



Wild Times

Les Bird in Tai O, 1978

Looking back to how we used to live, Peter Sherwood uncovers the history behind Tai O's 117-year-old police station, now a boutique hotel

It can be chastening when in a flash your superior knowledge of things historical is revealed to be blind ignorance. And expanded upon to make you wish you'd never opened your mouth. There I was telling retired marine police officer and Lantau resident, Les Bird, about the wonders of my new discovery, the magnificently renovated Tai O Heritage Hotel... "Yes, brilliant isn't it," said Les. "I used to work there in the late '70s when it was Tai O Police Station."

"Matter of fact, I was the marine police inspector there, in charge of the Western half of Lantau, patrolling on foot and by Land Rover."

Salt was thrust into the wound when Les brought out his book about his experiences with the marine police: *A Small Band of Men: An Englishman's Adventures in Hong Kong's Marine Police* (Earnshaw Books, 2019). I borrowed a copy, devoured it – the book kicks off in 1976 and is filled with gripping stories spanning 20 years – and demanded we head out to Tai O together the following weekend.

Hijinks in the 1970s

To be given a tour of Tai O Heritage Hotel by someone who remembers it as a wild and remote police station really brought the place to life for me. The sun may well have been setting on colonial Hong Kong in the late '70s, but to hear some of Les' tales it was not close to dipping over the horizon at Tai O.

"We really were out in the sticks. There was a dirt track to Mui Wo and an overgrown footpath to Tung Chung, which back then was a small fishing village," Les opens.

"My only communication with the outside world was via written dispatches which were always a day or two out of date by the time they arrived, and I had a black Bakelite telephone that took up half of my desk. To make a call I had to ask the sergeant in the report room to get an outside line, dial the number for me, then put me through."



Tai O, 2018

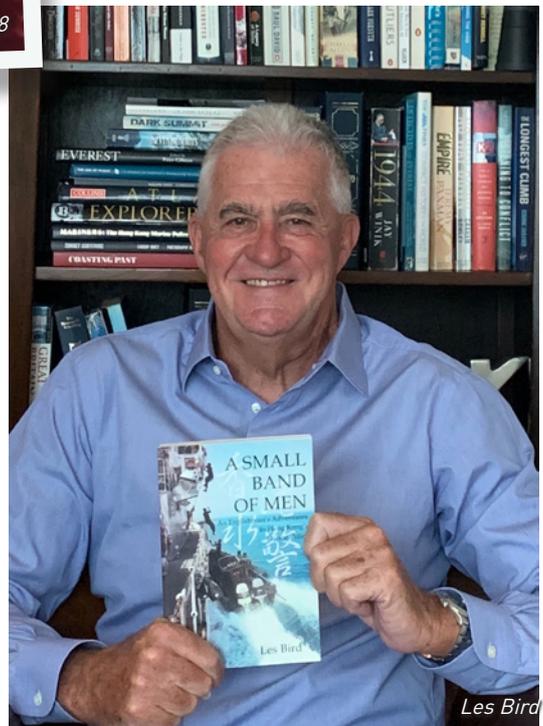


Tai O Dragon Boat Festival award ceremony, 1978

There was no dial facility on my contraption. The line was so bad that I had to shout down the trumpet-shaped mouthpiece in order for the person on the other end to hear what I was saying. There were some pretty crazy miscommunications. It was all a bit Blackadder in the trenches in World War 1."

But there were upsides. Les' quarters, the entire top floor of the police station, could only be dreamed of by others in the force: three bedrooms, a dining room and officers' mess. His fabulous view was across the Pearl River Estuary to the South China Sea beyond. And he was paid to live there.

Les speaks fondly of his then housekeeper, Ah Sam. "We made an odd couple: She was well under 5-feet tall and I'm 6 feet 4," he says. "She did my laundry, cleaned my quarters, pressed my uniforms and cooked my meals. She had worked at the station since the Japanese left in 1945."



Les Bird



Bridge in Tai O, 2018

According to Les, not a lot has changed since he was the station's chief cop. He marvels at the way the restoration has been delicately handled to ensure that every part of the building is easily recognisable. He points out two small cells still standing in the hotel lobby. "I rarely had to use them, but on a few occasions, I had to lock up two Royal Navy men for their own safety. They had the tedious job of working as lookouts, high in the hills above the station, and were inclined to overdo the demon drink out of sheer boredom."

A great historical landmark

Amazingly, despite tour buses arriving from the Big Buddha to disgorge their loads, much of Tai O village has retained its charm since Les' day, thanks to its winding paths and tightly packed stilt houses. Few people venture beyond the central village to the scattering of old houses and shacks beyond, and on to the island's end – and what is now a gem of a hotel.

Built in 1902, Tai O Police Station was restored by the Hong Kong Heritage Conservation Foundation in 2009, listed as a Grade II historic building by the Antiquities Advisory Board in 2010, and given the UNESCO Award of Merit for Cultural Heritage Conservation in 2013. For a little perspective on the age of the station, it is interesting to consider what else was happening in the world while this mini fortress was being built: King Edward VII was crowned in England; Alfonso XIII became king of Spain; the Boer War ended, and Cuba gained independence from the US.

Perched high on a lush hillside overlooking the village, Tai O Heritage Hotel has weathered centuries and stands in majestic and



The opening of Tai O's first bridge, 1979

permanent beauty. The nine-room property is managed as a non-profit social enterprise, with the aim being to preserve its heritage and help promote Tai O's famous landmarks and traditions.

"Tai O Heritage hotel has been meticulously restored and refurbished to maintain its late 19th-century character and historical details, such as the cannons, searchlight, corner turrets, dry goods store and cells distinctive to the former police station," says hotel manager Karl Law. "We hope guests will be able to visualise the beautiful colonial architecture of the olden days and at the same time experience elements of the still thriving fishing village."

Of pirates and resident ghosts

But what of Tai O Police Station's early days, way back in the 1900s? Here again, history buff Les helps me out. "As one of the ►

earliest police depots on the outlying islands, it was originally established as a garrison to combat pirates prevalent in the neighbouring waters,” he explains. “The marine police, who patrolled by sampan, also had a community role in resolving family disputes and arguments between villagers.”

In the mid-19th century, a joint British and American Navy famously took on a fleet of 36 pirate vessels in the Battle of Tai O Bay. About 500 Chinese pirates were killed in action with 1,000 more taken prisoner. Fourteen of the pirate ships sank in the battle.

For more on the police station’s history, I look to local author John Saeki’s *The Tiger Hunters of Tai O* (Blacksmith Books, 2017). Though based in the 1950s, the novel references many dramatic historical events – the march of the British colonialists, the opium wars, China in transition, World War 2 – and their impact on Tai O.

“There are terrible stories of the Japanese occupation, of starvation, violence, forced labour, and a torture chamber set up in the old Tai O Gas Station,” John says. “But there are stories of resistance too, for example from Wong Kei-tsai, said to be a triad, who always carried a pair of guns, and helped out the resistance by smuggling salt and bringing in food from mainland ports. And there were Tai O villagers who joined the guerrillas on Lantau’s hillsides.

“Tai O Marine Police Station was liberated briefly by the resistance fighters until the Japanese took it back,” John adds. “As far as I know, it’s the only strategic site in Hong Kong that was wrestled back from the Japanese during the occupation.”

John chose to base his novel in Tai O, after visiting the Tai O Heritage Hotel. His main protagonist, Eurasian police officer Simon Lee, is banished from the comforts of Central to a wild and rugged Tai O Marine Police Station, for having an affair with the police commissioner’s daughter. The premise for John’s book, which is based in 1954, gives Les pause for thought – he willingly applied for the Tai O posting in 1976. (Incidentally he was the only applicant.)

Today you can book a tour of the hotel and it’s well worth doing. You’ll be treated to the story of a rogue Indian police constable, Teja Singh, who killed his commanding officer Cecil Glendinning, and held his wife and child hostage there in 1918. It’s a complex story but the ghosts of Singh and Glendinning are said to haunt the hotel to this day. Should you stay the night, don’t be surprised if you’re woken by the sound of Glendinning’s bagpipes. 🌊



Village elders parade, 1979



Tai O Heritage Hotel, 2018

FIND IT

- *A Small Band of Men: An Englishman’s Adventures in Hong Kong’s Marine Police*, by Les Bird is available at Bookazine, Kelly & Walsh and Swindon
- Tai O Heritage Hotel, www.taioheritagehotel.com
- *The Tiger Hunters of Tai O*, by John Saeki is available at www.blacksmithbooks.com