

# Balestier Heritage Trail revamped

Former hospital wards among 30 new additions to area's history walk

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A row of eight single-storey former hospital wards with blue roofs stand on a hill in Moulemein Road. Although they would not look out of place in a war movie, few people in Singapore even know of their existence.

The National Heritage Board (NHB) is aiming to change that by adding the pavilion wards as a stop on its expanded heritage trail in Balestier, which was launched yesterday.

The wards housed Tan Tock Seng Hospital's tuberculosis and dysentery patients, among others, from 1909. The hospital vacated the site in 1999 and it was taken over by Ren Ci Nursing Home, which moved out last year.

The state-owned property is now managed by the Singapore Land Authority.

Built in the style of military hospitals designed by Florence Nightingale, the mother of modern nursing, the wards feature a long central aisle, wide spacing between beds and a high ceiling to let daylight in and improve ventilation, to help in the patients' recovery.

The Balestier Heritage Trail was launched in 2006. The NHB conducted fresh research and added 30 new sites to the existing 26 yesterday.

The NHB's assistant chief executive of policy and community Alvin Tan said: "We hope that Singaporeans will be encouraged to venture off the well-trodden path laid out by the previous trail and rediscover Balestier's heritage anew."

The trail is divided into three routes, each of which follows a different theme - Historical Landmarks Of Balestier Road; Faith, Film And Food; and Building Balestier.

A highlight of the trail is Balestier Point - an 18-storey mixed-use building completed in 1986. It was inspired by Canadian architect Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 housing complex in Montreal which features stacked housing units.

Vegetarian halls, or *zhaotang* in Chinese, are also featured in the trail. During colonial times, immigrant women with no family would take refuge in them after coming to Singapore to work as labourers, seamstresses, cooks or housekeepers. These Buddhist home-cum-temple establishments required their occupants to be vegetarian, to remain single and to perform Buddhist rites.

British cultural anthropologist Marjorie Topley described in a 1954 essay how such halls would provide "care while alive and a funeral at death", wrote heritage blogger Jerome Lim in a blog post.

One such hall is the Chan Chor Min Tong in Bassein Road. Mr Lim believes its last resident might have last walked its hallways in the 1970s. Some of these halls are open to members of their respective communities only during Chinese New Year.

The trail also traces the evolution of the area's architecture. It notes for instance that the area was once home to country bungalows from the late 1800s which attracted "Europeans and Eurasians of slender means".

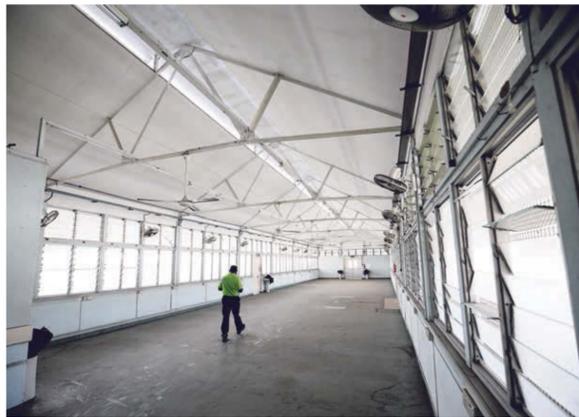
According to NHB research, by 1901, much of Balestier Road was lined by these country bungalows.

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SEE HOME B6

REDISCOVER THE AREA

We hope that Singaporeans will be encouraged to venture off the well-trodden path laid out by the previous trail and rediscover Balestier's heritage anew.



Tan Tock Seng Hospital's former wards for tuberculosis and dysentery patients have been added to the trail. The hospital vacated the site in 1999 and it was taken over by Ren Ci Nursing Home, which moved out last year. PHOTOS: LIANHE ZHAOBAO



Above: A redesigned trail site marker outside the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. Left: The new trail also features the former Nurses' Quarters in Mandalay Road.

## Bustling Balestier

First launched in 2006, the Balestier Heritage Trail has been updated to provide a fuller picture of the area's heritage, including its lesser-known history. The sites have been split into three thematic routes that allow Singaporeans to explore different facets of the area. Here are some highlights:

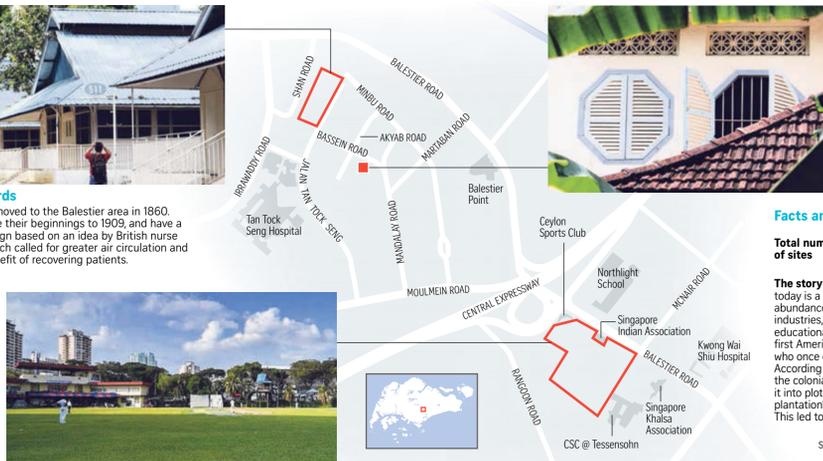


### Former pavilion wards

Tan Tock Seng Hospital moved to the Balestier area in 1860. These former wards trace their beginnings to 1909, and have a unique architectural design based on an idea by British nurse Florence Nightingale, which called for greater air circulation and good lighting for the benefit of recovering patients.

### Balestier Plain

Prior to serving as a sports field for groups such as the Singapore Indian Association and the Ceylon Sports Club, Balestier Plain was a landing field. The first commercial flight to Singapore - a Royal Dutch Air Service (now KLM) plane - landed there in 1927, en route to Jakarta.



### The Chan Chor Min Tong vegetarian hall

During colonial times, immigrant women would find refuge in vegetarian halls - Buddhist home-cum-temple establishments - after coming to Singapore to work. The occupants were required to be vegetarian and remain single. These places, including Chan Chor Min Tong, were usually established by migrants from Shunde district in Guangdong province, in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

### Facts and figures

Total number of sites **56** Total number of heritage markers **16**

**The story behind Balestier:** The Balestier we know today is a busy multi-faceted precinct known for its abundance of food options, lighting shops, old industries, as well as residences, medical facilities and educational institutions. The area is named after the first American Consul to Singapore, Mr Joseph Balestier, who once owned a large sugarcane plantation there. According to the National Heritage Board's research, the colonial authorities took over the land and divided it into plots for purchase by the public following the plantation's decline and Mr Balestier's departure. This led to the gradual transformation of the area.

Source: NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD PHOTOS: CMG, NHB STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

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