



Mr Fadzil Mohamed (left) at the Malay Club in Liverpool on his 75th birthday. The late Mr Fadzil, who was born in Johor, found a job in Singapore with the Straits Steamship Company and later settled in Liverpool. He worked at sea until he retired in 1996 at 65, said his son. PHOTOS: PAUL FADZIL

# Stories ahoy: Seamen and a Malay club in Liverpool



Mr Fadzil Mohamed (standing at left with someone's arms around him) and other seamen on the deck of the MV Charon. He left Singapore at the age of 17.

## NUS geographer chronicles the lives of men from Malaya who worked on British ships

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In the 1950s, a clubhouse in St James Road in the British city of Liverpool was serving steaming hot Malay dishes.

It was a hub for seafarers from Malaya who worked on British merchant ships carrying commodities such as tin and rubber to Liverpool for industrial production.

Established by Malacca-born Johhan Awang, it was patronised by hundreds of Malay men, some of whom ended up settling in Liverpool for higher wages and love.

The lives of this little-known group have been documented by urban geographer Tim Bunnell of the National University of Singapore.

Their stories will feature in a con-

ference in September at the Centre for Port and Maritime History's annual conference at the Liverpool John Moores University. Dr Bunnell will be delivering the keynote speech at the conference.

Conference organisers told *The Straits Times* that it will serve as a prelude to the commemoration of Singapore's bicentennial in 2019.

In an era when colonial British expansion brought administrators and merchants to South-east Asia, young Malays had opportunities to work on British ships and travel in the opposite direction – to the then thriving Port of Liverpool – once home to the passenger liner Titanic.

Many of the seamen started their journeys from Singapore. With British shipping booming in the 1950s, many ships sailed through Liverpool and “scores of Malay seamen hung out in the clubhouse”, Dr

Bunnell said. Their wages were low as they had been hired in South-east Asia. Still, those born in the Straits Settlements were British colonial subjects and could easily settle in Britain, where they could earn more money in the same trade.

Another reason for staying were the women they met and started families with in Liverpool, said Dr Bunnell, who chronicles this in his book, *From World City To The World In One City: Liverpool Through Malay Lives*.

Initially, the clubhouse was located in a rented space in the 1950s. In 1963, they bought a building at 7, Jermyn Street in Liverpool. Of the club's 12 trustees, half were from Singapore. Dr Bunnell said those who settled in Liverpool never numbered more than 100.

Briton Paul Fadzil, 59, a civil servant whose Johor-born father, Fadzil Mohamed, found a job in Singapore with the Straits Steamship Company and later settled in Liverpool, said his love for travel came from hearing the stories of seafarers in the clubhouse.

His late father worked at sea until he retired in 1996 at 65. His mother, 80, is British. He said: “Dad went on what seemed like very long voyages. We went to the Malay Club when dad was home and went to the gatherings after Ramadan.”

In most cases, the women did not convert and the children were not brought up as Muslims, said Dr Bun-

nell. Dr Bunnell, 44, who was born in Chester, England, first visited Liverpool in 2003 and chronicled the clubhouse's last five years of operation from 2003 to 2008.

By the time he arrived at the club, only about 20 of the first generation of seafarers were left, and a handful of them visited it regularly. Its other patrons were descendants of former seamen and Malaysian students studying in Liverpool.

The rise and fall of the community followed changing economic tides. Liverpool was badly affected by post-industrialisation from the 1960s as manufacturing jobs shifted from the north of England to regions with lower manufacturing costs. The seafaring families found it difficult to find employment.

Many in the community harboured a lot of regret, said Dr Bunnell. They had left South-east Asia to get to the metropole in Britain but ended up living through dramatic economic decline in Liverpool while Singapore and Malaysia underwent rapid economic development.

He added that making sense of Singapore's transformation requires a look inwards and outwards. “Today's Ocean Financial Centre in Collyer Quay – the name of which derives from the former Ocean Steamship Company of Liverpool – is one reminder of that commercial interconnection on the skyline.”

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