

Havelock Town: From rubber plantation to distinctive suburb

Posted on



Bambalapitiya Road (Havelock Road from 1907) dissecting Havelock Town and Park (Plâté, c early 20th Century)

It may be unusual to find a town within a city - unless it's a Chinatown - but as far as Colombo is concerned, before the creation of Havelock Town and the adjacent Havelock Park in the early years of the 20th Century, this land was outside the residential area, in fact a rubber plantation that formerly cultivated cinnamon, which stretched westwards to Galle Road.

Words Richard Boyle **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Havelock Town and Havelock Park were named by the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) to honour Sir Arthur Havelock who, after a distinguished colonial career in

which he governed Sierra Leone, Trinidad, and Natal, was appointed Governor of Ceylon from 1890-1895. Havelock is best-known for abolishing the 'paddy tax' – an unpopular levy on rice cultivation – extending the railway network to Kurunegala and Bandarawela, and bringing the benefits of medical science and education to all sections of the population.

Lady Havelock was also active in the medical sphere, responsible for creating the country's first hospital for women and children, which bore her name until 1954 when it ceased to exist. Her name was also perpetuated by SS Lady Havelock, a vessel that, with several others, circumnavigated the Island, providing one of the ultimate tourist experiences.

Soon after the departure of Sir Arthur and Lady Havelock from Ceylon (he became Governor of Madras) there was an attempt to commemorate their contribution to the country. Surprisingly, however, the plan had to be abandoned due to lack of support and public donations were returned. So it was appropriate that Havelock Town, situated 3.7 miles (six kilometres) south of Colombo Fort, was created a few years later.

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Described by the main reference work of the period, Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon (1907), as "a small residential quarter", and by George J A Skeen in A Guide to Colombo (1906) as "the latest suburb of the city", it spanned an oblong area bordered to the north by Dickman's Road, (now Lester James Pieris Mawatha, and location of the Havelock Town Post Office), and to the south by the Kirulapone Canal, next to which was planted *keerai* (leafy vegetables) for consumption by the capital's inhabitants. To the east was Bambalapitiya Road, which divided Havelock Town and its park.

Perhaps the significant location of this artery prompted the CMC to rename the thoroughfare Havelock Road in 1907.

Probably the most knowledgeable person regarding the history of Havelock Town, in particular the residents of Havelock Road two generations ago, is Hugh Karunanayake, Founding President of the Ceylon Society of Australia. In "The Homes of Havelock Road Fifty Years Ago", published in the Ceylankan (November 1999), the antipodean magazine concerning Sri Lanka, he comments:

“Havelock Road was the principal link between Central and South Colombo. A good cross section of the community of Colombo lived there enjoying the social, recreational, educational and career opportunities that inevitably arose from living in close proximity to the city centre. Fifty years ago, there were more people from the British and Burgher communities living in Colombo and that was represented in the Havelock Road microcosm. Life was less complicated, and probably more ‘family and friend’ orientated than is possible today.”

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The heart of Havelock Town consisted of the parallel, equidistant Layard’s Road, Elibank Road (which was another, more subtle, tribute to Havelock as Elibank was his middle name), and Skelton Road. “Much of the land there belonged to FJ Lucas Fernando, who was among the first to build in that area,” Karunanayake informs me in a personal communication. “His house was called Norwood and had several acres of land around it. Lucas Fernando’s wife was from the Lindamullage de Silva family, which also owned a great deal of land in the Elibank Road, Skelton Road area. Another big landowner was Wellawattege William Peiris who owned the southern end of Layard’s Road.”

Havelock Park was originally 4.5 acres (1.8 hectares) in area but, as Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon reveals, among the miscellaneous expenditure of the CMC for 1905 was Rs 30,000 for an extension of six acres (2.4 hectares). By 1907, “the Galle Face, Victoria Park and the Havelock Town Park” were adjudged, by the editor of the book, Arnold Wright, as the major “lungs” of Colombo (surprisingly, the environmental sense of the word lung dates back to 1651).

During the early decades of the 19th Century, Havelock Park became – and remains – the home of several sporting clubs, although one, the Havelock Golf Club, shifted to Buller’s Road (Buddhaloka Mawatha) where the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall now stands. At the northern end of Havelock Park is the public area named after the national hero, Henry Edward Pedris, a militia officer and prominent socialite who was executed by the British for alleged incitement of racial riots in 1915, a charge later proven false. It is believed that Pedris’ execution and the actions of the British marked the beginning of the Independence movement.

Inevitably, most aspects of that era have faded away, but the original heart of havelock town still preserves some of the suburban tranquillity of the past even though it is surrounded by 21st century bustle.

Adjacent to Pedris Park, as it is commonly termed, is one of Sri Lanka's best rugby clubs, the Havelock Sports Club – renovated in July 2012 to celebrate its 97th anniversary – and the Burgher Recreation Club (BRC), whose members played cricket and hockey on the Lucas Fernando land in Havelock Town until the club leased a section of Havelock Park. In the south-east corner is Colts Cricket Club, represented by a first-class team that won the Premier League Tournament Tier A in 2012. Finally, in the south-west corner, is a children's playground of more recent origin.

According to Hugh Karunanayake, in the late-1930s the Mayor of Colombo, Dr V R Schokman, lived in a house called Valerest opposite Havelock Park. "In its front yard was a beautiful circular sunken garden. In later years the house was converted into a restaurant. Adjoining the northern bund of the canal was the Government Senior School, which later transferred to Maharagama. During the Second World War it housed the Royal Primary School when the entire Royal College complex was used as a military hospital. Today the buildings are home to Lumbini Maha Vidyalaya."

Inevitably, most aspects of that era have faded away, but the original heart of Havelock Town still preserves some of the suburban tranquillity of the past even though it is surrounded by 21st Century bustle. Moreover, Havelock Park remains one of Colombo's most important green lungs, a focus of several sporting activities and gathering place for the people of an area zoned as "Colombo 5".

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