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THE MALAYSIAN PLANTING INDUSTRY:

Rubber and Oil Palm 1960–1980

S. GATHORNE-HARDY

Lecture given to the Society on 8 November, 1983. Mr. Gathorne-Hardy joined Harrison & Crosfield and was posted to an estate in Perak in 1960. As an assistant and manager he served on twelve different properties, ending on Kuala Ketil estate in Kedah. He now lives in Suffolk but keeps his contacts with the Far East.

I WOULD like today to talk about the changes that have come about over the last twenty years on the estates in Malaysia. I do not propose to go into the technical side much, if at all, but mainly to deal with life on estates for staff and labourers, and I hope that for those who have lived in Malaya my reminiscences may bring back happy memories of that lovely country.

In the early sixties, estates in Malaysia were still very much the same units that they had been before the war. The country was newly independent, and was beginning to get over the Emergency.

Estates were more or less complete units on their own. Each made its own electricity, pumped its own water, ran its own school and often had its own hospital. Races were in many cases treated differently in that the Indian labourers were usually directly employed and Chinese worked through contractors, the Indian being resident and the Chinese living off the estate in the new villages.

A large proportion of the Indian workers had been recruited from India, the foreman or Kangani having obtained his position by going to India and bringing back recruits. Dress and household utensils were still almost pure Indian. The language was Tamil, with little Malay spoken. In some estates, mostly coconut estates in the Bagandatoh area where there was a large Telengu population, it was hard to get by on Tamil.

Everything was done on the estate itself; there was a tailor, a bicycle repair man – even a goldsmith. In estate work it was the same: large building work like putting up a new factory or building a new labour line site would be done by outside contract, but all painting and maintenance would be done with estate labour as would seasonal jobs such as budding the young plants. When the season came round a grizzled old man would step forward at muster with his knives and gear ready. Such men were often of high intelligence but had been denied an education because of poverty in the place of their youth. So they learned many skills and did many of the odd jobs, and led a varied life.

It was the Japanese motor scooter that started the great changes that I saw in estate life. I remember well as a junior assistant being asked by my conductor, who was a sort of supervisor between the assistant and the Kangani, what I thought of his 75cc Honda when he produced one, and giving the standard answer of the time and telling him that he'd better watch out that he didn't go over any big bumps on the estate road as he

would find himself sitting on a pile of old bottle tops and rusty razor blades – then paddling off on my estate-supplied Raleigh pushbike. Ten years later, he was still using the same scooter.

When budding time came round the following year a young Chinese man arrived on his Honda, offering to do the job at half-price, quite happy to be paid on successes and not wanting an advance. He had come from a hundred miles away, in Ipoh. He got the job. Two days later he arrived with his mosquito net, set himself up in the fertiliser store, and started work the next day.

Travel itself was changing fast. One used to go by ship from Penang or Singapore, and friends were seen off or met at the railway station. Stations were familiar places; one usually knew the barman. Estate produce was often sent, and required goods collected, from the station. In isolated areas it became a sort of club, where people met to collect their cold storage in galvanised cold boxes. There was often a military truck somewhere around, and in some of the larger towns the stations had the best hotels.

At assistants' conferences many would arrive by rail, and there would always be a yarn about the journey. Those who had travelled farthest would have the thickest heads, the time having been spent mostly in the bar, new faces appearing at each stop. At my last conference I travelled from Butterworth to Kuala Lumpur by train, for old times' sake. I think I was the only planter on the whole train. Certainly the only one in the bar.

Then the new airport was built, at Subang – a great palace in the countryside. We all agreed that it was much too big. But it was soon overcrowded and had to be extended.

Farewells are not nearly so much fun, now. There is none of the station atmosphere – the manager going on six months leave, all his staff and half the estate to see him off, his jolly neighbours with a jug to see him well on his way, his responsibilities and cares signed over, the noise and paraphernalia of the old steam train pulling into the station and then drawing away – bustle, flags and steam. The garlanded figure slowly moving off; then, in the distance, waving. The momentary quiet; the estate staff being recognised, and recognising others, on the platform. The syces (drivers) turning to go; always smokers, stamping out their cigarette ends as they move from their gossip. Suddenly all commotion, as some group decides to race the train to the next station and have another beer for good fellowship.

At about this time – the early mid-sixties – the introduction of the Sunday day of rest was imposed. There were angry shouts of: "the industry will be ruined; it's the beginning of the end", as up until then it had been a seven-day week. But the industry was not ruined, and the weekly day of rest brought a rhythm into estate life and an added quality to it. It meant that families could go out as a group for shopping, and perhaps see a film. It meant that they could do more visiting, or work together on something of their own.

This period also saw the beginning of industrial development in and around the towns, and the enterprising youth of the estates started to leave and find jobs away from home.

It was about the mid-sixties, too, when dismissal as a means of discipline was stopped, by the simple means of labour courts reinstating

anyone who appealed against his dismissal. At the time this seemed to me and to others to be most unfair, and many was the time we commiserated with each other over some lost cause. But we learned to live and work with the new fact, and, looking back, one sees that it was an impossible situation; a man could have little self-respect and pride when he was subject to instant dismissal even after years of excellent work, at the whim of his supervisor.

On the estates, at the same time, there was a great shift to oil palm cultivation, and companies with coastal clay soils replaced the rubber with palms. For the labourers it meant a very different life- or work-style. Palms are a cleaner crop; it is not necessary to harvest at a certain time in the day, as it is with rubber; rain does not affect the crop, as in rubber. Strike action has a different effect on management as no crop is lost, as in rubber. Expansion was so fast that high wages could be earned by the skilled.

A further change was the introduction of contour-planting. This has changed the face of the countryside, particularly from an aircraft.

Also at this time a further technical advance was the introduction of the Standard Malaysian Rubber, in the rubber-processing side. The main points here were the change-over in the classification of rubber from visual to technical, based on the dirt content, and the presentation of the rubber in better form, which could be more easily handled and more attractive to the customer. The effect on estates was the introduction of centralised factories which processed crop from several estates, and the closing-down of the small estate factories.

New immigration laws had come in by this time, and there were no new faces coming from the UK. This meant that promotion to senior staff was from local people. These early promotions were always men of exceptional ability. They came from two streams: those supervisors or conductors with many years of proved service, or graduates through a cadet scheme. The older men were of immense experience with established reputations, but it was the younger men for whom I had the greater admiration. They had pressures on them at that time of race, politics and family which we did not. Not only did they, of course, have to be excellent planters, but they had to know all the social graces of the planters and memsahibs of that time. What wines went with what, and how to keep a steady head in a heavy drinking bout. Some even knew English school and regimental ties.

All this was not easy even for those who had come out from UK. I decided that people in Malaysia built a life-style on what they had seen managers have before them, or on that which their parents complained they no longer had. I know I did so in many ways, living at quite a distance in the past. There were other complications, too. I had one manager whose father came out to Malaya from England before the war. They must have been living in the style of the 1880s, and the son continued but was going to settle in Australia. One had to know when to call him "sir", and when to call him "Blue". I made a mistake once. He had asked me up to his bungalow one evening when he had some friends in, and instead of walking straight in and helping myself from his ever-generous

fridge I said, "Good evening, sir." "Did you hear that? He called him 'Sir'." I had got it wrong. After that I was very careful.

The man who followed me to the estate could never get it right. He couldn't read the signs. In the end, after about six months, he packed up and returned to UK. This was the sort of thing the young Asian assistants had to cope with, on an equal footing with us.

It was a start, however. Soon the government took over the schools the estates had established and run, and brought them into the main stream of education. Health services were extended to the rural areas, which meant us. The national union of plantation workers began to replace the old *punjayt* system of labour negotiations with management and they were representing locally born labourers. The position of the old head *Kangani* was undercut on all sides.

Power lines were creeping across the country, and the beautiful great *Ruston* diesel engines with their massive belt-driven systems were put on standby-by, their polished pipes allowed to tarnish over. The dignity of the engine-driver lessened now that he had only to deal with tractors and the little *Lister* engines.

It was in the late 'sixties that a fundamental change began to overtake the estates. Small estates were joined together, or attached to larger properties. It was a sort of trend, which all companies followed and which had certain administrative advantages from the point of view of the controlling agencies.

Those who know, will remember that there was historically always a sort of good-natured competitive spirit between personnel in the field and those in the agency house. It arose because owners and boards who had delegated their position to agency houses would usually side with field managers on some points of dispute between the two. There were many reasons for this and I expect the habit started in the days when owners had originally been field men. It led to the agencies engaging only the very best brains available, so that, hopefully, they would never get themselves into a position where they could be in the wrong. This was the basis of great strength where managers were on small units and did much of the actual supervision themselves. The beauty of it was that managers would work very hard to maintain their special position, and this was to some extent humiliating for the "best brains", but it served their greater aim in that extremely high standards were maintained on the estates.

As a result of the amalgamations, managers were forced out of the field and into the office. A manager had to rely more and more on supervision by other people, and his own ability to reply to queries. As the standards the manager had been brought up to dropped, his special relationship could not be maintained; the pendulum had swung in favour of the agents, but the greater aim would suffer.

It is, of course, necessary to have some large properties to which managers can attain in the last years of their service, but men in their prime should be on the ground. This became less and less so, particularly when the multitude of new chemicals became available and vast amounts of new research results had to be applied. Other things which kept the manager in the office and out of the field were the greater quantity of court

cases and dealings with various government departments to which a letter would often require a follow-up in person. The kind of difference I am talking about is that, in the early to mid-sixties, an assistant would spend from six o'clock in the morning to two o'clock in the afternoon in the field, with a break for breakfast, six days a week. The manager might spend one hour in the office, after a ten o'clock breakfast, opening his post, and in the week a further three or four hours in the office during the morning work period. All the rest of the office work was done in the afternoon between three o'clock and five-thirty. On an estate nowadays, a manager will spend no time at all supervising labourers and would consider himself lucky if he could spend three hours a day in the field every day. Certainly, estate offices grew. The old tiled building of planks, with a hitching rail, was replaced on a grand scale with air-conditioned blocks, with everything to hand and every appearance of efficiency. Managers became very plausible in their replies.

Standards on estates were at their peak in the sixties, and, with the higher yielding material coming in, it only mattered a little if standards slipped from then on.

In 1969 shocking riots broke out after the elections, with many dead, and the country was never the same again. Up to that time the people had to a growing extent followed the leadership of their political parties, but now these very leaders had led the country into chaos. Curfew was imposed, and the country felt leaderless. There was a sort of numb period for a couple of days, with ghastly rumours and no one believing the politicians on the television.

Slowly, in the rural areas, the other leaders – the district officers, the police (who were superb), the business men, the teachers and the planters – got things going again. It was here that the strength of the country showed itself. But the politicians never regained the respect they had had. Saving only the Tunku, if the great man can now still be called a politician.

It also showed that, in an orderly transition from colonial rule, official positions retained a continued respect.

On the estates, the new managers took over not only the highest standards of planting, but many of the traditions of beautiful bungalows and gardens, and other responsibilities outside estate life. If anyone who has known Malaysia were to return to some remote little club he had used, he would be likely to find the same thicket of planters at the bar, with the same talk and the same welcome.

There are changes of style and substance. Local managers were sometimes inclined to retain a separate home, and this is understandable. To the UK planter his possessions were his home, and in whichever bungalow he laid out his carpets, boxes and books, that was home until he moved again. He sent his children away to school early in life. His real home was some place in his mind in faraway Britain.

To the local planter, home was perhaps Ipoh, or Penang, and when it was time for his children to go to school, often his wife would stay in the same place and the manager would visit at weekends. This was not considered very correct behaviour, particularly when taken to extremes, but it, too, was very understandable.

It sometimes seemed to me that there was an unsettled element amongst labour forces who were subjected to this treatment.

The worldwide reawakening of religious awareness was felt strongly on estates in Malaysia. Bahai, and many other teachings, spread. The dress of Muslim schoolchildren changed, and showed the arrival of strict observance. Aggressive groups appeared. It is a strange period, the unpleasant aspects attracting attention more than the good. Most estates now have a *surau*, or mosque, for their Muslim population, and the gathering at Friday prayers, the evident sincerity of the congregation, all in fresh-washed linen, is an example that cannot be ignored.

Excessive fanaticism was checked by the example of the Khomeini regime in Iran, but it is a sorry thing to see some of the harsher Middle East brands of Islam being taught to the quiet rural people of the Malay countryside. In fact it is disturbing to talk to the returned teacher, full of zeal and contempt, vastly knowledgeable in his subject, strict in observance of the laws, making demands with the power of Islam behind him – and finding that a strong envy of worldly goods goes with it all.

The Hindus have also become more active in their membership. Where, hitherto, an estate labourer would double as priest, a full-time qualified priest is now engaged. Temple ceremonies are becoming more and more elaborate.

Firewalking used to be a fairly rare event, held at certain estate temples that one only heard about. Now, it is common. Although the mutilations with spears, hooks, and things in the body are sometimes almost competitive, the preparations – such as the necessary fasting and nightly ritual prayers – are strictly carried out for a full month beforehand. This was an observance hardly practised in times past.

Old folk tell me that, though the festivals may be larger, longer and grander than before, they lack the joy of bygone days, as there is always some educated youngster about to say that too much drink is a bad thing.

It is not only the grand ceremonies or weekly prayers at the temples which attract large numbers of folk all dressed in their best. The little field shrines by the stump or anthill have also increased remarkably. Every shrine will have its small ceremony, with the people of the field having a prayer and a picnic feast.

Now, long-neglected shrines by, say, a footbridge, have been repainted, and are visited every night by the priest on his rounds, the sound of his handbell drifting across the evening making a fitting close to the tropical day.

With the rapid growth of government land development, which has planted much of the jungle in the lowlands, and industry starting up in the towns, by the mid-seventies the estates began to feel the pinch of labour shortage. This has led to the employment of Indonesians and other peoples on the estates whose position is not quite clear in law. It also led to many sorts of chemical labour-saving devices which, although expensive, at least got the job done. This in turn has led to fake or counterfeit products coming on the market on a large scale. There is a lot of money involved and a large organisation quite happy to invest in expensive equipment to duplicate containers, patent seals, or fake the packaging.

Petty crime on estates varied with locality. Usually it got worse the nearer the estate was to industrial towns. Gangs, which had been rare, are now on many estates, protection rackets taking a regular subscription and intimidating anybody who resists.

Samsu, or "moonshine" (illegally distilled rice spirit) is sold more or less freely on all estates. On one estate we smashed six distilleries. I was rather pleased with myself until, when speaking with a hardened old drinker, I was told that supplies were really not too much disturbed. The Towkay seemed quite happy; he had simply doubled the price and blamed it on an over-zealous manager.

The tale of the sale of samsu to estate labourers is a shameful one. Nobody does a thing about it. I tried to interest the breweries, who would stand to gain if it were stamped out. It is a killer. On one estate near us over sixty people died from one bad batch. There are hundreds of thousands of others who die or are affected by the beatings or poverty it causes.

Problems such as these are a sign of the times, but conditions of service for labourers are much better, on the whole. Wages going into some homes are large; the homes they go into are well-built and to a high standard and are very much better than their equivalent in the towns. It is not uncommon for youngsters to leave the estates to work in towns and, after a few months, ask to return. They come back very disillusioned, and their return is a great boost to the morale of those who remained behind.

The noticeable change in estate life throughout Malaysia nowadays is the number of young people about. I am told that sixty per cent of the population is under sixteen years old. And this youth is quite well educated. Whereas, in the past, one addressed someone in his native tongue as far as one was able, one starts in English now, as a sign of respect, only moving to another language if it fails.

Thus, with education, good housing, firm religious conviction and healthy work, life on the well-run estates is good for the labourers and the youth coming on, alike.

Of course, there are still disagreements, requests and ambitions. One of these now current is that the estate should set aside fifty acres so that the labourers can have some land of their own to live on and build on. This apparently reasonable request has some attractive aspects for the estate – or so I thought. But the next-door estate to the last property I was on had done just that and more, and after the houses had been built and the difficult problem of allotting units had been completed, it did not appear that relations between staff labourers and management had in any way improved.

The position of estate junior staff has improved over the years. The junior staff are made up of the field conductors, the office staff, the hospital assistants, the electrical charge man and the engine drivers.

Estates used to be run with assistants doing most of the field book work, such as latex weighing, checking rolls and cost distribution. On the last property I was on there had been at one time between ten and fifteen European staff. (Of course, in those pre-war days one could always expect two or three to be down with fever or something similar.) Nowadays, all their work is done by conductors, with assistants in the place that used to

be held by managers.

Thus, over the years, the conductors have had more and more responsibilities delegated to them. It has made a change in the pattern of life on the estates, as assistants used only to be on a property from one to three years, whereas conductors are there all their life. Conductors were, or are, a special breed of man. Often they have come from Kerala State in India, and have the genius of that people. It seems that, amongst them, everybody is someone's cousin's brother. They are the backbone of the planting industry. I think that what I treasure most from my time in Malaysia is the memory of the friendships I built up amongst this community.

If they have done well by the plantations, they have also made the best of what the plantations have done for them. Years ago they used to come to Malaya to work, make money and return to India. Now, they make Malaysia their home. They hold an increasingly high position in district society and are about on a level of income where race means less and less. Their children are the reservoir for recruitment to senior staff, if they have not gone in for medicine or law.

I was once told how one man had been recruited. How true this is, I don't know, but it was said that, as a young man, he had paid his ticket and was standing on the quayside, having just arrived, when he saw a European going up to people and saying, "ABC". When it came to him, he said, "D", and was promptly engaged as a clerk.

The most recent change in estate life or position has hardly been felt at estate level yet. This is, the buying-in by Malaysians and the take-over through various bodies. It may in the end have the effect the Gracchi wanted for the Latifundia in Rome, and the great estates will be split into small holdings. On the other hand, it could well have the opposite effect and be the means by which they are preserved.

From the point of view of the planters, it put one into a stronger position. Whenever the State Government wanted land, it was from the estates that it was taken. If it was for a clinic or school, there was no objection. But there were many projects – housing projects, for instance – which could just as well have been placed elsewhere. Compensation offered was never in line with local land prices and we would fight the case, but there was always a feeling of having been cheated because we were foreign-owned. It once took two years for the plans to be approved for some new labourers' quarters. Again there was the same feeling. But now, the new owners are very well aware of the value of property and are not going to see their best land go for a song, or have unnecessary delays sustained by their staff.

When driving through Malaysia now one sees no country houses – except planters' bungalows. These houses are fast becoming history, and should have preservation orders put on them. It may be that, as son follows father, memories of places will be such that a wish to save them will build up. A happy thought! In the same vein it is to be hoped that, now that a planter's life is no longer a matter of keeping the jungle back, since there is precious little left, an interest in natural history will develop.

In sum – life has changed a lot on estates over the past years. Twenty years ago foreign-owned estates were still worked by foreign imported labour intending to return to India, and managed by Europeans expecting to return to Europe. Now, to a great extent, estates are owned, run and administered by Malaysians. Units are larger, although the tendency now is to break down some of the biggest properties again, but with modern transport taking workers to the fields and bringing back the produce, it works well. Management used to be closer to labour, but there is hardly the need for this now, with educated labour and where the labourers have friends and relatives off the estate to whom they can turn.

The system has worked itself into a successful unit, so by and large the changes have proved to be right. It has withstood the War, the Emergency, and Independence. It has also got over the last twenty years, and is going forward in strength. It is really quite a success story – and is a pattern for others to follow.