

# Architect of history

Some of Malaysia's most iconic buildings are revisited more than a century after their completion but with a very personal perspective, writes **Amanda Suriya Ariffin**

IMAGINE meeting the grandson of the man who designed some of the most identifiable edifices of the Malaysian skyline, structures that were erected before your own septuagenarian parents were born. Brick, stone and mortar fashioned into familiar buildings that you have grown up seeing, crafted by a man who had travelled thousands of kilometres from his native country to make our country so historically distinctive. And so it was a treat being in the presence of Dr Peter Barbor on a cool morning in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, in the tiled corridors of the National Textile Museum, the co-organiser of an exhibition that celebrates the life and work of Arthur Benison Hubback.

To those in the profession, A.B. Hubback is responsible for iconic landmarks such as Masjid Jamek, the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, the Carcosa and the Selangor Club.

To the 78-year-old Barbor, Hubback is his maternal grandfather. The silver-haired and soft-spoken Barbor is tweed-jacketed and eager when we tour the exhibition hall that reverberates only to the sound of our conversation.

He has an audience of architects waiting for him to speak in the theatre hall down the corridor but for this tiny slice of the weekend when most have yet to read their papers, he lights up with unabashed admiration for his granddad.

The first stop is a painting. "This was painted in 1908," he elucidates in an unmistakably posh drawl, complete with elongated vowels, "and we had it in our family for 100 years," he says, turning to look at me with a smile playing just at the edges of his eyes. "So I gave it to them." ("Them" means us lucky folks in Malaysia.)

The painting is one of Masjid Jamek (the Jamek mosque) and the artist's identity is unknown.

The painting was in Hubback's house until his death, Barbor explains, before subsequently made its way to his only daughter's (Barbor's mother) house and then, to Malaysia by way of some very keen and helpful men named Lloyd and Najib.

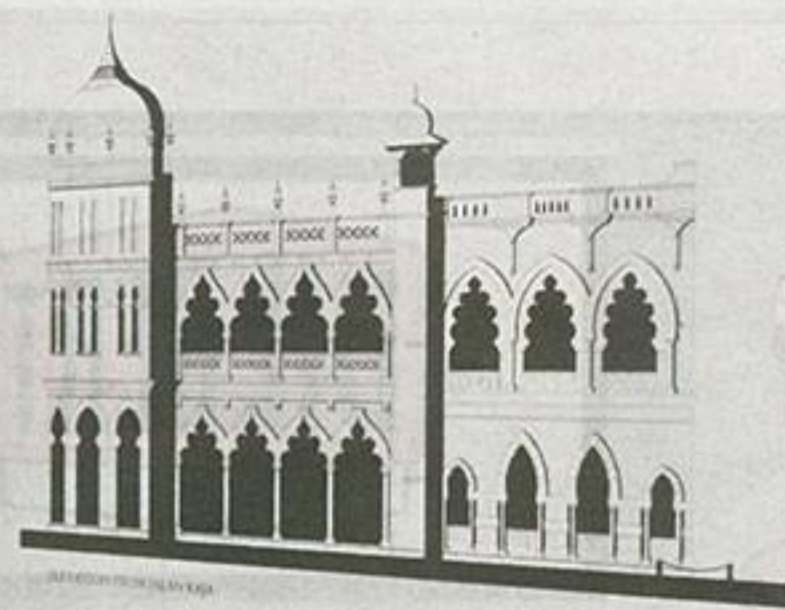
"When the architects contacted



Arthur Benison Hubback came to Malaya in 1895 and forged a stellar architectural career.



Peter Barbor on A.B. Hubback: An Architectural Celebration in Malaya.



some of our most iconic buildings, I tell him.

"Isn't it amazing?" he lobs back gracefully with breathless excitement. I nod enthusiastically as Barbor caps the exchange with, "between 26 and 40", betraying the same unspoken thought that Hubback achieved so much at an age when many are still finding their feet and direction. We continue in this excited banter for a good 20 minutes, generations and cultures apart, yet unified across these seemingly huge crevasses of time by this moment.

We pore over the drawing and photos of landmarks such as the railway station, the Carcosa — where Barbor's mother Yvonne was born ("So she told us, but my mother was a wicked liar!" he says to gales of laughter) — and of course, the 'Eton of the East', the Malay College Kuala Kangsar.

The walls of these beautifully-preserved buildings made possible by A.B. Hubback have been witness to, and sheltered for more than a century, many great men and women throughout Malaysian history.

Barbor's grandfather built the school where my father and brother both absorbed life's lessons, where they went in as boys and emerged as men, and so it is more than professional privilege to meet the architect's grandson: It is an absolutely personal honour.



Hubback welcomed the birth of his daughter, Yvonne, at the Carcosa.



Anderson School, in Ipoh.

The Malay College in Kuala Kangsar, completed in 1909, still stands as testament to glorious architecture.



me, I realised this is where the picture should be."

The painting — essentially a Hubback family heirloom — is in immaculate condition.

"My mother died in 1997 and so the

painting made its way into our little house in Somerset and then I spoke to someone at the Malaysian embassy and asked if they would like to have it," he shares, good-naturedly. "That was about five or six years ago," he continues, while generously obliging the occasional pop of our photographer's earnest picture-taking.

"I was 12 when he died," he says of his grandfather. Hubback passed away at his home in Hertfordshire in May 1948, of heart failure. He was a long way away from his birthplace of Liverpool, when he joined the world in April 1871.

### FORMIDABLE LIFE

"He was a frightening man," says Barbor with conspiratorial good humour, "but he led two lives. He led this life where most people dream of — building these extraordinarily beautiful buildings — and when World War I broke out, he raced back to join the army and became a general."

Hubback was no stranger to military involvement, having taken charge of the Federated Malay States Volunteer Rifles Force (MSVR) as Captain in 1902. "He took pride training them and was proud of what they achieved — they won shields — and then he went back to the army as a Major at 43," says Barbor with a mix of affection and pride.

There are many noteworthy points in the celebrated architect's life. Hubback arrived in Malaya in 1895 and settled in Klang as not just Chief Draughtsman for the Selangor Public Works Department but also adopted the duties of former State Architect

### Hubback Guided Tour

**Where:** National Textile Museum and Masjid Jamek  
**When:** June 14  
**Admission:** RM30 per person  
**Contact:** Nurul Izzati at nurulizzati@pam.org.my or 03-2693 4182  
A short walk along Jalan Raja to the Sultan Abdul Samad building

### A.B. Hubback: An Architectural Celebration in Malaya

**Where:** Kuala Lumpur's National Textile Museum at Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin.  
**When:** Until June 30  
**Admission Fee:** RM15

A.C. Norman.

He received an allowance of what was the equivalent of RM10 then to pursue a course of study in the Malay language. He married Margaret Roses Francis (Daisy) Voules at the St Mary's Church in Kuala Lumpur in October 1901. He honeymooned in Taiping. He played golf and cricket often. He welcomed the birth of his daughter Yvonne at the Carcosa in 1912.

Through his entire residency in what was then Malaya, between 1895 and 1920, Hubback made manifest — through vision and execution — some of the most enduring buildings that have housed the nation's greatest men and women: The Carcosa in 1901, the Anderson Boys School in Ipoh in 1909, the Malay College Kuala Kangsar and the Jamek mosque

that same year, the Selangor Club in 1910 and the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station (and the Hotel) in 1911.

He was also responsible for the Railways Terminal Office in Penang, the Federal Lunatic Asylum in Tanjung Rambutan, Ipoh, the British Residency in Seremban, the Supreme Court in KL, the Federal Secretariat in the capital and the Idris Memorial Mosque in Kuala Kangsar and Ipoh's Railway Station and Hotel.

"Most of us are finished by that age," muses Barbor when recalling his grandfather's military enlistment in 1914, "and there he was in the trenches. So he wasn't very talkative when he came out after four years of fighting."

Hubback was 68 and a General at the outbreak of the World War 2 in 1939, just three years after Barbor was born in 1936. "He wasn't allowed back into the Army then."

He did, however, help with a charity that looked after families who'd lost loved ones to war, shares Barbor. "And got a golf handicap of two," he adds smilingly, the non sequitur rolling naturally as if such a handicap were completely achievable for everyday folk.

The handicap would have come

in useful when Hubback served as president of the Royal Selangor Golf Club for a year in 1913. The subject of Hubback's love of golf even becomes interwoven into Barbor's natural sense of humour when he tells of how his mother was born 10 years after her brother: "He was too busy playing golf. I imagine!" he chirps.

### FAMILY PRIDE

Barbor is clearly in his element and enjoying every second reminiscing his family history. "My grandfather was one of four brothers who were all very interesting in their own way. His brother Theodore — a big game hunter turned conservator — was responsible for the creation of the national park," he shares.

There were ivory tusks and weaponry from the wars that were part of the family's treasury, ferried back to England from the Malay archipelago, he tells me, some of which were disposed of ("We can't have ivory sitting around — we disapprove of such things.").

So now that he's generously donated century-old family paintings and disposed of ancient treasures, what of his grandfather does he have?

"I have some of his letters. He wrote wonderful letters from the war." Your grandfather is responsible for

### THE HERITAGE LIST

#### CARI MAKAN TIME

**Where:** 54-56 Heeren Street/Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Malacca  
**When:** Weekends only, 11am-5pm, till July 27

An exhibition of street food culture in Malacca, Penang and Yogyakarta based on selected works from a 2014 field trip by the National University of Singapore's Dept of Architecture. Venue is Tun Tan Cheng Lock Centre for Asian Architectural & Urban Heritage.

#### PERANAKAN COOKING DEMO

**Where:** Courtyard, d7 at Sentul East, KL  
**When:** June 14, 10am-1pm  
**Admission:** RM50

**Contact:** Go ahead and drool as nyonya Debbie Teoh demonstrates dishes such as ayam cincaluk, Penang-style salted fish curry and kuih bingka. Organised by the KL & Selangor Peranakan Baba Nyonya Society.

#### BUKIT CHINA HERITAGE WALK

**Where:** Meet at Poh San Teng Temple, foot of Bukit China  
**When:** June 22, 9am-11am  
**Admission:** Free

Josephine Chua, a descendant of Malacca Kapitan Chua Su Cheong (1750-1802) who built the Poh San Teng Temple, will take you on a walkabout of the hill. She was involved in the restoration of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple in the early 2000s. Organised by the Malaysian Heritage & History Club.