

## Investigation of the Landscape Change in Old Malaysian Railway: Special References to Port Weld-Taiping Railway

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**Abstract:** Train service was first introduced by the British in Malaya connecting Taiping to Port Weld in 1885. This railroad service played major economic role in the state over the last 100 years. Other lines were later developed to connect tin mining areas in Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan to coastal ports. These lines ceased to operate with declining tin mining activities. New economic activities using former tin mining lands now represent new agricultural land use pattern. Port Weld-Taiping and Tapah Road Teluk Anson lines used to reflect the economic prosperity of Perak State. Rubber exports were also using these lines to reach British factories through the Straits of Melaka. Unlike the North-South rail line along the West coast of Malaya, these East-West lines are shorter and limited in usage. This resulted in unique cultural and physical landscape change delineating Northern and Southern sectors of coastal Perak. However with the decline of the tin mining in particular, these lines have been abandoned and failed to rejuvenate the coastal zones in the 21st century. Population distribution along the rail in particular has not seen any significance growth. Similarly, Perak in particular did not seem to play any significant role to activate or promote these rail lines. Population settlements, along these sectors have not grown at the same pace as the other part of the country. The physical landscape of these lines has seen significant changes. In particular, the tracks are mostly lost to destruction, theft and decay. These changes have resulted in new cultural and physical landscape change in this area.

**Key words:** Landscape change, railroad, population settlements, mining, Perak

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### INTRODUCTION

Railroad between Taiping and Port Weld ceased, its operation in late 1960's after beginning its pioneer operation in 1885. This is the first railroad system in Malaya. At the early days of railroad development in Perak, especially the main cargo transported were tin ore destined for smelting factories in England. Later, smelters were built in Penang and Singapore to reduce transportation cost sailing across the globe. Port Weld earlier known, as Kuala Sepetang has now been changed to its former name. However, for the purpose of this study, Port Weld will be used throughout this study. At the peak of Taiping as the mining town of Perak, Port Weld provides the link to sea routes towards Europe. The settlement in this West side of Perak State continued to expand along this line (Aiken *et al.*, 1982). The old railroad resulted in landscape change along the former track. This study will discuss and highlight these changes and how the landscape has changed over the years after the railroad service.

**Location of the railroad:** Port Weld is located on the coast of Perak, some 60 km South Penang port by sea and at equal distance to Pulau Pangkor further South (Fig. 1). It is situated at the mouth of Sepetang River. This port became the access to Straits of Malacca and the landing point into hinterland Perak over several 100 years. However, its location situated among massive mangrove vegetation and blocked from Malacca Straits, protected it from sea waves and prograded at a faster rate. Thus, increasing the sedimentation rate continuously over the years (Wayte, 1959). Historically, Port Weld had been identified, as the shortest point to bring out tin ore from Larut District. By 1880, the British government decided to build the railroad connecting Taiping to the coastal port as the most economical transportation mode.

Taiping flourished by having large tin reserves found almost everywhere in Larut District. British later used Taiping as the state capital. As the pioneer rail service in Malaya, it also becoming the focus of foreigners looking for jobs. Foreign workers especially from South Asia were brought into help fill labor jobs in various areas including plantations. The introduction and use of the railroad from

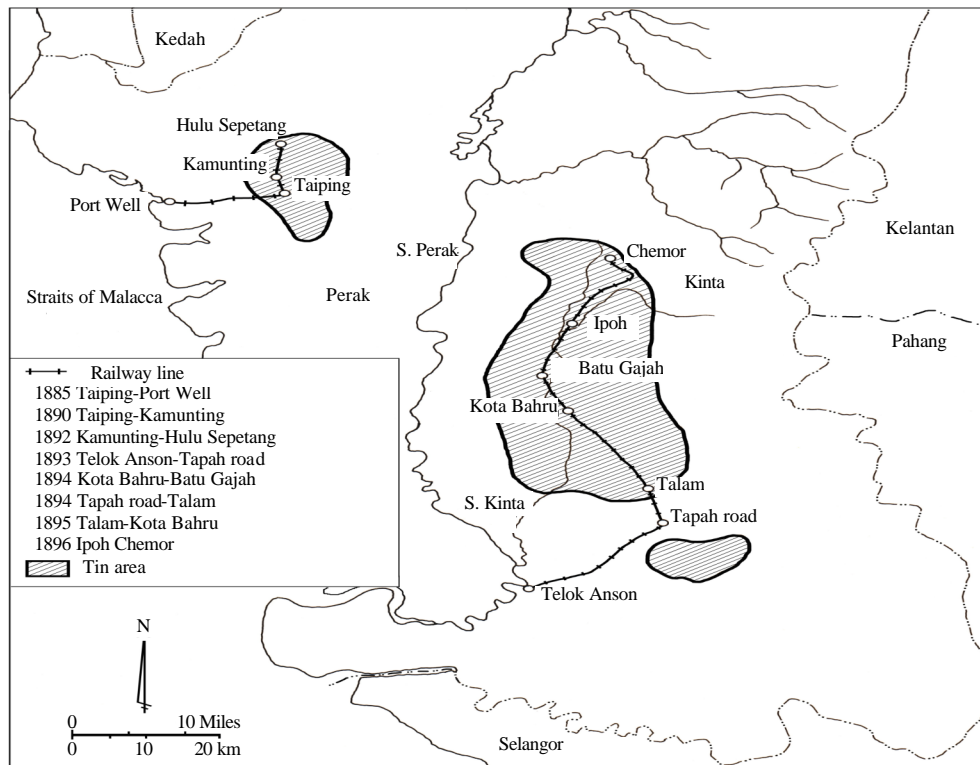


Fig. 1: Old Railway in 1885-1896 Perak, Malaysia: Railway development in Perak, 1885-1896 (Kaur, 1985)



Fig. 2: Human settlement location in Port Weld (Kuala Sepetang) and Taiping surroundings (Google map; December, 2010)

Taiping to Port Weld reflected the transportation needs for tin and rubber. The mining areas then include today's Aulong and Kamunting. Finally with the consent of the British Government and Perak

Sultan, as well as the support and cooperation of tin mine operators, the project begun in 1882 (Fig. 2).

Construction and foundation work has begun to be implemented in 1882 by workers from India and Sri Lanka

(Colombo). Construction costs amounted to 7000 pounds sterling for a distance of 1.6 km. The total distance from Taiping to Port Weld is 13 km far. So, the total expenditure had amounted to 56,875 is the pound sterling. Road-building efforts of the railroad track is heavily influenced by the requirement that merchants are required to Chinese miners in the state at that time and it is also important to transport the rubber industry in 1920. In addition, the Perak State government can also enjoy the profits and gains arising from the use rail service. Finally, the British colonial government extended the railroad system to connect the Malay peninsular into Singapore with the completion of the Johor causeway linking Singapore island (Douglas, 1996).

However, railroad running East-West connecting tin mine towns to coastal ports only at peak during the height of tin price. With the Japanese occupation in 1942, the rail almost came to a halt. All dedicated reserved land area for these railroads includes a 20 feet (6.6 m) width on both sides of the rail. It is officially owned by the Malayan railroad Berhad (KTMB), the predecessor of the Malayan railway department.

The research group visiting the site of the Taiping and Kuala Sepetang (Port Weld) has identified the remnants of the railroad sites. Many of these remnants left signs indicating the location of the station along the route. Houses were found on the site of the former railroad line. Most of the iron rails are missing from the line. In Port Weld itself, the site of the former station and railroad were traced in between buildings of homes and warehouses. The rail had been cemented, sunk in the ground or cut. While the warehouses have been converted for other uses including resting places, loading and unloading of fish or the wet market selling daily necessities.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In this study, researchers approach the issues that focus on research methods in social science history and geography. The samples collected consist of records of events, statistical data, figures and all samples are derived from primary sources and secondary sources. The main source of materials, including documents, letters (official or otherwise), records, reports, diaries, letters, newspapers and magazines and sometimes reminders can also be regarded as a primary source. The main sources are from documents available at the National Archives, National Museum and those at the state and district office and some kept and held in the library of the Institute of Higher Learning (IHL), National Library, State Library or relevant parties. While the second source will be from studies or writings that have been recorded or mentioned by

someone or group of an event or figures (Ibrahim, 2000). In this case, Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTMB) is also been identified as one of the source for the relevant information.

In this study, the thematic approach will be used to write the structure or arrangement of any section or sub-topics. While the qualitative survey of library materials will be conducted by the researchers to understand the important items on the development of historical events that are the focus of research from 1885 to present.

Researchers will sieve through the materials to begin the analysis and interpretation of the available data. Further findings of the reviews in library and information interviews will be analyzed and interpreted qualitatively. The researcher will also use the method of applying the method of quantifying the pure sciences and social sciences or social. Among the important matters in this approach is the emphasis on the use of natural resources in research and critical approach in the writing and interpretation. In addition, researchers will remove the subjective elements (ambiguity) or personal nature in assessing the events that happened.

**Population of Taiping, Malaysia:** In the 1870s, Taiping has emerged, as the bustling city with the population exceeding 30,000 living in the Larut. The town flourished with over 70% of the population were migrant workers from China alone. When the British administration decided to make Taiping, as the new state capital. It also bring along major infrastructure development with a range of buildings for various purposes including financial office, police barracks and stations, hospital, armory, storage facilities, prison and the bungalow, as a residence of British officers (Khoo, 1981). Central Taiping town were dominated by Chinese and Indians. These are migrant workers from Southern India and later followed by Punjabis and Pathans who mostly joined the British police force of Perak.

It was decided that a railroad should help ferry tin ore and provide transportation services from Taiping to Port Weld (Khoo, 1981). By 1888, the service has become more important, as the port in Port Weld is getting busier with the total exports and imports expanded to eventually resulted in a new floating dock built in 1891 to expand the port. For several years later, Port Weld led in position among the ports in Malaya. Wayte (1959) describes this:

Formerly for a time, Port Weld moved to a much livelier tune. For a few years, it even ranked among the leading ports of Malaya and for 15 months it was terminus of the country of the country's only railroad line

**Landscape change in Taiping-Aulong-Simpang:** The landscape along Taiping-Aulong-Simpang line requires extra work to identify the former railroad route. There is almost no sign to relate the past glory of the pioneer railroad ever existed from the site researchers visited. On several points along the route, physical landscape can be connected to the railroad existence many years ago. However, since the last train that run the line was over 40 years ago, it is difficult to even inquire from residents in the neighborhood. It will be hard, even to local resident to associate their present neighborhood to once busy and noisy railroad that bring prosperity to the state.

The railroad runs for about 12 km from Taiping to Port Weld. When Keretapi Tanah Melayu decided to reduce expanding losses due to low cargo, the train service was terminated in 1960s. With the discontinuity of the rail service between Taiping and Port Weld, the railroad and land reserve started to decay and deteriorated. Over the last 40 years, after the last train service between these 2 towns, the railroad land started to be occupied by illegal squatters. The situation resulted in rail tracks are now missing and most signs to point to former national historic heritage almost non existence. Meanwhile, there is no sign erected by the federal railway authority and KTMB to protect the land from trespassers and illegal squatting. Hence, local residents themselves are not aware of former pioneer rail service in the country.

From the field observations, researchers manage to identify the former railroad track. Researchers followed the marking of the former track until the last point the track in Port Weld. However, the former stations and rail tracks had been ransacked and some buildings were rented out to fishing traders.

Many of the facilities had been destroyed and can't be found. However, the trace of the former can be easily identified from the satellite image downloaded from Google earth.

From the personal observations, researchers found the rail track had been disposed off. There are also remnants of a submerged in cement buildings, warehouses and row houses and shops in residential areas and Aulong to Taiping to Simpang. Rail station platform in front of the Taiping station. Ongkah and updated platform for the construction of double track to the north of Peninsular Malaysia.

Landscape along Taiping Road, Wuhu Port Rail Weld is owned by Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTMB) and has reserved land area of 20 feet (6.6 m) on both sides of the rails. This way the environment has changed from the forest area in the 2 sides reinya once the residential areas and agricultural areas side by side at the junction of

business and residential areas clustered in Aulong. This proves that the new man-made changes landscape where buildings, row houses, shops and agricultural activities.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Port Weld:** The landscape in front of the former station Port Weld had also experienced major changes. The physical landscape of Port Weld today is a new fisherman town with very limited signs that can lead visitor to any past railroad histories. In particular, no rail track of signs associated with rail activities.

However, no railroad can be identified through visual observation. Along the railroad route from the junction to the old Port Weld, there were signs of landuse changed from the forest into agricultural areas of oil palm plantations, settlements and fortress of mangrove swamps and roads in Port Weld. Some temporary buildings and paved road were also found on the rail land.

**Taiping station:** Very little that can be detected at Taiping station to link it to earlier services to Port Weld. As such, it requires further study to investigate and detect the check-point along the critical path and changes along the former railroad landscape. New double track construction covering Taiping station, also resulted any remnants left earlier to be destroyed and erased from the station. Thus, more information based on photos and drawings are needed to redraw and identify relevant facilities, including signal systems and tracks that may help redraw the landscape changes along this route.

## CONCLUSION

The old railroad landscape along the former Taiping Port Weld track has changed significantly through our observations in the field. These changes reflected neglects by the authorities involved. Similarly, federal and state government are not showing any concern for this pioneer rail system in the nation. The outcome of this 40 something years abandonment resulted in railway land encroachment and in dire needs for rehabilitation.

The concern for national heritage, as well as demand for public transportation require more analysis and study on under utilised resources such railroad. The present stage of this study, also will continue to look at the landuse changes, along the railroad and how the settlement patterns have adjusted to this phenomena.

At the same time, random survey on local residents reflected almost zero knowledge of the existence of such services over 40 years ago. Those from older generation at 60 years old and above have some dim memory of trains

passing through their houses. They themselves are not aware of the significance of these services which made Port Weld a historic name in all school textbooks over the last 70 years or more.

However, additional information are still required to further study and explore this route landscape changes including the change of land use changes over the years based landscape changes and with the geographic analysis and management. Additionally, national heritage and historic features would, also help rebuild interest and generate tourism industry in transportation history.

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