny little engine

One last story from this photo is the car parked in the distance. It's an Austin 7, commonly known as the 'Baby Austin'.



As the name suggests, it had a puny little engine, so it seems a strange choice if you need to drive up and down the Peak each day.

I heard the reason for that choice from a lady who grew up near here in the 1930s, and who remembered a neighbour who drove the same type of car. She explained that the roads on the Peak were originally built for sedan chairs, so they were little more than walking tracks. The Baby Austin was the only car small enough to squeeze along these narrow roads.



Sample

Photo 21 : View over Central in 1952

The previous photo is the only point in the sequence where we see Hong Kong's development grind to a halt. There was very little new construction in Hong Kong during the war years. Instead Japan focused on stripping Hong Kong's resources for use in their war efforts. In some areas development even moved backwards, as buildings were destroyed by bombing and looting.

This photo was taken just six years later, and comparing the two photos shows how quickly Hong Kong was back on its feet again. I've copied similar sections of the two photos and placed them side by side, 1946 on the left and 1952 on the right. New buildings are highlighted in green.



Furthest away is the new Telephone Exchange Building over in Tsim Sha Tsui. When it was announced in the newspaper in February 1948, they excitedly described it as Kowloon's first skyscraper:

192-Foot Skyscraper For Kowloon

TELEPHONE EXCHANGE BUILDING

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.

To be built by the Hongkong Telephone Company, the finished building will stand 192 feet high, just 24 feet lower than the Hongkong Shanghai Bank, the tallest building in the Colony.

Back on the island, there is a new building down on the seafront. The old Telegraph Office had been demolished, and the new Electra House (later renamed Mercury House) had replaced it.

Electra House is mostly hidden behind the Hong Kong Club Annexe, but there's no missing the new Bank of China Building, shown here to the left of the cricket pitch.



The construction of the bank building started as a project of the Nationalist government, but straddled the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, so when it was finally completed in 1951, it belonged to the new Communist government. The huge changes across the border in mainland China don't seem to have caused any major delays in the project.

Once the building was finished, its prominent position made it a handy site to hang slogans on giant banners. Usually these were innocent celebrations of Chinese New Year, or the anniversary of the founding of the PRC. But in the 1960s the messages took on a darker tone, showing slogans from the Cultural Revolution. For a time the building also sprouted loudspeakers broadcasting revolutionary messages.

A short distance uphill from the bank we can see the tower of St John's Cathedral, then over to the right is another new addition, the Cheero Club. A long, single-storey building, it was a recreation club for the British armed forces in Hong Kong. A 1950s servicemen's guide lists its facilities as: inexpensive food, billiards, table tennis, library and piano.

Continuing uphill towards the camera, we come to the last group of new buildings.



The two low roofs in front of the Cathedral show the new American Consulate on Garden Road. Above them is the Helena May, then we come to the Peak Tram line again.

On the right of the line, the ruins of St George's House have been cleared and the Freemasons' new Zetland Hall is already complete. The previous Zetland Hall, which stood on Zetland Street, was destroyed during one of the American bombing raids on Hong Kong in 1944.

The new Zetland Hall shown here is the same building we see there today. If you look at the building's entrance on Kennedy Road, then just to the left is the foundation stone. It was laid in a grand ceremony in 1949, and sits above a hidden recess in the wall. Before the stone was lowered into place, a lead casket was placed into the recess. It contains newspapers and coins from 1949, together with a collection of Masonic documents.

The last new building in the photo is a curvy new residential building, built on the garden plot that stood below MacDonnell Road in 1946.



samples



samples

Photo 22 : View over Central in 1965



Our final photo captures the dramatic changes Hong Kong went through in the 1950s and 60s.

The obvious change is the huge amount of construction that has taken place. Flip back to the 1952 photo again, and the two bank buildings dominate Central's skyline. But here it takes a moment to spot them, as they've been overshadowed by a whole new generation of buildings. Hong Kong wasn't just growing upwards, it was growing outwards as well. There is reclamation underway on the right off Wanchai, on the left off Central, and across the harbour east of Tsim Sha Tsui.

All this construction helps to put a date on the photo. Over in Tsim Sha Tsui there's cleared land where Star House will stand. A photo from 1966 shows it was already several storeys high, so we're earlier than that. Prince's Building was completed in 1965, and here we can see they're just taking down the last of the scaffolding. I'll date this photo to early 1965.



Star House site



Prince's Building

Hong Kong's growth is clear to see, but the photo also captures Britain's decline. Between the end of the Second World War and the time this photo was taken, the British Empire had just about disappeared, and Britain's armed forces faced cuts to match. By 1965, the Navy had given up most of their dockyard.



The dry dock had been filled in, the big chimney demolished, and the new Harcourt Road built across the old dockyard land. The Army still had Victoria Barracks, but lost Murray Barracks and their Murray parade ground. The first became a car park and the second the site for the new Hilton Hotel (the tall building above).

Moving any further ahead will bring us into the modern day, so we'll finish our stories here, and bid farewell to Old Hong Kong.

1880s

1900s

1910s

1920s



16

View over Central in 1886



6

Typhoon Damage



9

Farewell to the Queue



18

View over Central in 1922



7

The Big Chimney



3

The famous 'Number Nines'



5

Unveiling the Cenotaph



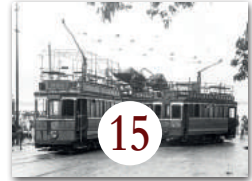
8

Teacups & Tennis



12

Cape D'Aguiar



15

Crashed Trams



17

View over Central in 1907



14

Brownies



10

Flapper Cloche

1930s

1940s

1950s

1960s



View over Central in 1930



View over Central in 1946



View over Central in 1952



View over Central in 1965



Hawker • Book stall • Rat bin



Hawker at Aberdeen



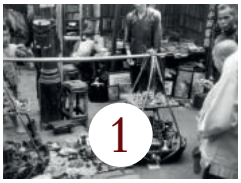
Altadena



A Royal Procession



Bayonet Practice





TAI KOK TSUI

YAU MA TEI

TSIM SHA TSUI



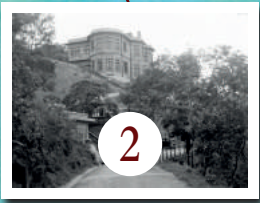
CENTRAL

WANCHAI



THE PEAK

ABERDEEN



CAPE D'AGUILAR

Not your typical photo book!

David Bellis, founder of the popular local history website Gwulo, shows you a selection of his favourite photos of old Hong Kong. So far, so familiar.

But then he takes you on a deep dive to discover and understand the photos' most minute and revealing details. Plague-ridden rats (p.7), flapper hats (p.56), and chocolates (p.73) are just a few of the surprising clues you'll investigate. Finally, David helps you piece the clues together to uncover the photos' hidden stories.

David's ability to discern useful details from historical pictures of Hong Kong is exemplary. This book and Gwulo.com are essential resources for anyone curious about this city's past.

*Dr Kwong Chi Man,
Assistant Professor, History Department,
Hong Kong Baptist University*

Listeners to my show on RTHK know David as a great teller of quirky Hong Kong stories. He brings the same insight and meticulous research to this, his new book. Good to see it is Volume 1 – looking forward to the rest of the series!

*Annemarie Evans,
Producer & Presenter, Hong Kong Heritage,
Radio 3, RTHK*

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