

Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell

Volume 2



David Bellis

Sample

Thank you for downloading this sample. It includes the first two and last two photos and their stories, to help you decide if it's a book you'll enjoy. At the end of the sample you'll also find the timeline and map of photos, to show what else is in the book.

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

This book's photos come in all shapes and sizes, and from a wide range of sources. Despite their differences, they all have interesting tales in store for us.

You can dip into any photo you like the look of, but if you read through them in order, you'll find the photos are grouped into four sequences:

- A stroll through old Central (photos 1-6)
- Queen's Road from west to east (photos 7-14)
- To school by donkey (photos 15-20)
- Construction and destruction (photos 21-26)

Our first sequence starts with one of the photos shown below. They were taken professionally over one hundred years ago, using a special pair of cameras. The two photos were sold as a stereogram, to be viewed in a stereoscope like this one. Look through the eye-pieces on the right, and you'll see a surprisingly lifelike 3-D view of the scene.



Turn the page for a closer look at this photo, then we'll begin uncovering its stories.





Photo ① : On the Praya



The people in this photo come from several very different groups.

On the left is a young, trouserless child in a grubby top, being hurried along by his mum. They look to be heading to the hawker in the centre.

Looking right, there's a young man who's obviously from a much wealthier family – he's the only person among this group wearing shoes.



But does money buy happiness? The look on his face says no!

The next group of children have already reached the hawker, who has some kind of snack for sale.



This photo was taken before the 1911 revolution in China, so the shaved forehead and queue (long, braided hair) were still the standard male hairstyle. At first glance the two men above don't have queues, but look more closely (it's clearer on the man in the light-coloured shirt), and you can see they *are* there, just wrapped around their heads.

From the men's heads, look down to the ladies' feet.



Not a bound foot in sight, luckily for them. But one item of clothing I find curious is the strap under each foot. The lady on the left looks like she's wearing stirrup pants, where the strap is part of the trousers. But the lady on the right has worked the strap forward to her toes, showing it was a separate item of clothing that could be worn outside of the trousers. Any idea what the straps were for?

Location

Where have we started our walk through Central? The stereogram's printed title will help us work it out.

3703 On the Praya, (Water-front) Harbour of Hong Kong, China
COPYRIGHT 1901 BY H. C. WHITE CO.

In 1901, a large reclamation had recently finished here. It expanded Central northwards, so that in 1901 the 'Water-front', or 'Praya' ran along the new Connaught Road. To find out where along Connaught Road we're standing, look back at the main photo and note how the road in the foreground heads off to the left.

Then look at the building in the distance, enlarged here. Its alignment shows that the road swings back to the right again, so there must be a bend in the road, out of sight to the left of the photo. That bend is at the junction of Connaught Road and Pedder Street.

The photographer was east of Pedder Street, so we're starting our walk close to where the Mandarin Oriental Hotel stands today.



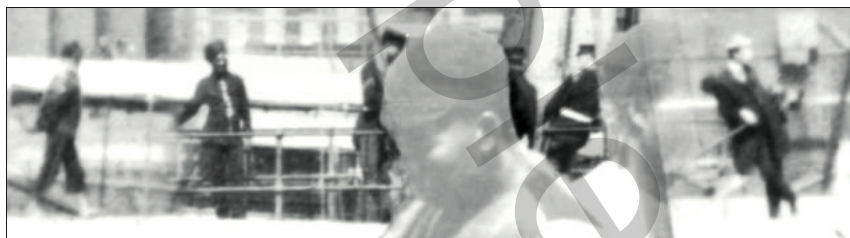
We can see how new the reclamation is by the lack of buildings in the distance – there’s just the one lonely building in the crop above. It won’t stay lonely for long though. Look to its right to see a forest of bamboo poles, showing that its neighbours are already under construction.

Blake Pier

Turn back to the main photo, and if you look at the section between the lonely building and the trouserless child, you should see several hefty stone blocks. These are the start of Blake Pier, which had just opened the previous year.

If the name sounds familiar, you’re probably thinking of Blake Pier in Stanley, which uses part of the roof from this, the original Blake Pier. There’s no sign of the roof in this photo, though, as it wouldn’t be finished until 1909.

Back to 1901, and there is quite an assortment of different people on the pier. On the left is a barefoot man, then in the centre are several men in uniform, both Indian and European. Finally, at the right is a man leaning back in a very nonchalant manner, cane in hand.



It’s not surprising to see this mix of people, as Blake Pier was an important traffic interchange in its day. It’s where you’d board one of the launches that carried passengers to and from the ships in the harbour, or across the water to Kowloon.

To continue the tour of Central, follow Blake Pier to the left and cross over Connaught Road to enter Pedder Street. Walk a short way along the street to reach the location of our next photo.

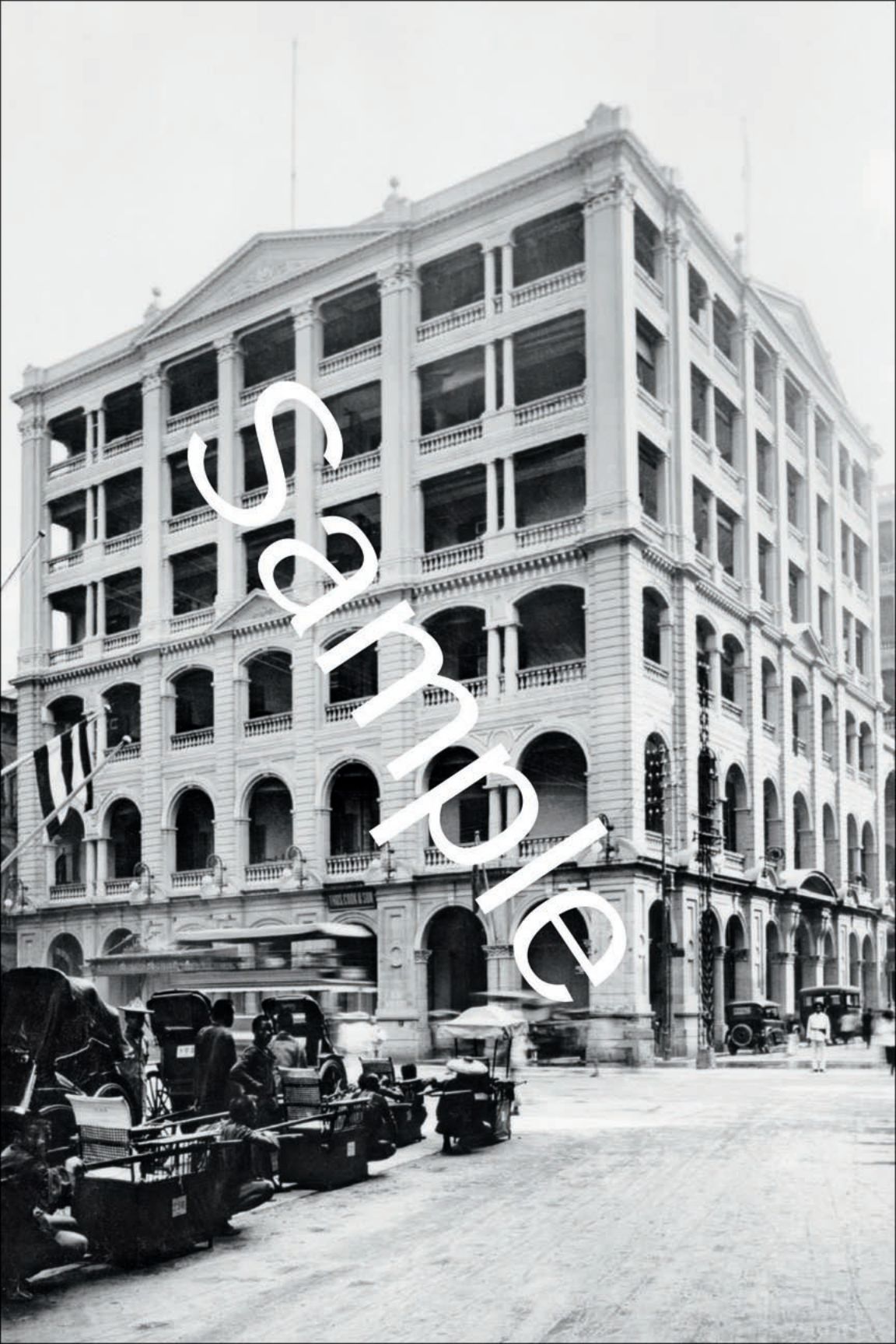
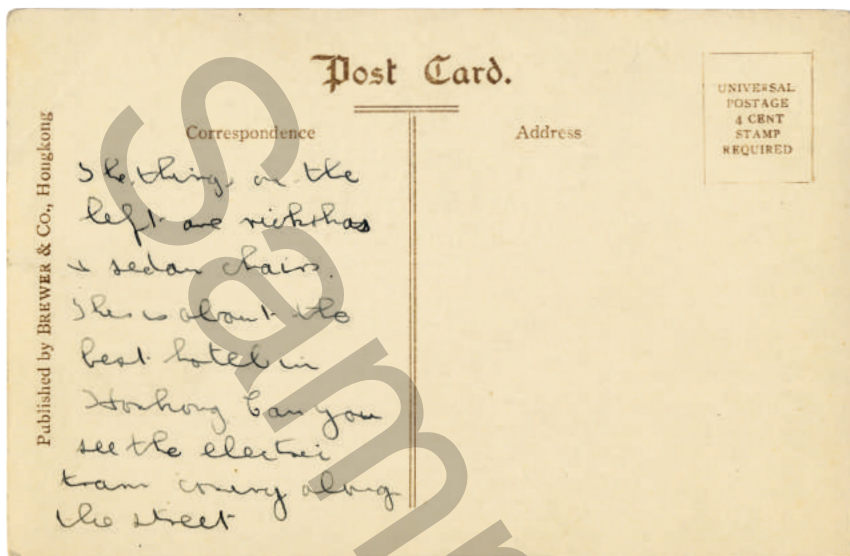


Photo ② : The Best Hotel in Hong Kong

This photo shows the view looking south along Pedder Street, across its junction with Des Voeux Road and Chater Road.

It was sold as a postcard, and its title comes from this pencil note on the back.



The things on the left are rickshas & sedan chairs
This is about the best hotel in Hongkong
Can you see the electric tram coming along the street

The 1920s

Filling up the centre of the photo is 'the best hotel' – the Hong Kong Hotel. It started life as a much smaller building, but this photo shows the hotel in its prime, when it ran from Des Voeux Road all the way along Pedder Street to Queen's Road.

The section of the hotel we see is the north wing, and it can help us put a date on this view. It was finished in 1892, and originally looked out over the harbour. The reclamation in the 1890s took away the sea view, then in 1926 this wing was destroyed by fire.

That gives us a range of 1892–1926 as possible years this photo was taken. The ‘electric tram’ helps narrow it down further.



Hong Kong’s trams have been through several different configurations over the years. This one has an upper deck with a canvas roof, a design in use from 1913 until around 1924. The motor cars suggest we’re towards the end of that period, so I’ll date it to c. 1920.

Ghosts

An Indian policeman is looking at us from across the junction.

We see him because he’s standing still. The ghostly figures around him show people on the move – films then needed longer exposures, so anything moving appears as a blur.



For an extreme example, look carefully at the street in front of the hotel pillars.



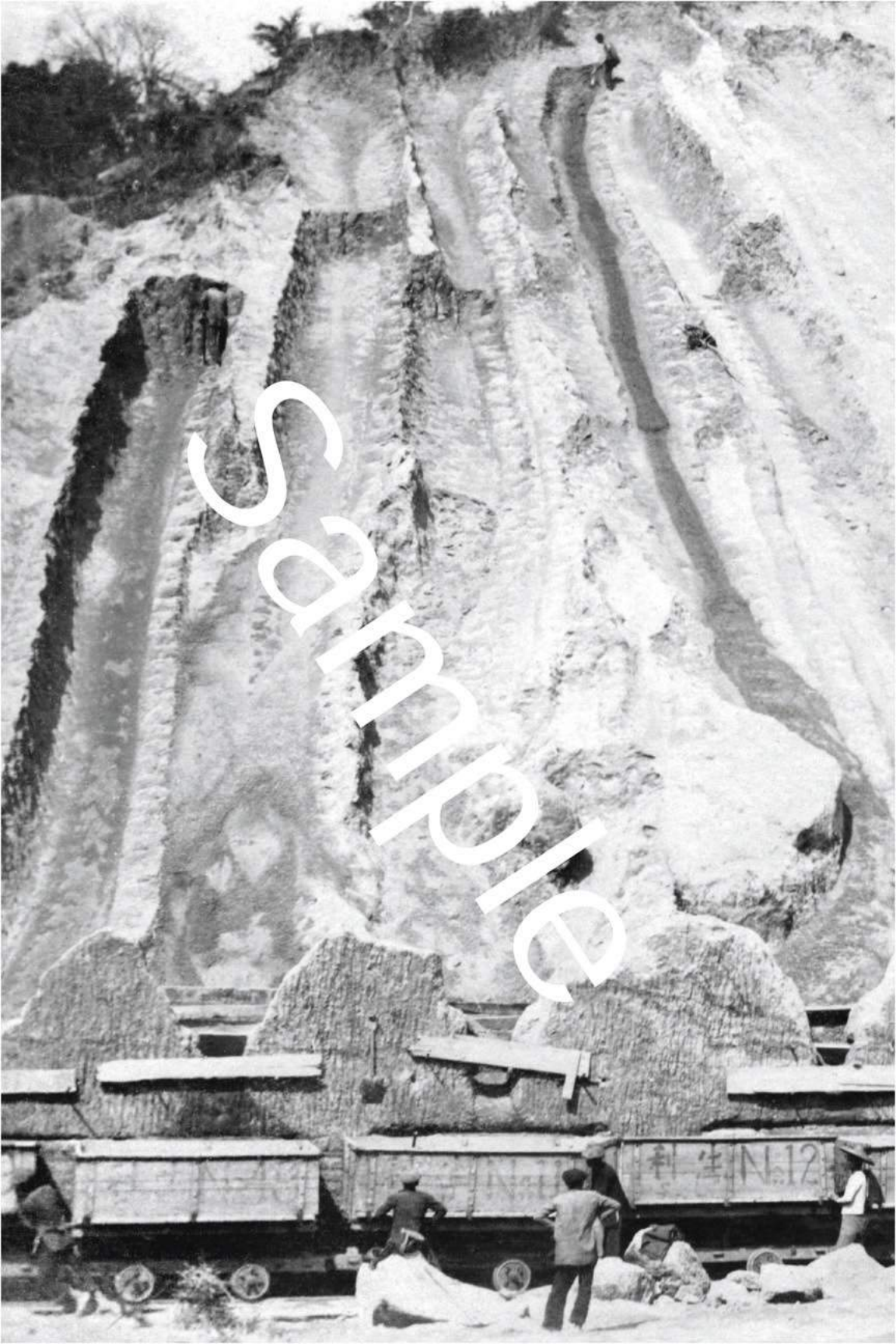
At left and right we can see a couple of disembodied feet! They belonged to the men carrying the sedan chair, which appears as a shadowy outline in the middle. Each foot stayed still for just a moment after hitting the ground, and that is why we can see it.

In the left foreground are more sedan chairs, and rickshaws too.



Several of the men among them have noticed the camera and look towards us. But the men at the front of the queue look intently ahead. I guess this was a rickshaw / sedan chair rank for the hotel's guests, and the men are waiting for a nod from the hotel doorman that their services are needed.

For the next photo, follow Des Voeux Road to the right till you reach the junction with Pottinger Street. Stop there, and do an about turn.



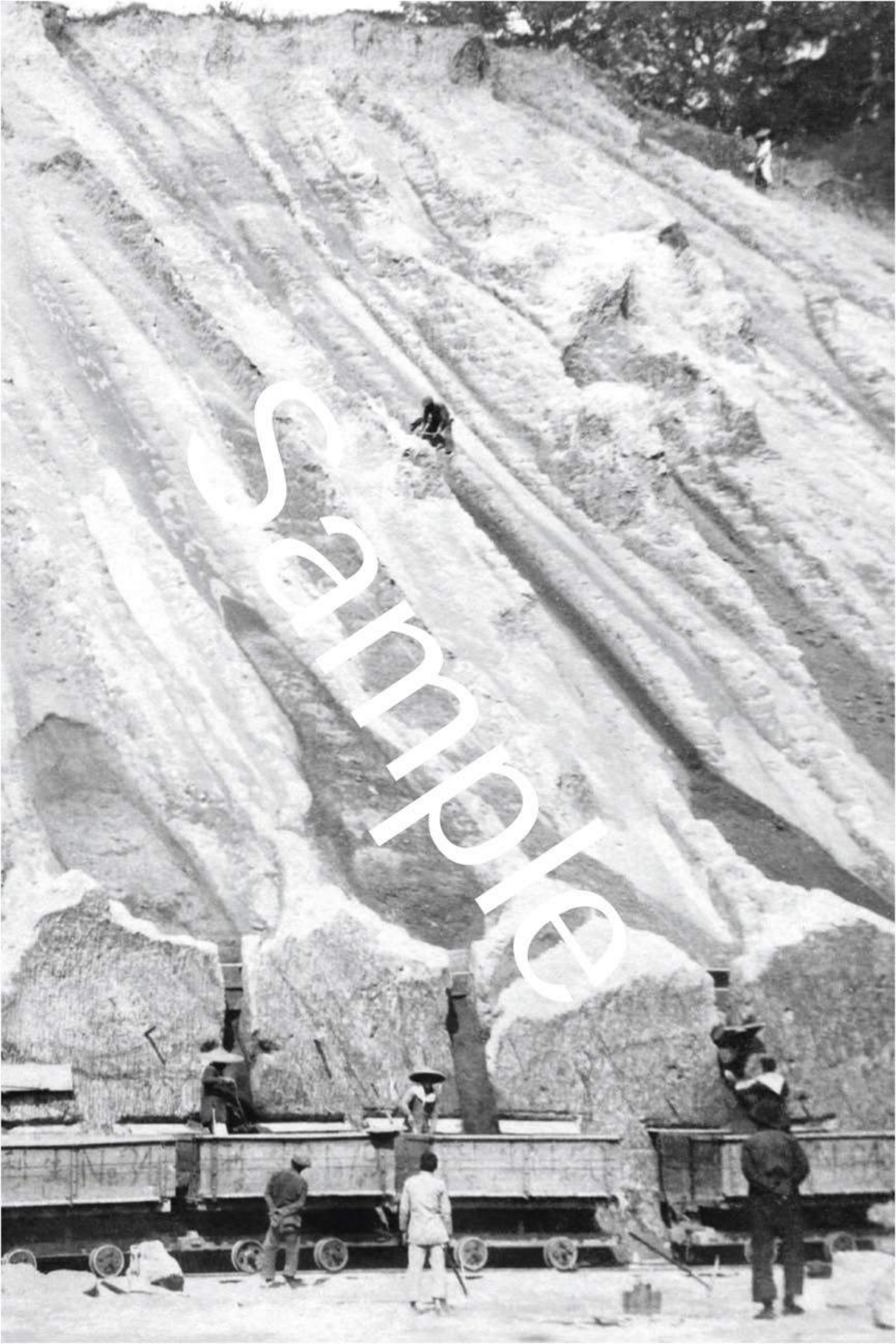


Photo 25 : Goodbye Morrison Hill

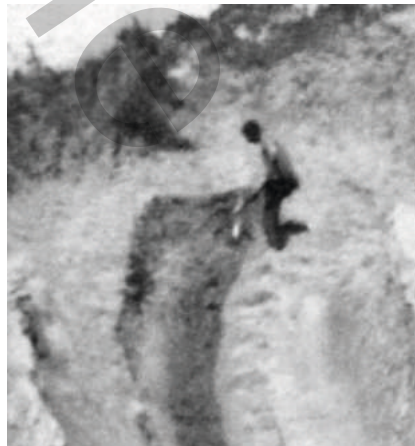


This photo shows the excavation of Morrison Hill. It straddles the line between construction and destruction, as the earth and rock that are dug away here will be dumped in the sea to create the Wanchai reclamation. It's the same project we saw back in photo 12.

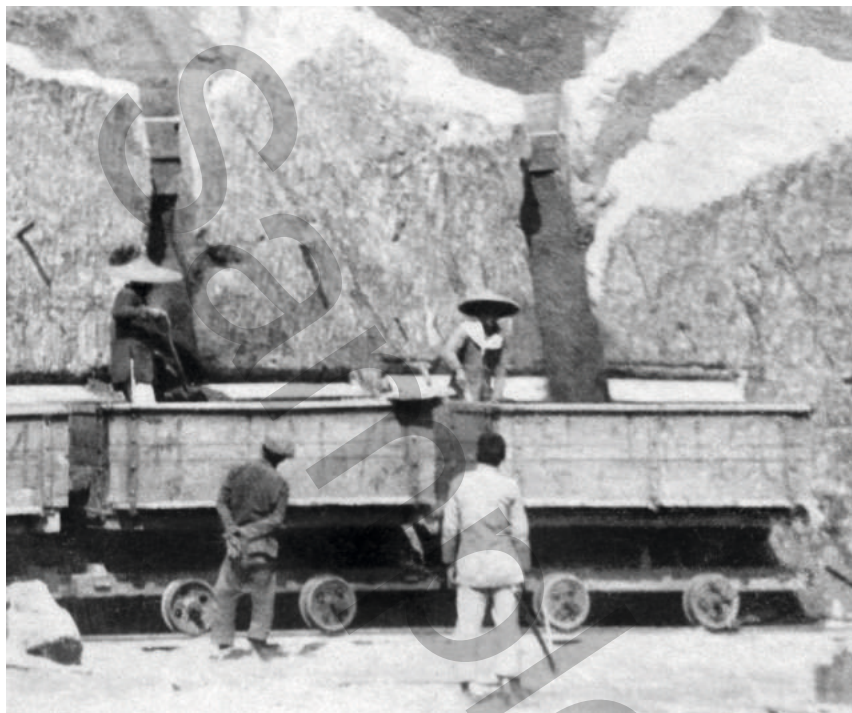
How to throw a hill into the sea

Despite the scale of the job, the photo shows the hill being excavated by hand: a team of men using picks to dig.

Each man worked in a channel he'd cut into the slope. The channel led down to a holding area cut into the rock. Whatever he dug ran down the channel and gathered in the holding area, held there by a couple of boards.



At the bottom of the slope, another team filled the trucks shown below with the freshly-dug earth. They'd park an empty truck next to a holding area, then fit a plank into a slot in the rock. The plank's job was to make sure nothing fell down the gap between the truck and the rock. Finally they pulled out the boards so the earth ran out from the holding area, filling the truck. Simple, but effective.



Unfortunately, after the first 18 months, the men doing the digging started encountering 'crops of boulders' which were much harder to excavate and transport. First they tried working overtime to stay on schedule, but eventually they had to admit defeat, as they were losing money on every truckload they moved. The government agreed to pay more, which got the work started again. But then the boulders turned to solid rock. In the end the contractor turned to other sources for the material to fill the reclamation, especially the old East Point Hill. One side effect of this was that Morrison Hill wasn't completely excavated, so instead of ending up with a flat area

of cleared land, a rocky stump of the hill remained that wasn't finally cleared until after the war.

Back to the photo, and those trucks. When the project began, workers delivered the earth from Morrison Hill to the reclamation using small trucks that they pushed by hand. That was slow work, so in 1922 a narrow-gauge railway was built, complete with rails, locomotives, and the side-tipping trucks shown above.

The rails were easy to move, so each time the reclamation grew, the rails could be picked up and moved out to the new shoreline. That way, the trucks were always delivered to the water's edge. Once there, the 'side-tipping' came into action, and the earth and rock were emptied out into the sea.

We get glimpses of the trucks out on the reclamation, in photos that were taken looking east out over Wanchai. Photo 12 is a good example. Taken from the Peak, it shows the reclamation not long after work began. The photo below was taken in 1928 from a lower viewpoint, and shows the reclamation when it was nearly complete.



The 1928 photo shows faint lines running across the newly-reclaimed land. They are the railway lines mentioned above. Here's an enlargement of one of them.



We can see the trucks on the line, but they're too far away to see any detail. I still hope there's a photo album out there somewhere, that will give us a better view of the different equipment used.

A possible lead is the contractor's name. We can see it painted on the side of the trucks in the main photo: 利生 .



The company was known as 'Sang Lee' in English (the Chinese characters were read from right to left). If any readers are members of the family who owned Sang Lee, and have close-up photos of this project, please get in touch.



Photo 26 : Flying to Work

Our last photo has the caption ‘Aerial Ropeway Kang Hau K.C.R.ly’. Using modern terms and spelling, its subjects are: a cable car, Keng Hau village, and the Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR).

The KCR’s tunnel at Beacon Hill was under construction when this photo was taken. The European miners initially lived near the tunnel portal at Keng Hau village, but they were often sick with malaria. The doctors advised the company to move the miners’ camp to higher ground, to get them away from the malarial mosquitoes that lived in the village’s paddy fields. Then how to transport the men between the new camp and the tunnel? Just like photo 10 – build a cable car!

You might notice the men aren’t dressed like typical Englishmen from c. 1908. They’re more likely to be a couple of the Italian miners who worked on this tunnel. We hear about them in the newspaper reports after the teams tunnelling north and south met in the middle.

The celebrations got off to a good start when Mr Waite proposed a toast to the miners – not just the British, but also ‘the Italians whose expertness in machine drill work, if equalled, could not be excelled’. But after ‘a jolly tiffin’, a Mr Eves nearly spoiled the party, saying:

Many English people think that Italians are a dangerous sort of people to meet as they think they always have a knife somewhere concealed about them ready to stick into one, but I can contradict this most flatly. A more law abiding and quiet set of men than Mr. Ghella and his fellow men here I think could not be found anywhere.

Fortunately the Italian Consul ignored the knife remarks, gave a short speech of thanks, and called upon the Italians present to drink the health of the railway staff. ‘The toast was honoured with many “vivas”, and as the toasters resumed their seats the store rang with loud applause.’ A happy ending for their celebrations, and for this book!

1880s

1890s

1900s

1900s

1920s



8

View over
Tai Ping Shan



13

Kuhlan Monument



1

On the Praya



16

Peak Hotel



2

The Best Hotel
in Hong Kong



7

View over
Sai Ying Pun



22

Blake Pier



5

Queen's Road
Central



9

City Hall



26

Flying to Work



12

View East
from the Peak



10

British Military Hospital



15

The Peak



11

Queen's Road East



17

Peak Tram

1920s

1930s

1930s

1950s

1970s



Nathan Road



Des Voeux Road Central



Beached Ship



Star Ferry



Wrecking Ball



Landslide



Li Yuen Street West



Goodbye Morrison Hill



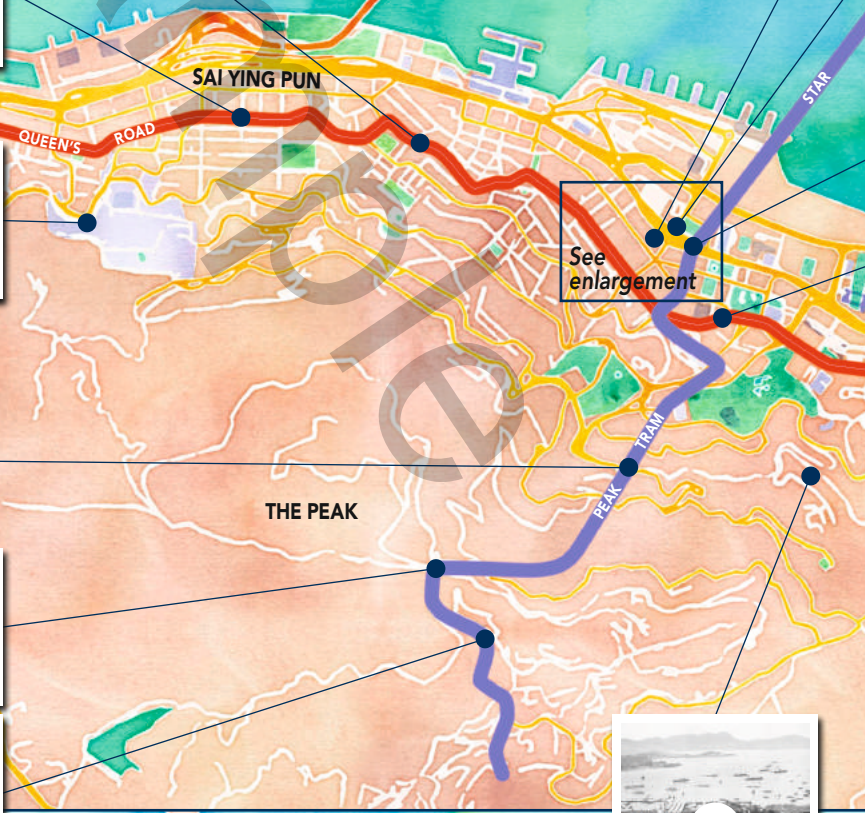
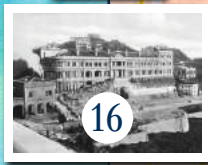
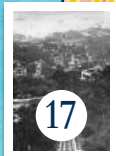
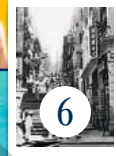
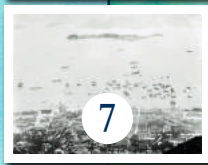
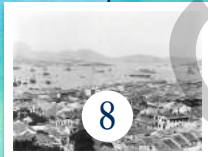
Pottinger Street

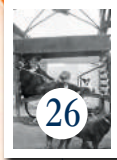
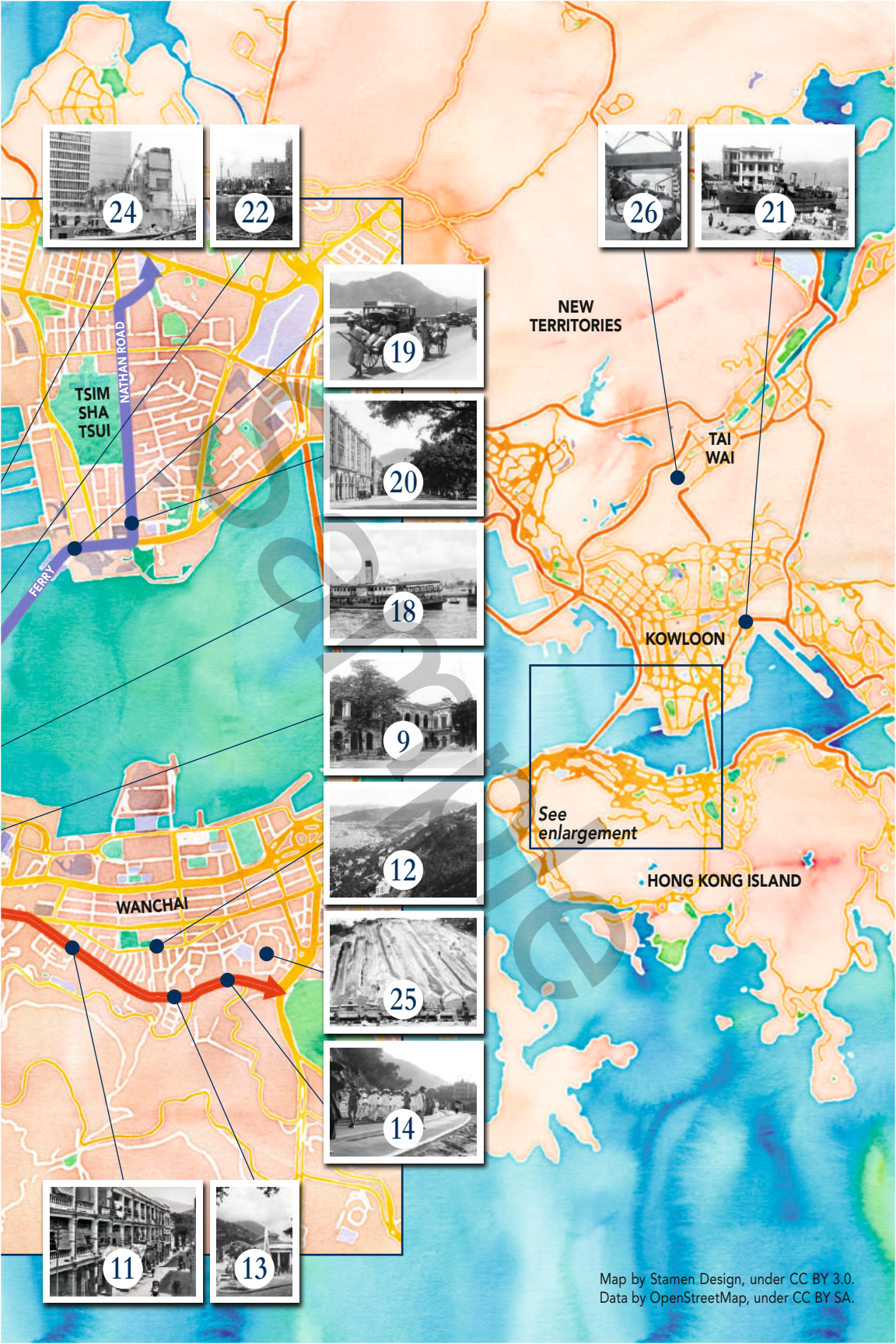


Gap Road



Hurrying from the Ferry





NEW TERRITORIES

TAI WAI

KOWLOON

See enlargement

HONG KONG ISLAND

24

22

26

21

19

20

18

9

12

25

14

11

13

Not your typical photo book!

David puts more of his favourite old Hong Kong photos under the magnifying glass, revealing the photos' secrets, and uncovering their hidden stories. Flying Italian miners (p.107), disembodied feet (p.13), and the most beautiful woman you'll never see (p.17) are just a few of the surprises in store for you.

David runs the popular local history website Gwulo, home to over 15,000 photographs of old Hong Kong.

Reviews of Volume 1

Wonderful memories of my childhood were refreshed as the photos and stories brought to mind similar events.

Robert, *Goodreads*

Eye for detail marks out Bellis's book from the pack.

Adam Wright, *SCMP*

Bellis gives us "old" Hong Kong as it actually was, and reveals more hidden stories in the collection than just the rat-bins.

John Butler, *Asian Review of Books*

This is an example of Bellis's deft way of story-telling.

May Holdsworth, *Journal of the HK Branch of the RAS*

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