

Chimney Tower: Labuan's Historical Symbol of Pride



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I was invited by the Petronas Methanol Plant in the Federal Territory of Labuan to be a guest speaker at its annual innovation celebration. As the event was held during the school holidays, I brought my family along and extended my stay after the event.

My family and I ventured around Labuan Island, also popularly known as the Pearl of Borneo. It is a peaceful place surrounded by beautiful beaches, carpeted with charming tropical trees and houses a few interesting sites such as the Chimney Tower, a water village (Kampung Patau Patau) and Malaysia's largest World War II cemetery where 3,908 Australian, British and Indian soldiers were buried. I visited all these sites but I found the Chimney Tower particularly intriguing.

It is located in Tanjung Kubong, in north east tip of Labuan Island. This area is also known as Coal Point during the British occupational period although locals refer to it as punil. The Chimney Tower is a rectangular tower of red bricks, with two arched entrances at its base in the north and south. There is a decorative frieze at the top. Each arched entrance is 2.2 metres high and functions as a wind breaker to protect the tower from strong winds.

Standing at 32.5 metres tall and facing the South China Sea, the tower is made with over 23,000 pieces of red

bricks imported from England. The architectural design and the brick layering work are influenced by the British style. There are 12 layers of bricks beneath the ground and the tower sits firmly on limestone rock, containing highly concentrated kaolin or porcelain clay which is compact and provides a solid foundation.

The tower was constructed around 1900 when coal mining activities were at its boom in Labuan (1847 to 1911).

There are several theories about the exact function of the tower. Initially, because of its location, it was thought to be a ventilation shaft for an underground coal mine. However this suggestion was dismissed after excavation work at the site failed to uncover any evidence of mining activity. It was also believed to be a lighthouse to alert passing ships because of its strategic location on high ground, close to the open sea and the presence of Raffles Port nearby.

An Australian, who conducted in-depth research, suggested that the tower was built to be a smoke stack for brickmaking as large quantities of bricks were in

demand to erect buildings and coal mines during the coal industry boom.

Till today, the exact function of the tower remains a mystery but despite that, Chimney Tower is definitely a historical symbol of pride to the people of Labuan. ■

