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Home > Newspaper Catalogue > The Straits Budget > 1932 > June > 30 > Page 15 > A JOURNAL IN THE FEDERAL CAPITAL.



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The Straits Budget, 30 June 1932, Page 15

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Previous Article

Next Article

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A JOURNAL IN THE FEDERAL CAPITAL.

A Chapter Of Planting History—When Rubber Was New—What Thirty Years Have Done—An Old Favourite Comes Back—Memories Of The Coffee Days—Another String To Malaya's Bow.

(By Our Kuala Lumpur Correspondent.)

Kuala Lumpur, June 24.

IT is strange how the wheel of Malayan agriculture has turned full cycle within the memory of living men. In the year 1901 a Government official visited a coffee estate in Negri Sembilan and this is what he saw :

“On reaching the estate my attention was immediately attracted by strange shrubs interplanted with the coffee bushes. To an eye well inured to the general aspect of a well-regulated coffee plantation these lank seedlings of an alien plant, varying in appearance from short, thick hop-poles to long, attenuated walking-sticks, presented a puzzling spectacle. The planter, catching the note of interrogation depicted on my countenance, hastened to explain their presence, volunteering the opinion that they would in six years' time retrieve the entire fortunes lost on coffee.”

That was the beginning of rubber and today, with the imposition of a protective duty in the Federated Malay States

planters are turning to coffee again.

Early Experiments In Malacca.

COFFEE in this country has a long history and one which will give the future historian of Malayan agriculture several of his most interesting chapters. The Arabian variety, which has been known in the East for a very long time, was tried in the Malacca district as early as the eighteenth century but apparently without success—a result which need cause no surprise, as this variety thrives best at high elevations.

As an estate cultivation, however, this crop does not seem to have been taken up in Malaya until the opening up of the Native States in the early 'eighties, and indeed we may say that it was coffee that brought the European planter as we know him today to this country. In the Straits Settlements in the **early days, and** also in Johore, agriculture seems to have been practised in a rather desultory way by European residents, but it was coffee that brought to this country from Ceylon a body of keen, hard-working, determined men who were specialised, professional planters.

Among the first properties which those men founded were Linsum and Silliam Estates in Negri Sembilan and Tremelby and Glenmarie Estates in Selangor, while there were other early ventures in Kuala Lumpur, notably Batu and Weld's Hill Estates, which are now transformed into residential suburbs, with never a coffee bush left in them and rubber trees only for decorative purposes. Other well-known estates which were opened up for coffee in the early days and are now under rubber are Hawthornden, New Amherst and Braemar, all in Selangor.

How It Began At Klang.

AN old Resident's report gives exact details of the beginning of coffee in Selangor, and it is striking as showing that the credit for that enterprise must go to a Javanese and not to a European. This report says:

"In 1887 Haji Mohamed Tahir, a Javanese, known in pre-Residential times as the Penghulu Dagang, or headman of the foreign settlers, obtained an advance of \$4,000 from the Government, he being the owner of 95 acres of land, now held on

customary tenure, and 700 acres under lease or agreement, and commenced plant-

ing up with arecanut palms, durians, mangosteens and coconuts. The demand for, and consequently the price of, arecanuts has of recent years been much depressed, and the cultivation is no longer a paying one in Selangor.

"In several places many acres of fine areca palms have now been cut down to make room for Liberian coffee, but the way was shown by Haji Mat Tahir, who, with extraordinary energy for a native, has drained his land and planted up a portion with coffee, which has proved so successful that he has been able to cut up most of his land into blocks, averaging from three to five acres, which he sublets at 50 cents an acre for coffee gardens to Chinese and foreign Malays.....The result has been that applications for coffee land are coming in rapidly from Europeans, Chinese and natives, and the quit-rent for the district has been raised from 25 to 50 cents an acre for coffee estates."

The Coffee Boom.

BY 1894 Klang, then a little town with a population of two thousand, was ex-

periencing an exhilarating boom. A visitor in that year wrote: "For some time past there has been quite a phenomenal demand for agricultural land outside the town, and in nearly every case for the same object, viz., coffee planting. Europeans and natives alike seem to have been smitten with the planting craze.....I

believe that about four or five thousand acres of coffee land have been granted to Europeans this year already."

The industry spread to Perak and Negri Sembilan but Selangor remained the principal coffee State, and it was mainly owing to development around Klang and Kuala Lumpur that the export of coffee from these three States rose from 17,000 piculs in 1894 to 100,000 in the peak year of 1905. Considerably before the latter year, however, the industry had fallen upon evil days.

Sir F. Swettenham's Warning.

IN the year after the Federation was founded Sir Frank Swettenham, replying to a congratulatory address from the Selangor planters, spoke some curiously prophetic words.

He said that ten years previously (in 1887) he took some Arabian coffee that

had been grown in Perak to brokers in London and was told that it was an excellent product and worth a high price.

the product and worth a very high price. But they also uttered the following warning: "If you have any influence in the Malay States at all, use it to stop people planting Liberian coffee. It is not worth growing. Nobody will have it, and although it has a fairly high price at present, that price won't continue for more than a certain number of months and then it will come down to almost nothing at all, and it will ruin all the people who tried to grow it."

In the very next year after Sir Frank Swettenham addressed the planters the full effect of Brazil coffee production began to be felt and the price fell away to disastrous levels, while an outbreak of disease in 1900 added to the distress of many estates in Selangor. Providentially rubber came in at that time and, after five or six lean and anxious years, the sun shone for the planters again.

Hill-Country Cultivation.

THE reference to Arabian coffee from Perak in the speech quoted above is interesting because it is hoped that this variety, which still commands high prices, will be successful at Cameron Highlands. In this case, as in that of tea, Boh Plantations are doing much to prove the agricultural value of Malaya's hill country.

The experiments at the Highlands are not the first to be made in this country with Arabian coffee. As long ago as 1880 this variety was being planted on an estate scale at an elevation of 1,500 feet in Negri Sembilan. This remarkable, though brief, episode in Malaya's planting history is described by Mr. Rathbone in his well-known book, which describes vividly the difficulties under which the pioneer planter worked in those days.

Transport Over A Bridle Path.

MR. Rathbone's estate was fifteen miles from Seremban. There was no road and he had to transport himself, his labour and his supplies over a bridle-path, part of which ran through steep hill country. His predecessor had died of fever and he himself suffered from it at frequent intervals.

His labourers were Malays, many of whom had never worked under a white man before and it required only a slight mistake in understanding their psychology to send them back at once to their kampongs. Each man, Mr. Rathbone says, "brought either a kris or spear, often both, in addition to his parang, so that the houses they occupied presented quite a warlike appearance from the number of dangerous weapons hanging and lying

about." There were no Europeans or police nearer than Seremban, and, with a force of two hundred armed Malays under him, Mr. Rathbone—who went straight from Ceylon to this estate—performed a remarkable feat in keeping the venture going at all. Later on he had to deal single-handed with an outbreak of cholera which killed one quarter of his labour force.

Fatal Lack Of Labour.

GRADUALLY he got his land cleared and planted, only to see success snatched from his grasp as soon as his bushes reached the bearing stage. He could not get enough labour to pick the berries, and so long a delay occurred in

getting permission to import Indian labour that the crop had to be left rotting on the ground.

"A stretch of 360 acres of luxuriant coffee in full bearing," says Mr. Rathbone, "which had been planted and cultivated under most difficult and trying circumstances, had to be abandoned; and although nature and disease had been overcome this industry was strangled by red-tape and fell a victim to the seven years of protracted negotiations that took place before the Colonial and Indian Governments would finally accede to the earnest and urgent representations of three successive Colonial Governors."

It was during the same period that the planting of Liberian coffee on the plains was begun, but these estates, being nearer to local sources of labour supply, were able to keep going until the importation of Tamil labour was finally permitted in 1887.

Planting In The 'Nineties.

HOW different is this solitary and heroic effort in the hills of Negri Sembilan from life on a Malayan coffee estate in the 'nineties, an account of which some forgotten planter has left behind. Work was strenuous enough, but not much more so than on a modern rubber estate, especially in present circumstances. The day started with muster at five-thirty a.m. Field work went on until eleven, when there was an interval for rest and tiffin until one-thirty, and the planter went out into the field again for a short time.

The coolies mustered again at four, after which the planter had his tea and carried on with office work until dinner time, turning in sleepy and tired at about eight-thirty. When the crop was being

picked he had to be in the field throughout the afternoon, which was unpleasant after an indiscreet tiffin. We of the present generation assume that the life led by the planters of thirty and forty years ago was always a very dull and comfortless one, but it must be remembered that most estates in those days were within a few miles of a town—in many cases Klang or Kuala Lumpur—and the planters, although they worked hard while they were at it, were not without recreation. Indeed the planter-author from whom I have been quoting makes that clear. He says :

"I do not mean by my account of life on a coffee estate to make out that the planter's lot is all work and no play. On the contrary, on Saturdays, and sometimes another day as well, we drive into the nearest town and play either cricket or football . . . After football and a change one repairs to the club, where are to be met all the elite of the place and where one can get a game of billiards. After a pleasant hour there the cart is called and in brilliant moonlight we drive home to our estate in time for the welcome dinner at half-past eight."

The Prospects Today.

ONE should add that there are no prospects of the coffee revival of today reaching the heights attained in Selangor in the 'nineties. In the present state of the world coffee industry the Malayan planter has no hope of working up a considerable export trade in coffee grown on the plains.

What he can hope to do, however, is to divert into his own pocket the two million dollars which Malaya is spending every year on coffee brought from Java and Sumatra. Coffee of equal quality can be grown in this country, and indeed is being grown. A Negri Sembilan product has been undercutting imported brands of coffee for some time past, and the new duty will help on the good work. This is a cultivation, of course, which has never died out entirely in Malaya. In fact there were 13,000 acres under it (interplanted with rubber in many cases) in the country at the end of 1930, and the Chinese small holders have always cultivated it, especially in the western coast districts, there being a constant demand for the berries in native shops.

Moreover, it is one of the mysteries of international trade that there is actually a small exportation of coffee from Malaya to the Dutch East Indies. but

possibly the system by which a Chinese dealer in Singapore pays for goods bought from Dutch customers with other classes of goods stocked in his own shop explains this curious minor current of the coffee industry.

Markets In The Country.

TWO corrections have to be made this week. It was stated in this Journal some days ago that all the Malay markets

in Selangor had been organised by the Co-operative Department. This, however, is not true of the Ulu Langat district.

I am indebted to a Malay correspondent for the information that in this district, especially at Kajang, the Malay markets have been organised by the ketuas (headmen) of the kampongs concerned, under the guidance of the District Officer. There are now five weekly markets in this district, at Ulu Langat on Friday, at Ulu Lui on Sunday, at Simpang Balak (Kajang) on Saturday, at Beranang on Friday and at Jendram on Sunday. A sixth market at the ninth mile, Cheras Road, is under consideration.

These place names will be meaningless to most readers of the Straits Times but they are set out here as showing how a new institution is being introduced into rural life in the F.M.S., and not only in the F.M.S., for one read recently that weekly markets, or fairs, have been organised by the State Department of Agriculture in Kedah and are proving very popular.

Native Rubber Profits.

THE statement made in a recent article that an income of seven dollars a month is received from a two-acre rubber holding was wrong, this estimate being undoubtedly too high at present prices.

Even the gross receipts from two acres of good native rubber must be considerably less than that today, so that the peasants in the low-yielding coast districts must have an even smaller supply of cash than was assumed in this article.





This is a fine photograph of the Liberian coffee flower, which is highly scented, making a walk over a coffee estate in the early morning a delightful experience. Another variety of low-country coffee which is not illustrated in these pictures is Robusta. This grows well in Malaya and is more popular with European consumers.



This is a typical coffee store on a Chinese small holding in Selangor. The berries are first dried in the sun, passed through a de-husking machine, then through a winnowing machine to remove the outer covering substances, and finally roasted. The cycle of operations takes about a week. A great part of this Chinese coffee is consumed in the coffee-shops which are a familiar feature of every Malayan town.



This specimen of the Liberian coffee bush was photographed on a Chinese holding near Serdang. Large European estates in Malaya were planted with this crop thirty years ago.

