

Ronnie Holmes

40 Great Years

In a remarkable career Sir Ronald Holmes, CMG, CBE, MC, ED, JP, has served in a wide variety of administrative posts in Government, ranging from Social Welfare Officer to Acting Colonial Secretary. Since he retired from active Government service in 1971 he has been Chairman of the Public Services Commission. Sir Ronald first came to HK in 1938. During the war he served in the Defence Force and when the Japanese army invaded HK he escaped to China. He returned on the first plane to arrive here after the war and has been here ever since. Sir Ronald had a hand in many of the events and processes which took place during the key transition period in the early 1950s. In a wide-ranging interview with The Bulletin he related some of the problems facing HK at that time and how they were dealt with.



The Chinese Revolution dumped Heaven knows how many people in Hong Kong — refugees either from the Communist regime or, more likely, from the confusion which accompanied the changeover. In 1948 the population was estimated to be about 1.8 million and by 1952 was of the order of two and a quarter million.

‘Simultaneously with this immense population problem the traditional entrepot trade, the backbone of Hong Kong’s existence, virtually disappeared with the closing of the China market and the outbreak of the Korean War and subsequent embargo on Chinese goods.

‘These were the days when the industrial giants from Shanghai were beginning to make themselves felt — people like C.C. Lee and the late P.Y. Tang and so forth. They had so much foresight in Shanghai that they were able to get out with a good deal of their resources intact, with their key personnel and very often with their machinery.

‘I don’t know that very much machinery was actually shipped out of Shanghai, although certainly some was, but this was a time when they were re-equipping with new, post-war machinery. Much new machinery was on order or actually at sea and when they saw the red light it was possible to divert it from Shanghai to Hong Kong. At first we didn’t realise what was happening, but by 1952 it was very clear that these chaps meant business. They were businessmen of a very high order of experience and sophistication. They knew at once what was possible and knew exactly how to set about it.

‘However, what they chiefly wanted

was land and the great influx of people made it very much more difficult to make land available. The policy was then — and still is apart from a few vagaries — that if land was available it was sold at public auction. But the problem was, there simply wasn’t the land to sell and this was mainly because most of the available land was by then covered and sterilized by various forms of illegal occupation — the squatter problem. If you look at old photographs taken at the time you can see what the situation was. I guarantee that the government at that time didn’t know to within half a million how many squatters there were. I saw an estimate in one of the annual reports for that period of 300,000 people living in huts and shacks and other illegal structures. Well, subsequently, when they’d resettled a million people, which was quite a long time ago now, the estimate then was that there were still 500,000 squatters!

‘You see, it wasn’t a straightforward situation of people finding their way into the colony, seeing a piece of vacant hillside and building a hut there.

‘For a start, the people living in huts were not necessarily refugees, although of course many of them were. You couldn’t delineate any part of them and say ‘Here is a mountain-side with about 2,000 huts containing refugees from China.’ There would be shops and factories, brothels and boarding houses, and so on. Speculative contractors built structures and rented them out. The result was a great mix up. Areas of Crown Land that could otherwise reasonably easily have been supplied with basic services and sold just could not be made available. If you wanted to widen a road and recover a strip of

land that was covered with shacks you could probably do it. But if you wanted a decent-sized parcel of land there was no means politically whereby you could clear it for development.

‘In 1952 there wasn’t really a resettlement policy at all. The ‘policy’, so-called, was to build pre-fabs made of concrete blocks and asbestos. The trouble was, if you rehoused squatters in these structures they were taking up roughly 40 times as much space as they had been previously. So you were stuck even before you began! The only places it was possible to build these huts were areas which had been burnt out and then Government would try to get some philanthropist to put up the money to build the cottages. The net result was that only about one in thirty of the people who had been unfortunate enough to be made homeless by a fire could actually be resettled. So the ‘policy’ was really no policy at all, and probably made matters worse.

The Shek Kip Mei fire

‘The key change came, as you know, at the end of 1953 with the enormous fire at Shek Kip Mei, which must have been one of the worst fires in history from the point of view of numbers made homeless. It started on the evening of Christmas Day and by the next morning an estimated 60,000 people had lost their homes — personally I think the figure was a good deal higher. But fortunately there was an extraordinarily small loss of life.

‘The fire brought home to us that the problem simply couldn’t be solved by any of the means that had been tried up to that time. So the basic decision was taken that the only way we could possibly solve the problem was by Government building accom-

modation. In the time between then and now — that is, less than 25 years — we have reached the stage where nearly half the population is living in public housing. I should think that is a higher proportion than in any country in the Western world.

'The Government set up a Resettlement Department in April 1954 and I was the first Commissioner for Resettlement. As a first step a lot of temporary two-storey structures were erected on part of Shek Kip Mei. A remarkable number of the fire victims were absorbed into the city, taken in by their friends or relatives. But there were still whole sections of Shamshuipo where perhaps 30,000 people were camping on the streets in little huts made of fibre-board or asbestos. It was an incredible sight.

'We straight away designed the first resettlement blocks which were six stories high — we reckoned that that was as much as a person could be expected to climb, although the following year we revised that to seven stories (the idea that lifts might be feasible hadn't occurred to us!) The H-shaped design of these blocks has been criticised more recently, I think unjustly. These buildings were so designed as to be capable of conversion to a much higher standard. The truth was that you could do this only by removing half the people. Some conversions of this kind have been done but it has not so far been feasible on any substantial scale. Instead, the old buildings are being pulled down to make way for much higher blocks.

'I can clearly remember appearing before the Executive Council when our multi-storey resettlement plan was first put to them. After the Members had asked a variety of questions the Governor, Sir Alexander Grantham, said to me 'Well, Holmes, what do you think? Is this the best we can do?' I said that we couldn't think of anything better. Then he asked the Director of Medical & Health Services, who said, 'Sir, I feel bound to oppose it. These are standards of overcrowding which are simply intolerable and we shall be criticised all over the world.' So the Governor asked him 'Well, what *would* you do?' He replied 'I don't know Sir'. And that was the key. There was nothing else we could do in the circumstances.

'After that we really went to town on the Shek Kip Mei site and other New Kowloon sites which we cleared by a process of "decantation". I remember one particular building which

we needed in a hurry to house 5,000 people. We included a bonus clause in the contract and from the time the building contractor started work to the time it was finished and ready for occupation was two months!

'Then we had to decide what we would charge the occupants of the new estate. Quite frankly, what we did initially was to decide what we thought they could afford to pay and rig the figures so that the answer came to about the same amount! What else could we do? You couldn't take a bunch of people who were mostly pretty poor to begin with and who had probably lost all they had in some fire and then say: 'The land we're going to house you on is worth \$400 a square foot and the building costs are so much and we expect to get our money back in five years. So you can move in tomorrow as long as you can pay \$125 a month.' So we produced "notional figures", which is another way of saying we rigged the whole calculation.

From NT fields to ladies' pants

Sir Ronald was Director of Commerce & Industry from 1962 to 1966:

'It was a difficult post to take over. I had no first hand knowledge or experience of this work and was posted to it from the job of District Commissioner, New Territories, a very different kettle of fish. Two weeks after walking through fields in remote parts of the N.T. I was in Geneva negotiating a textiles agreement!

'I relied heavily on the experts in the department, for whom I retained great respect and affection, and also upon the businessmen and industrialists in the private sector with whom the Government then, as now, maintained the closest contact in all matters affecting international trade.

'Textile problems dominated the scene and in four years I travelled nearly a quarter of a million miles on duty, a good ideal of it in the course of textile quota negotiations. These were frustrating rather than rewarding, although perhaps in retrospect a basis was established for what can now be seen as solid progress in subsequent years.'

Sir Ronald recalled the story of negotiations in Washington when Hong Kong sought an increase in the quota level for ladies' slacks.

'The leader of the American negotiators said, "Ladies' pants are not, repeat *not*, negotiable". Small voice from somewhere in the small HK delegation: "You wanna bet?"'

Sir Ronald was asked whether throughout this long period of rapid progress and development, there was any particular field in which he thought HK, or the Government of Hong Kong, could have done better.

Building roads

'Yes, roads. Not urban or suburban roads, the record is good in this field, but arterial roads into the New Territories, which are the basis for bringing the New Territories in to redress the balance and relieve, so far as it can be relieved, the problems of dense concentration.

'To me, we have always seemed to be struggling here and making heavy weather of what is a relatively simple matter. We break all records with state housing, we develop the world's third largest container port without one dollar of tax-payers' money being spent, we reclaim land before anyone is ready to buy it, and yet if you try to travel to Taipo or Yuen Long you might be in the rush hour in London commuting from some remote and inconvenient suburb.

'I suppose it is being put right now, but at what a cost at today's prices and how much too late. To this day, if you except roads built by the British Army, by the Japanese, and for the purpose of water supply projects, the system is much the same as when I first drove over it in 1938.'

Sir Ronald Holmes has probably had a wider variety of Government experience than anyone else in HK. Colleagues who have worked with him profess to have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. In conclusion we asked Sir Ronald what he believed to be the main ingredients in his remarkable success with colleagues and subordinates. He replied with consummate modesty:

'I have met with a great deal of tolerance from people who often knew far more about the job than I did. In the British civil service tradition one is expected to be a 'generalist', that is, to learn a little about everything. I think it is a good system but it does mean that the experts often have to be capable of carrying their inexperienced colleagues. I have had tremendous support from people who, in some cases, might have been expected to get the top job themselves.'

Sir Ronald & Lady Holmes will be leaving HK next month to settle in Greece, although they intend to visit HK from time to time. We wish them a long and happy retirement. **MP**