

# **Chronicles from the far east: the garden city model of planning in the Federated Malay States, 1920-1929**

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The establishment and history of town planning in the twentieth century in the Federated Malay States (FMS), part of present day Malaysia, has been the subject of various studies including by scholars Meng et al (1990), Lee (1991), Shamsudin (1996), Home (1997), and Bristow (2000, 1996). However their publications focus mostly on the rationale behind and the outcomes of efforts to develop and improve modern planning legislation that commenced with the *Town Planning Enactment* (1923). Attention has also been paid to key individuals who contributed to these efforts. One of them, Charles Reade (1880-1933), inaugural Government Town Planner (1921-1929) in the FMS, has been of particular interest for his initial and critical role in disseminating the message of town planning and the garden city idea, and in drafting and implementing town planning legislation. Yet little has been published on the actual projects that he initiated. This paper seeks to examine the broad nature of the works that Reade sought to implement and specifically on two projects in and near Kuala Lumpur in the state of Selangor. Principal sources include Annual Reports of the Government Town Planner, Reade's articles in the *Journal of the Town Planning Institute*, newspapers, and other published materials including histories of Malaya and Kuala Lumpur. Information about the contemporary status of the projects reviewed is informed by site visits undertaken in 2002.

## INTRODUCTION

The history of Malaysia's development to the present day is a complex and fascinating story built upon elements including geographical factors; the existence of and relationships between multiple racial groups – mainly Malay, Chinese, Indian and European – and their diverse cultures; economic circumstances; and social and political structures. Self-ruled until 1874, the arrival of the British in that year introduced a new set of cultural ideas and practices and led to another level of government. This paper focuses on a short period of Britain's involvement in Malaya – the 1920s – and on the introduction in that decade of the related concepts of town planning and the garden city idea. By then the country was divided into the Federated Malay States (FMS) and the unfederated states. A system of British administration was in place but locals were seeking a louder voice in their governance.

Effects of the desire for increased local participation in town planning have been examined in studies of the introduction and impact of modern planning legislation in Malaysia largely under the aegis of Charles Reade (1880-1933) (Meng et al, 1990; Lee, 1991; Shamsudin 1996; Home, 1997; Bristow, 2000, 1996). Reade was the inaugural Government Town Planner in the FMS and held the position from 1921 to 1929. This paper deviates, however, from the focus of existing work and is a preliminary investigation of planned schemes proposed and executed in and near Kuala Lumpur during Reade's period of office. The paper is drawn from research for a larger project – an analysis of Reade's life and *oeuvre* as a peripatetic planner based in Australia, Asia, Northern Rhodesia and South Africa.

Reade has been described as having "almost single-handedly, laid the foundations for modern town planning in Malaysia" (Bristow, 1996, p. 22). While attention has been paid to his critical role in that regard, little is recorded of his realised projects. The research for this paper has adopted a largely empirical approach, since the aim has been to identify projects and gather and compile data pertinent to them. However the outcomes have been limited and investigations constrained by the absence of extensive archival materials, especially the numerous maps and plans to which Reade refers in his reports and missives to various publications.<sup>1</sup> Principal sources include Annual Reports of the Government Town Planner, Reade's articles in the *Journal of the Town Planning Institute*, newspapers, and other published materials including histories of Malaya and Kuala Lumpur. Knowledge of the projects executed and their contemporary status is informed by field trips undertaken in 2002.

Despite its approach, the research has not ignored the fact of Malaysia's multifarious history nor the need to unravel the various complexities of the place and interpret the factors and forces underpinning its history. Scholarly texts by authors including King (1980), Healey (1997), Yeoh (2003), and Nasr and Volait (2003) provide theoretical perspectives on how such undertakings might be attempted and framed, particularly with respect to the built environment. Yeoh's study of colonial Singapore is especially apt in assisting understanding of Malaya.

## THE FEDERATED MALAY STATES

The Federated Malay States, comprising Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, came into being on 1 July 1896 and encompassed approximately half of the Malay Peninsula (Kennedy, 1970; Gullick, 2000). Due to its central location, Kuala Lumpur was chosen as the Federal capital and departmental heads were stationed there. The federation was constituted "to secure uniformity [between the states] in matters such as justice, taxation, and land-settlement, as well as to plan communications on a wider basis" (Kennedy, 1970, p. 236). Prior

to the alliance, each had been separately administered; now all four came under the control of one British Resident-General (named Chief Secretary from 1910) who liaised with the individual Residents and Malay Rulers. The High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States, also known as the British Governor, supervised the Resident-General.

In addition to the Federated States there were also the unfederated – Kedak, Kelantan, Trengganu and Johore – as well as the Straits Settlements comprising Singapore, Malacca and Penang (Illustration 1). The States were subject to British advice and protection but were administered by their own Councils while the Straits Settlements were under the authority of the British Governor.



1. Malay States 1909-1941. KENNEDY, J. (1970). *A History of Malaya*, New York: Macmillan, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. 246.

Although social and economic improvements resulted from the union of the States there was dissatisfaction amongst the indigenous Malay Rulers as well as miners, traders and plantation owners about the lack of opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns (Kennedy, 1970). They protested that power was centralised in the hands of one individual, namely the British Resident-General. Consequently in 1909 a Federal Council was formed. It met annually and was presided over by the High Commissioner. Sultans represented their states but the majority of other members were British; hence that voice dominated. The Council was the chief vehicle for policy-making.

Federation did not precipitate the desired outcomes but little action was taken to redress the situation until the effects of economic depression in the 1920s forced a critical review of government administration. Contrary to expectations, the unfederated States had not moved towards federation. However, the Sultans of the four States that had were jealous of their neighbours' independence. They urged restoration of their own State Councils' powers. A move towards decentralisation was instituted and in 1927 the Federal Council was reconstituted to reflect that change (Bristow, 1996; Kennedy, 1970).

## **KUALA LUMPUR**

Kuala Lumpur was founded in the late 1850s as a trade centre serving tin mining and agricultural operations at and near Ampang in the upper reaches of the River Klang (Gullick, 2000).<sup>2</sup> The Klang Valley was inhabited initially by the indigenous aborigine and Malay population, mostly living in villages along the River but within a few short years of the commencement of tin mining, Chinese labourers had been brought in, enabling continuous tin production.

The River Klang divided the town. Malays and Chinese lived on the eastern side with the western reserved for government buildings and residences. The earliest buildings were built in the vernacular style using local materials – timber with atap (thatched palm leaf) roofs. After many of these structures succumbed to fire, in the mid-1880s a program commenced to progressively replace timber with brick-walled and tiled-roof buildings. A town improvement program that included road widening accompanied the rebuilding. Two-storey shop-houses, then common elsewhere in the Straits Settlements, first appeared in Kuala Lumpur about this time. They comprised a shop at ground level with living quarters above and were built at or near to the street boundary. Business expanded noticeably in the capital in the 1890s with the Chinese occupying the central shop-houses and other racial groups establishing themselves in various spots nearby.

William Maxwell, British Resident of Selangor, established the Kuala Lumpur Sanitary Board in 1889. The first municipal body in any Malay state it became the model for similar boards. Members included the heads of state departments – Medical, Public Works and Police – and influential representatives of the Malay and Chinese communities. The Sanitary Board's ambit of responsibility was broad and covered health and hygiene – clean water supply, drainage and the removal of waste were key responsibilities – and town maintenance, the construction and naming of streets and traffic regulation. Additionally, the Board oversaw building applications and approvals to build houses. In reality, despite seemingly wide control, "the board itself was little more than a coordinating committee, dependent on state departments, such as the PWD, to implement its decisions" (Gullick, 2000, p. 246).

When Kuala Lumpur was made the Federal capital new public and government buildings were built around the Parade Ground (later named the Padang), a reclaimed swamp adjacent to the Selangor Club (1890) reserved as open space for public use. Buildings such as the Printing Office (1899), GPO (1907) and Railway offices (1905) were sited by purpose and land availability, rather than according to a preconceived plan. In the decade after its elevation to Federal capital, railway development accelerated north and south of Kuala Lumpur and it became the regional hub for an expanding rubber industry.

## **READE AND TOWN PLANNING IN THE FMS**

Reade's appointment to the Federated Malay States came, then, at the beginning of a decade of political turmoil and change and at a time when Kuala Lumpur had moved from its early settlement phase and was on the rise as a commercial and administrative centre. Gullick (2000, p. 246) describes 1921, the year that Reade commenced his duties, as the genesis of a "new era" due to the establishment of the "long-deferred" Federal Department of Town Planning. Clearly, the venture was considered significant.

A New Zealander by birth but of British landed-gentry stock, Reade's early career as a journalist introduced him to the nascent movement for town planning and garden cities (Tregenza, 1981). After a period of voluntary service in the offices of the Garden Cities and

Town Planning Association in London, he was made co-organiser and lecturer for the Australasian Town Planning Tour (1914) (Freestone, 1998). Subsequently he was offered a position as Government Town Planner in Adelaide, South Australia. There, between 1916 and 1920, he gained the reputation as an expert in his chosen field and his achievements earned him the FMS role. Seconded to Kuala Lumpur for what initially was to be no more than a twelve-month term, on being offered a permanent place, he accepted. He remained as Government Town Planner until 1929, when the position was abolished (Garnaut 2002, 1997).

Reade (1921-22, p.164) considered the FMS a "fertile" setting for the introduction of town planning ideals and ideas. Comparing the states with other "younger British Overseas Dominions" (Reade, 1922, p. C229) he pointed out that their towns had not "developed with many miles of straight streets and geometric blocks following checker-board lines ... irrespective of topographical difficulties, constructional costs, drainage, traffic ..." (Reade, 1922, p. C229-230). While this was a distinct advantage and led to interesting responses to topography, he nonetheless detected problems and foresaw future difficulties if these were not addressed. Broadly he was referring to imprudent siting of areas for industrial, residential, commercial and agricultural purposes; the absence of a systematic road plan and of planning for urban growth, public purposes (buildings, open space) and increased volume of traffic; the vast number of private investors, of all races, mostly holding small parcels of land of arbitrary shape; and the Sanitary Board's lack of legislative powers and control in town planning (and other) matters (Reade, 1922).

As on his Australasian Town Planning Tour, and in his previous post in South Australia (Tregenza, 1981; Hutchings, 1986), Reade advocated the early introduction of town planning legislation in the FMS with the view to replacing and controlling haphazard growth and urban disorder by organised planning and development (Reade, 1922). Legislation was achieved in the *Town Planning Enactment* (1923) that created a Federal Department headed by a permanent Government Town Planner (Bristow, 1996; Lee, 1991). The *Enactment* established development guidelines and rules and regulations for their application. Separate Town Planning Committees were required in each State and the local Sanitary Boards continued to function.

At the same time as he was drafting legislation, with characteristic energy and enthusiasm, Reade was also identifying and responding to situations in need of town planning in each of the states of the federation as well as, by invitation, in the unfederated states. Although working across the entire country he concentrated his initial effort on Kuala Lumpur, as the Federal capital, drawing up an ambitious improvement agenda. His strategies for replanning areas of existing towns, and their progress, as well as layouts for new towns, were described in detailed Annual Reports and chronicled in missives sent by him to publications such as the *Journal of the Town Planning Institute* (London).

## **REPLANNING KUALA LUMPUR**

The replanning of the Federal capital was considered holistically and the Town Planning Department prepared a preliminary general plan under Reade's direction. That completed, the entire town was divided into twenty-eight distinct schemes (later extended to thirty) and individual plans were prepared for each. Reade's rationale was that "This programme or scheme ... is indispensable to the promotion and substitution of orderly for disorderly development in new areas; also for adjusting parts of the older town to modern conditions of transport, commerce and convenience ... " (Reade, 1924, p. 1).

By breaking the town into a series of smaller, defined areas, he anticipated that the range of identified improvements might be more manageably addressed and the redistribution of

land by negotiation and/or exchange between owners made easier. Reade favoured this policy which involved exchange of private and State land perceiving it not as the "sole remedy by any means but .... economic and practical in the present circumstances of the country" (Reade, 1922, p. 1). But land redistribution became a stumbling block to change and in time the resolve of vested interests would quash Reade's ambition to achieve for Kuala Lumpur "the best economic and social use of land, including traffic, health, convenience and amenity generally" (Reade, 1924, p. 2).

A survey of the foci of the twenty-eight proposed schemes demonstrates Reade's vision and intent to apply in Kuala Lumpur, and more widely in the FMS, the principles of planning on garden city lines that he had learnt and implemented elsewhere (Garnaut, 1999, 1997). Principles explicated in selected examples of the schemes serve to illustrate the point:

The general plan for Kuala Lumpur established a systematic and hierarchical road system that accounted for function and traffic volume, flow and management and anticipated future needs given the rapidly increasing rate of private car ownership (Gullick, 2000; Reade, 1926). This involved street widening, re-routing and realignment and the concomitant land exchange and redistribution (Bristow, 2000, p. 148, Figure 1);

Betterment and layout improvement could be achieved through negotiation between land owners and the government for land exchanges. This was illustrated in Schemes 14 and 16 encompassing the area between the racecourse, and Bukit Bintang and Circular Roads where the original proposal for a grid layout was replaced by streets of varying width and line and irregular-, rather than rectangular-shaped blocks. Reade used this project to promote the efficacy of the policy of replanning and redistribution by exchange. Plans for the two schemes were contained in Reade's Third Annual Report (1923) and are reproduced in Bristow (2000, p. 149, 150);

New buildings were sited to take convenience and safety of people and traffic into account for example in the relocation of the Chinese Community Centre to the junction of Petaling, Birch and Kampong Attap Roads (Scheme 8);

Provision was made for public open space through the conversion of the Petaling Golf Links to the site for the Victoria Institution and a People's Park (Scheme 5) and the reservation of a site for an Asiatic Padang between Goal and Loke Yew Roads (Scheme 7);

Sites were nominated for schools such as the Elementary English School (part of Scheme 15), and the Malay Artisans School (Scheme 23);

Separation of factories and workers' housing was ensured in industrial areas such as Sungei Besi Road (Scheme 1);

Public health and hygiene and general living conditions were improved by replanning in sectors like Sentul (Scheme 21), near the railway yards, which was "thickly populated with housing and living conditions of a primitive type following the irregular and confused lines of the original surveys" (Reade, 1923, p.10);

Housing was provided for government workers in discrete residential areas such as Imbi Village (Scheme 15). A surviving 1929 land use plan of Kuala Lumpur and shows the layout of the Village, allowing it to be described more closely.

## **IMBI VILLAGE**

The Imbi Village housing scheme was introduced as a means of alleviating the government employee housing shortage in Kuala Lumpur following World War 1. The design phase commenced during 1922 and it was built in two stages between 1923 and 1926. Stage one was approved in February 1923 and stage two in August 1924 (Illustration 2).



2. Imbi Village layout. Excerpt from map titled 'Town of Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Federated Malay States, 1929, showing land use'. CO 1047/959, Public Record Office, London.

Imbi, Pudu and Circular Roads bounded the site. Occupying eighty acres of former State land, some of which had been a forest, it was chosen because of its proximity to an existing water supply and to established modes of transport (Reade, 1927, 1924). Primarily for housing (approximately 350 quarters were planned), the estate also incorporated one site for a school and playgrounds, nineteen acres of public open space, including a village green, and reserves adjacent to the boundary arterial roads (Reade, 1927).

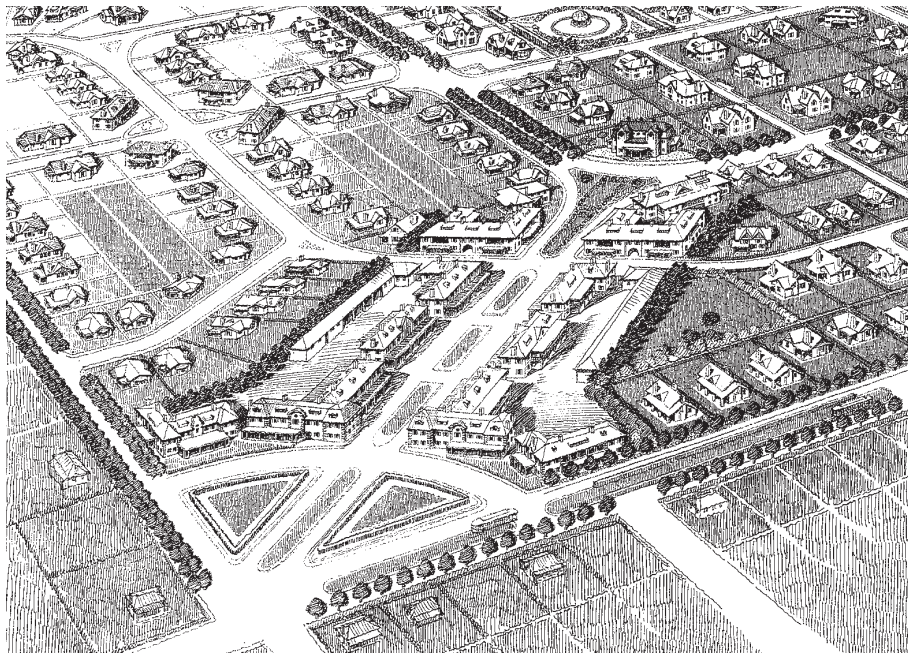
Houses were arranged in pairs and groups and set in generous areas of open space rather than on traditional housing blocks. Here Reade demonstrated his view of the suitability of adopting "the garden city practice of scientifically grouping and limiting the number of houses to the acre ... to cheap housing areas in tropical countries like British Malaya" (Reade quoted in Shamsudin, 1996, p. 3). Some of the quarters were described as "experimental concrete bungalows" (Reade, 1927, p. 9) indicating that detached dwellings were also constructed. Employees in different salary classes were to be housed on the estate, reflecting the garden city principle of social mix. Dwellings would vary in design to avoid the visual monotony arising from the repetition of the one facade. Initially however, due to financial constraints, only Class VIII dwellings were constructed.

Houses were sited to achieve space between buildings, variation in the building line, visibility at street corners and to terminate street vistas. Landscaping elements included trees and hedgerows and plantings in the margins between street kerbs and footpaths. An Advisory Committee oversaw the implementation of the plan to ensure that it complied with the approved layout (Reade, 1924).

Stage two of the Imbi project realised the construction of an Elementray English School on the nominated school site as well as teaching staff quarters (three Class VI dwellings) and

further housing for various classes of government employees (Reade, 1923, 1924). During 1927 a sub-division of shop-lots was approved on a section of the stage two development facing the bounding Circular Road, near Cheras Road (Reade, 1927). Their construction would make the estate a self-contained entity.

The 1929 map illustrates the extent of the development of Imbi Village. The estate is distinguished by its formal layout demonstrating not only the features mentioned in Reade's Annual Reports but also the distinctive triangular shape of the first stage with its central village green, mix of curved and straight streets, and bold crescent fronted by a reserve. Similarly, stage two contains streets of mixed line and length, with two oval-shaped reserves surrounded by dwellings dominating the area. Whilst the shape of the stage one layout responds to the available land – it is wedged between existing development – it is also reminiscent of Reade's secondary entrances to the model Mitcham Garden Suburb (1917), known as Colonel Light Gardens from 1921, near Adelaide, South Australia (Illustration 3). Similarly the angled siting of buildings at street intersections and the inclusion of traffic islands are familiar elements from his South Australian residential projects.



3. Secondary entrance (north west corner), Mitcham Garden Suburb, 1917. *Official Volume of Proceedings of the First Town Planning and Housing Conference and Exhibition (1918)*, Adelaide: Vardon and Sons.

Imbi Village did not survive the late twentieth century rush to redevelop inner Kuala Lumpur and housing on the estate was progressively demolished from about 1997 (Shamsudin, pers. com., 2002). In 2002 the land was vacant.



## **KUALA KUBU BARU**

Outside of Kuala Lumpur, Reade and the Town Planning Department were engaged in numerous other projects in existing towns and for new sites. One surviving example of a new town is Kuala Kubu Baru, known locally as KKB. It was located about 60 kilometres from the Federal capital, at the base of the road to the summer retreat of Fraser's Hill, and along the former Ipoh to Kuala Lumpur Road. The original town of KKB, sited downstream from its modern replacement, was frequently flooded due to the build up of silt from tin mining operations in the Selangor river (Reade, 1921-1922). Hence the new town was moved up river and to higher land. The plan of the new town was distinctive for its use of zoning, a parkbelt encircling the central shop-houses which fronted streets arranged in a tight grid, and elsewhere, roads that meandered with the topography, contrasting sharply with the formal arrangement of the central space.

The preliminary plan and layout of the shop-house area were completed during 1926 (Reade, 1926). The town and environs occupied about 333 acres. Although some of the land had been owned by the State, most was purchased from private owners who had worked it for tin mining.

The District Offices for the region were located at KKB, making it an important administrative centre. Hence its planning involved consultation not only with residents and business owners in the original town but also with administrators of the various government departments located there. Reade indicated that the preparations for the new town "proved to be a work of considerable magnitude [involving] continuous cooperation ... [between] the Government Town Planner with the District Officer, Public Works and other departments" (Reade, 1927, p. 11).

The town was separated into commercial, administrative, residential and recreational sectors. The District Offices were located in an administrative hub on a hill overlooking the town centre. As mentioned, the commercial area formed the central core which also included sites for markets, post office, cinema, police and a fire station. Approximately 320 shop-houses were allocated with provision for a further 140. Schools, churches, temples and clubs were sited in the vicinity of the shop lots. A parkbelt separating the shopping and residential areas was to be used for public recreation, padangs (public reserves) and sports like cricket and golf.

The residential sector provided accommodation for government employees – subordinates and senior officials – and private citizens. Various classes of dwelling were intended with quarters initially provided for 104 subordinates. A hospital was sited in the residential area.

Reade planned for KKB's extension by allowing space for growth in each sector. Additionally an intended main road diversion would permit future expansion (Reade, 1928). In 1928 the Government Town Planner reported that the KKB town plan and extension had been executed.

Today, KKB is a thriving administrative and bustling commercial centre (Illustration 4). Its original architecture, including the central core of shop-houses, remains largely intact and Reade's comprehensive scheme for a fully self-contained town designed on garden city lines is on the ground. All the key elements of the intended layout are there – administrative zone, commercial sector separated from the residential by a parkbelt, buildings on sites reserved for school, worship, firestation and public use. Zones are clearly defined creating a sense of measured order and purpose throughout (Illustration 5). The parkbelt is a striking feature and a creative solution to utilising low-lying reclaimed mining land to achieve the garden city requirement of ample public open space. Tree-lined streets reinforce the idea of a park-like setting and enhance the amenity of the town.



4. Kuala Kubu Baru, Selangor. Central commercial area, July 2002. C.Garnaut photograph.

5. Kuala Kubu Baru, Selangor. Entrance showing parkbelt to the right, July 2002. C.Garnaut photograph.



## CONCLUSION

Reade arrived in Kuala Lumpur full of enthusiasm and optimism for “seeing town planning and garden city principles applied in th[e] young wonderland of the East ... ” (Reade, 1921-1922, p. 165). He was confronted with a challenge of enormous magnitude as he sought to come to terms with cultural traditions and differences, the tropical climate, and the physical state of Kuala Lumpur and the other towns of the FMS. While appreciating the need to acknowledge and work with and within these different settings, he approached his task as Government Town Planner in the methodical and systematic way that typified his work elsewhere (Garnaut, 1997).

Reade’s Annual Reports suggest that he persisted in pursuing the schemes for Kuala Lumpur and other towns despite mounting opposition to his vision, methods and personality and to the legislation that he drafted and implemented (Bristow, 2000, 1996; Home, 1997; Garnaut, 1997). Surviving personal correspondences indicate that he was aware of local antagonisms towards him and of the growing loss of confidence in a federal town planning authority (Garnaut, 2002). A letter written in 1926 to New Zealander George Fowlds summarised the challenges and obstacles of the FMS job:

“... our work grows and grows, although I must admit that the difficulties and drawbacks in an exhausting climate (with many racial differences to consider) make for problems beyond adequate description ... We have reached a critical period when the further realisation of our plans and schemes may become possible if re-actionary forces do not prevent it ... ” (Reade, 1926).

This preliminary foray into identifying the projects that Reade conceived and saw realised while he was Government Town Planner in the FMS has revealed that, in parallel to his contribution to planning legislation, he was determined to design and execute ‘object lessons’ to assist the locals to understand the essence of the message of garden cities and town planning. However, the reality of his tangible achievements seemingly fell far short of his vision for the “young wonderland”. Remnants of Reade’s influence remain in present day Kuala Lumpur in the separation of industrial, residential and commercial areas; the siting of surviving buildings such as the Chinese Community Centre and the Victoria Institution; the road pattern that he established through land redistribution in Schemes 14 and 16 adjacent to the former racecourse, now the site of the Kuala Lumpur Twin Towers (Shamsudin, pers.comm., 1997), and in the open spaces in the form of parks and reserves in older residential areas beyond the inner core.

Outside of the capital, Kuala Kubu Baru is a little known and intact legacy of Reade’s efforts to introduce the garden city model of planning to the FMS. A faithful and exciting example of the principles of garden city planning transposed and adapted to suit eastern conditions, it fulfils Reade’s hope (1921-1922, p. 165) for “some permanent result of my visit” to Kuala Lumpur.

## Acknowledgements

This paper had its genesis in July 2002 when Kamalruddin Shamsudin kindly led me on site visits to surviving Reade projects in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and their environs. His generosity in assisting my research on that occasion and in various ways prior to and since my visit is gratefully acknowledged.

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Reade to Fowlds 31.5.1926. National Archives New Zealand. Series file 34/5 843. Courtesy C. Miller.

'Town of Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Federated Malay States, 1929, showing land use'. CO 1047/959, Public Record Office, London.

## **CHRONICLES FROM THE FAR EAST: THE GARDEN CITY MODEL OF PLANNING IN THE FEDERATED MALAY STATES, 1920-1929**

### **LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

- 1 Copies of the Annual Reports held in Arkib Negara Malaysia, (Malaysian Archives), Kuala Lumpur and the Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, London do not contain the maps and plans to which Reade refers except for three plans in Reade's Third Annual Report, 1923. These plans are referred to later in the paper. Separate searches for the 'missing' materials in the maps and plans collections of the have not been fruitful.
- 2 This section on Kuala Lumpur is based entirely on GULLICK, J. (2002). *A History of Kuala Lumpur 1856-1939*, Selangor: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society