

## THE MACINTOSH CATHEDRALS

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### Introduction

*The author of this article has been working in Hong Kong since 1971. He started in the Architectural Office of the old Public Works Department, and is at present a Chief Maintenance Surveyor in the Architectural Services Department which celebrated its Tenth Anniversary in 1996. He has been assisting the Antiquities and Monuments Office in recording historical buildings and structures since 1992. In this article he gives a brief history of the police border observation posts known as the MacIntosh Cathedrals, which were named after Commissioner of Police, Mr. D.W. MacIntosh, whose idea it was to build them. The article has been compiled from information in the Hong Kong Police Force Library, also the Force Museum in Coombe Road to which due acknowledgements are made.*

In 1945 when Hong Kong was liberated, the population was estimated at 500,000. As the Territory regrouped and normality returned it saw an upturn in immigration and by the end of 1947 the population had increased to an estimated 1,800,000. In 1948/49, as a result of unsettled conditions in China caused by the civil war and the increasing successes of the communist armies, a large influx of refugees from the mainland commenced. Approximately 750,000, mainly from Kwantung Province, Shanghai and other commercial centres entered Hong Kong during 1949 and early 1950. This reached its height in the Spring of 1950 when the estimated population was 2,360,000.

Amongst the refugees were the defeated remnants of the Kuo Min Tang Nationalist armies and also a fair number of common criminals. Arms of all descriptions were available and gangs of armed men raided villages near the Border. There were frequent gunbattles between the police and gangsters, and there were several cases of policemen being killed and their revolvers stolen. In May 1949 two incidents occurred on the Border which were to lead to a change of design and use of police posts in that particular area.

On May 2, 1949 a four-man police patrol left Ta Kwu Ling Police

Station and shortly after midnight was ambushed at Chung Yuen Ha on the Border Road between Ta Kwu Ling and Lin Ma Hang. The attackers, a gang of more than ten men, fired on the officers and once police constable was killed instantly, while another was slightly wounded. The culprits escaped, taking with them the dead constable's service revolver. The same gang struck again fifteen days later on the night of May 17 with an attack on Nga Yiu Post, near Ta Kwu Ling, where four constables were on duty.

In those days the Post was only a brick structure of two rooms without any form of perimeter fence or facilities of any kind. Two constables left the post to visit a local teahouse, situated about 100 yards away, but out of sight of the post. A third constable decided to take a bath at a nearby matshed structure, leaving the fourth constable on guard duty outside the post. Whilst away from the Post the three constables heard the sound of shots being fired. Three men were seen running from the Post carrying weapons and the body of the constable who had been left on duty was found outside the Post where he had been shot twice in the back. The two constables in the teahouse were prevented from taking action by two armed men in what was obviously a well planned operation.

The gang escaped in the direction of the Shum Chun River, and took with them a Sten gun and two rifles, and the dead constable's revolver. Three days later, acting on information provided by New Territories officers, a large body of Chinese troops mounted an attack on the gang's hideout in a village four miles north of Shum Chun. In the encounter three of the gang were killed and five were captured. Seized in the raid were all the weapons stolen from the Post, including the revolver taken from the constable killed in the previous ambush on the Border Road.

It was as a direct result of the Nga Yu incident that the then Commissioner of Police, Mr. Duncan MacIntosh, decided to improve the design of border posts and the conditions of officers deployed at such outposts. On the hilltops lining the Border, a string of strongposts was erected which gave a view across the Border at strategic spots. The imposing concrete structures with their distinctive appearance and outline against the skyline were dubbed the "MacIntosh Cathedrals". The posts, of which seven in all were built up to 1953, provided police

with a strong visible presence along the colony's first line of defence.

A very comprehensive description of the new observation posts was given in an article by Sub-Inspector M.E. Davis\* which appeared in the HK Police Magazine in December 1953 :

*"The land frontier of the Colony of Hong Kong extends from Mirs Bay in the East, to Deep Bay in the West, following for the most part the tortuous course of the Shum Chun river. The country is intensely varied. The arable plain at Sha Tau Kok soon gives place to rugged mountains and deep gorges, which gradually fall away until the extensive marshy tracts near Mai Po are reached. Along the border for 16 miles of the length runs the frontier fence. It is, without any overstatement, difficult territory. The frontier area forms part of the New Territories Division of the Hong Kong Police Force, and is commanded by Mr. N.B. Fraser, M.B.E., Senior Superintendent of Police. One of the most important of the several methods of border control in effect in this area is the operation of a chain of Observation Posts*

*There are seven of these posts in the chain, covering the whole of the land frontier. Each is within sight of one or more of its neighbouring posts. All are accessible from the frontier road, or by means of jeep track from the roads. Most are located on prominent hill features which gives them an excellent field of observation. The elevation of the highest is over 700' above sea level. The frontier is divided into three sections, each with its complement of observation posts, which are controlled by a parent station in each section. From East to West the stations are Sha Tau Kok, Ta Ku Ling and Lok Ma Chau. The first has only one post, Pak Kung Au, under its control. Ta Ku Ling, the central and largest area has four, Kong Shan, Pak Fa Shan, Nga Yiu and Nam Hang. On the Western flank Ma Cho Lung and Pak Hok Chau posts are controlled by Lok Ma Chau*

*The posts are all almost identical in construction. Centrally there is a round, two storied, tower, and jutting from its sides are two long, one storied arms. The plan of the whole is roughly in the shape of a chevron. The upper storey of the tower is the Control Room, equipped*

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\* Deceased-Editor

*with radio and telephone, which is manned continuously. In the wall, at head height around the circumference, windows afford a 360° arc of vision to the duty constable. The Control Room gives access on either side to the flat roof of the arms of the post. This roof has a low, castellated parapet, and forms the Observation Bridge. Here is located a petrol generator and a searchlight. The former supplies electricity to the searchlight by night, and re-charges the R/T batteries by day. The bridge is also manned throughout the twenty four hours of the day.*

*The lower storey of the tower forms the men's mess room. In one of the wings there is sleeping accommodation for the personnel, with built in bunks and lockers. In the other wing there is a kitchen, bathroom and storage space, all small, but adequate. The windows of the ground floor perform the dual function of admitting light and protecting the post, since they are fitted with movable steel shutters bearing loopholes. The whole building is surrounded by a barbed wire perimeter of some depth.*

*The personnel are Cantonese and Hakka constables, the number varying with the area covered by the post, and the activities which it has to perform. This also influences the choice of command: in the more heavily staffed posts a Sergeant is in charge, and in the remainder a Corporal. All posts are well armed, having automatic weapons and grenades as well as the rifles and revolvers normally to be found in the N.T., and there is a plentiful supply of ammunition. Emergency signalling and lighting equipment is installed so that the posts are able to continue in their work in the event of a breakdown in their mechanical equipment.*

*In short, each post is so designed, constructed, equipped and staffed that it can, if need be, carry on an independent existence as a unit, without assistance from the main station."*

Today the posts still retain very much the same appearance as when they were built. They are in a good state of preservation despite their exposed positions. Modern installations include room coolers, thermal imagers, external cat ladders, safety railings, and windows to the upper storey of the control tower. In the fenced compound of each post there is a separate ablution block and generator house, and at some locations

there are rainwater catchments discharging into underground water storage tanks.

Outer defences consist of a danneret or barbed wire topped chain link fence, slit trenches, barbed wire entanglements, and at some locations concrete bunkers sunk into the hillside. Dense thickets and tangled undergrowth form a natural defence outside the perimeter. A later Police Commissioner, Charles Sutcliffe, who came to Hong Kong from Tanganyika, had the idea of improving the natural defences by planting the Mauritius or Cape Thorn. His idea was to cultivate the thorn all along the border fences and around the observation posts as a general security measure. The plan was not successful as the plant did not grow very well and in most areas never really developed as expected.

The man who gave his name to the new observation posts and whose idea it was to build them, was Duncan William MacIntosh, C.M.G., O.B.E., who assumed command of the Hongkong Police Force on Nov. 22, 1946. At the age of sixteen he joined the Royal Irish Constabulary in 1920 and served with that force until 1922 when he joined the Airdrie Burgh Police. In 1929 he was appointed an Inspector of Police in the Straits Settlements and was interned in Singapore during the occupation. After the war he became Acting Commissioner of Singapore Police, from where he was posted as Commissioner to Hong Kong in 1946.

Commissioner MacIntosh was responsible for reorganising the Hong Kong Police Force after the liberation, and to him goes the credit for laying the foundations on which so much of the present efficiency of the force depends. One of his most important tasks was to improve the low morale among the men under his charge. He set about this by beginning a long battle to upgrade police pay, conditions of service, and above all living accommodation. He also concentrated on improving professional standards, and reorganised the Police Training School. He succeeded in his efforts in boosting morale, improving recruitment, and established an *esprit-de-corps* essential to the running of an efficient police force.

After leaving Hong Kong in 1953 on retirement, Mr. MacIntosh accepted appointment as Adviser to the Iraqi Police and spent some time in Baghdad. He died at his home in Surrey, England on September

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14 1966, at the age of 62. His name is remembered in Hong Kong not only in the MacIntosh Cathedrals, but also in the MacIntosh tartan kilts of the Force Band. In the Force Museum in Coombe Road a special display case is dedicated to Commissioner MacIntosh and is full of memorabilia including a brass model of a MacIntosh Cathedral which was presented to him on his retirement by his Chief Inspectors and donated to the museum by his widow.

In conclusion although the MacIntosh Cathedrals are perhaps not architecturally significant, they have a certain appeal and are historically important as a key element in the development and improvement of Hong Kong's frontier defences and in the control of illegal immigration in the post-war years.

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