

A Walk In The Past

Posted on



The evening beauty of Chatham Street; the former Marketing Department building and National Mutual are illuminated with the old Clock Tower cum light house in the background

The gates are open and there is no one to stop you, except greet you with smiling faces. President's Avenue, Sir Baron Jayatilake Mawatha, Chatham Street and Mudalige Mawatha in Colombo Fort are all open so that you can take a walk in the past.

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One of my fondest child-hood memories is driving along President's Avenue (Janadhipathi Mawatha) with my father where he gestured towards the General Post Office (GPO) and said, "that is where your grandfather used to work." While the President's House itself was just visible beyond the trees and foliage, it was buildings such as the National Mutual (Central Point Museum), GPO, Chartered Bank and the Republic Building (now the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) that lingered in our memories, not only because of their impressive architecture and stature, but also because of what they represented to each and every one of us.

My grandmother like so many others of that generation, spoke about going to Millers and Cargills to purchase imported goods, while others reminisce about having lunch or tea at Pagoda, trying out the various Chinese restaurants or shopping at the many arcades in the area. Many speak with nostalgia about how everything was 'open and relaxed', and hopefully with the reopening of the roads in and around Fort, we will be able to relive our past glory.

We started from the Central Bank end of Janadhipathi Mawatha (President's Avenue), formerly known as Queen's Street. With the gates open, we were able to pass through. The street was quiet except for a few vehicles as we walked along admiring the buildings. And for the first time after a very long time we were able to see the full expanse of the Central Bank. We felt very 'touristy' as we stopped and inquired about the various buildings and also about the roads we could access. From the point of the old Clock Tower cum light house, which was opened in 1857

by Governor H C Ward, we continued on Janadhipathi Mawatha after admiring the colonnade building of the Central Point, formerly known as National Mutual, opened in 1914 and was once the headquarters of National Mutual Life Association of Australasia. The Corinthian columns and sandstone façade was reminiscent of a bygone era.

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We passed the next set of gates and stopped in our tracks overwhelmed by the beauty of the street. Yes, there was a bit of cleaning up to do and structures to be removed that had been put up in an ad hoc manner. However, this process seemed to have already started. The Chartered Bank building designed by Edwards, Reid & Booth Architects, is somewhat different from the other buildings on the street as its architecture seemingly reflects an Indian influence with large arches and majestic carvings of elephants. Furthermore, there are also emblems with names of different countries such as Australia, India and China. The head office of Hatton National Bank, that is of colonial architecture is visible but not in its entirety, as there is an outer wall, which is currently being removed. We decided to walk along the Mudalige Mawatha, and was pleasantly surprised as it was very similar to a street in a town in Europe, narrow yet pleasant, with buildings showcasing Colonial architecture. We were told that there were banks on this street. Though many were in a dilapidated state, renovations have started in some. One such building had a doorway with an ancient door belonging to the Dutch period. Another painted in red with the doorways highlighted in white, reflected the classical period.

From Mudalige Mawatha, we turned on to York Street (Main Street becomes York Street) and walked along the corridors of the old Millers and Cargills building. There were signboards from the British colonial era and we were not used to the wording, which made us remember the movies and dramas we watch from that era. 'Dispensing, drugs, toilet requisites, perfumery, optical goods', another read 'Groceries, wines, tobaccos, fancy goods'. There were counters, which were now closed that had signboards such as 'Pharmacy; prescriptions dispensed by fully qualified pharmacists. Foreign prescriptions a speciality' (what?) and there was another interesting board displaying the services of the optical department. We felt like we were on a historical tour.

We continued on York Street and crossed Sir Baron Jayatilake Mawatha to the other side where the Macan Markar building was. This is an impressive structure that continues on to the Metropolitan branch of Bank of Ceylon, McKinnon Mackenzie building and the Grand Oriental Hotel. At the end of York Street is the Sri Lanka Ports Authority and Harbour and a turn to Church Street takes you to the other entrance of the Sri Lanka Police Headquarters. No one questions us or asks us what we are doing as we curiously peer into the various buildings that we did not have access to before. At Grand Oriental, you are allowed to walk along its side corridor, which runs parallel to Church Street (this is within the Police Headquarters) to arrive at St Peters Church. This Church used to be part of the official residence of the Dutch Governor and was renovated in 1680. First used for service in 1804 and consecrated as an Anglican Church in 1821, it was formerly a garrison church. The interior is calm and quiet reflecting the spirituality of the place. Built using large granite stones with the central hall, the place was cooling with a slight breeze sweeping through. The church walls displayed many dedications that dated back to the 1800s in remembrance of loved ones. Being close to the Harbour, it was apparent that the Church was for seafarers. And, there was a board saying "Mission to Seafarers" too.

We headed back on to York Street and started walking along Sir Baron Jayatilake Mawatha, formerly known as Prince Street towards the Janadhipathi Mawatha. Some of the buildings cannot be seen as they are under renovation, but the State Bank of India who is the successor of the Empire Bank of India has retained its grandeur. The section, which houses HSBC is under renovation. Apparently, there had been a famous department store on this road as well. Lloyds Building has been renovated and now has the offices of the Employee Provident Fund. Built in 1908 and formerly known as 'Freudenberg Building', it was designed by Architect E Skinner. Our heads turning this way and that, we were pleased to see tourists with their maps exploring the area. At times we too were mistaken for tourists and were offered guides and three-wheel tours. Prior to the closure of this street, it had been known for tour operators and airline offices.

The current Foreign Ministry building used to be the Republic Building and was the meeting place of the Legislative Council of Ceylon. Though the public are not allowed to cut across, you can easily stop and admire the beautiful architecture of this building, which has been painted completely in white. From a distance you will be able to see the massive terminals of the Colombo Harbour as well. Even if security personnel are around, they are very friendly and will tell you a little bit of

history that they know about the various buildings.

At the entrance of President's House is the statue of Edward Barnes, Governor of Ceylon. The pristine white building is clearly visible beyond the trees and foliage. The green expanse of the premises is known as Gordons Garden. Anyone can look at the building and admire its structure. It is fine to take photographs too. Known as Queen's House, the building was originally the property of the last Dutch Governor Johan Gerard van Angelbeck. His niece who inherited the property had to sell it to the then government (British) to settle her husband's debt. The house became the property of the government on January 17, 1804 and was named Queen's House following Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne. It continued to be the official residence of the Governor of Ceylon and then the Governor General of Ceylon following Independence in 1948, until 1972 when Sri Lanka became a republic and renamed it as President's House. This magnificent building reflects both Dutch and British influences.

We had done a complete circle and was at the General Post Office. This is still a magnificent building, though its original sand stone exterior has been painted in white. Governor Sir Arthur Havelock opened the building in July 1895 and it reflects a design of the Edwardian era. There is still the old red and green post boxes and though you cannot go in due to renovations, if you peek in through the entrance, you can imagine the glorious interior of the building. A magnificent staircase, counters, impressive pillars and ceiling reflect the grandeur of the massive public hall. Though in a dilapidated state, you can still make out the beautiful coloured tiles. The exterior is embellished with Corinthian pillars, doric lines and features reminiscent of the days of yore. We proceeded along Chatham Street to complete our excursion.

If you ask anyone from my parents' or grandparents' generations in Sri Lanka they will have a story to tell about how they used to visit the numerous places in Colombo 1. For more than 20 years that opportunity was lost, but now with all the roads opening the day is not far away when you too will have a story to tell.

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