Coaling station and naval base

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Coal and the move to New Harbour

Steamships needed coal, deep water and repair facilities, none of which the Singapore River could provide. The river mouth was shallow and crowded with lighters, which suited the junk trade and kept ocean steamers away. The answer lay to the west of the town, in the deep and sheltered channel between the mainland and the islands of Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani. In 1852 the P&O became the first shipping company to move its coaling station from the Singapore River to this New Harbour, where it built its own wharf.[1] Other companies followed. On 19 April 1900 the acting Governor renamed the anchorage Keppel Harbour in honour of Admiral Henry Keppel.[2]

Coal was a bulky cargo that had to be imported, stored and loaded in large quantities. The coal heaps of New Harbour, the gangs of labourers who carried baskets of coal on board and the lighters that fuelled ships in the roads became familiar features of the port. The speed at which a ship could be coaled became a matter of competition between ports, since every hour in port cost the owner money. At Tanjong Pagar, the contract rate for bunkering was eventually fixed at 40

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tons per hour. At its largest the dock company could store 250,000 tons of coal alongside 200,000 tons of cargo.[3] The bunkering business, which Chapter III of Part G follows into the age of fuel oil, LNG and ammonia, began here.

The Tanjong Pagar Dock Company

The most important enterprise of the new harbour was the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, founded in 1864 by the agency house Guthrie and Company and the Chinese merchant Tan Kim Ching. It was formed as a joint-stock company to finance a dry dock and was the first local joint-stock company in Singapore to offer its shares to the public, with an initial target of 200,000 dollars in 2,000 shares of 100 dollars each.[4] The company is thus an early landmark in the history of the Singapore capital market, which Part D follows to the modern exchange.

The beginning was difficult. The trade of the 1860s was depressed and the first dry dock, the Victoria Dock, opened only on 17 October 1868, a year before the canal. The canal transformed its prospects. More steamers called, and by 1870 the dock operations had become profitable. The second dock, the Albert Dock, followed in 1879. The company introduced steam winches and cranes in 1874, which raised the cargo handled at its wharves from 200–300 tons to 500–800 tons in a working day.[5]

Growth came through acquisition as well as construction. In the 1880s the company leased the Jardine Matheson wharf and bought the Borneo and Purvis wharves. In 1899 it merged with its rival, the Paten Slip and Dock Company, and thereby controlled five dry docks, about one and a quarter miles of wharf frontage and some 375 acres. The company maintained its own police force, recruited largely from Sikhs of the Punjab, and its own fire brigade.[6] A private company had become the operator of most of the port infrastructure of a Crown colony.

The expropriation of 1905

That position created a conflict between private and public interest. The port needed heavy investment in new wharves, docks and reclamation to keep pace with the growth of shipping. The shareholders, many of them in Europe, preferred

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dividends. In March 1904 the European shareholders rejected a modernisation plan of 12 million dollars. The colonial government responded with the Tanjong Pagar Dock Ordinance, passed in April 1905, which transferred the company to public ownership. Shareholders received 761 dollars for each 100-dollar share, against a peak market price of 600 dollars.[7]

The generosity of the compensation makes the decision instructive. The colonial state took control of infrastructure it considered essential to the economy of the colony. It did so by statute, with compensation above the market price, so that the investors had little ground for complaint. The pattern of a state that takes strategic infrastructure into public hands while respecting property and compensating owners would reappear in independent Singapore, in the statutory boards and government-linked companies examined in Part D.

The public dock board was reorganised as the Singapore Harbour Board, constituted under the Straits Settlements Port Ordinance of 1912 and operating from 1913. In the same year, on 26 August 1913, the King's Dock opened, then described as the largest dock east of Suez. An offshore breakwater completed in 1914 and the reclamation at Telok Ayer gave the port a modern harbour front.[8] The Harbour Board is the direct ancestor of the Port of Singapore Authority and of PSA International.

A coaling station of the empire

For the Royal Navy, Singapore was one of a chain of coaling stations and dockyards that allowed British warships to operate across the world. Merchant and naval interests coincided. A port with coal stocks, dry docks and skilled labour served the navy in war and the shipping lines in peace. Singapore benefited from this dual function, which gave the imperial government a reason to defend it and merchants a reason to use it.[9]

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The transition from coal to oil began before the First World War. Oil companies built storage installations on the islands south of Singapore, which later became the basis of the refining industry examined in Chapter II of Part G. The strategic importance of fuel would grow further when the Royal Navy converted its fleet to oil, since a base in Asia now needed fuel tanks as well as docks.

Notes

1. Wee Beng Geok, "The Story of Two Shipyards: Keppel & Sembawang", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 15, issue 2, July–September 2019: "In 1852, P&O became the first shipping company to move its coaling stations from the Singapore River to New Harbour", where it built its own wharf. ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Keppel Harbour" (accessed November 2026): renamed Keppel Harbour on 19 April 1900 by acting Governor James Alexander Swettenham in honour of Admiral Henry Keppel. ↩
3. PSA International, "Heritage | Chapter Three: The rise of the Port of Singapore" (globalpsa.com, accessed November 2026): "The contract rate of coal bunkering was also fixed at 40 tons per hour"; warehouses held "200,000 tons of cargo and 250,000 tons of coals". ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Tanjong Pagar Dock Company" (accessed November 2026): founded in 1864 by Guthrie and Company and Tan Kim Ching; Wee Beng Geok, "The Story of Two Shipyards: Keppel & Sembawang", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 15, issue 2, July–September 2019: the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company was the first local joint-stock company to offer shares to the public; it aimed to raise $200,000 through 2,000 shares of $100 each. ↩
5. Wee Beng Geok, "The Story of Two Shipyards: Keppel & Sembawang", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 15, issue 2, July–September 2019: Victoria Dock opened by Governor Sir Harry Ord on 17 October 1868; after the Suez Canal opened in 1869, more steamships called and by 1870 dock operations had become profitable; PSA International, "Heritage | Chapter Three: The rise of the Port of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): steam winches and cranes installed

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in 1874 raised cargo handling from 200–300 tons per day of ten hours to 500–800 tons per day; "Singapore Harbor from Its Founding to the Present: A Brief Chronology", *The Postcolonial Web*: Albert Dock opened in 1879. ↩

6. "Singapore Harbor from Its Founding to the Present: A Brief Chronology", *The Postcolonial Web* (accessed November 2026): 1884 lease of the Jardine Matheson wharf; 1885 purchase of Borneo Wharf and Purvis Wharf; 1899 merger with Paten Slip & Dock Co., giving control of five dry docks, 1¼ miles of wharf frontage and 375 acres; Wikipedia, "Tanjong Pagar Dock Company" (accessed November 2026): the company had its own police force, mostly Sikhs from Punjab, and its own fire brigade. ↩
7. Wee Beng Geok, "The Story of Two Shipyards: Keppel & Sembawang", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 15, issue 2, July–September 2019: a $12-million modernisation plan was rejected by European shareholders in March 1904; the Tanjong Pagar Dock Ordinance was passed in April 1905; shareholders received $761 for each $100 share, compared with a stock market peak of $600. ↩
8. PSA International, "Heritage | Chapter Three" (accessed November 2026): the Singapore Harbour Board was "constituted under the Straits Settlement Port Ordinance of 1912"; Wikipedia, "Tanjong Pagar Dock Company" (accessed November 2026): expropriated in 1905, renamed Singapore Harbour Board in 1913 and later Port of Singapore Authority (1964); Wikipedia, "Keppel Harbour" (accessed November 2026): King's Dock opened on 26 August 1913; Wee Beng Geok, *BiblioAsia*, July–September 2019: King's Dock launched in 1913 as "the largest dock east of the Suez"; "Singapore Harbor from Its Founding to the Present: A Brief Chronology", *The Postcolonial Web* (accessed November 2026): 1907 second phase of Telok Ayer reclamation and offshore mole; 1914 breakwater completed; 1932 Telok Ayer Basin opened. ↩
9. Wikipedia, "Singapore in the Straits Settlements" (accessed November 2026): "Singapore also benefited by acting as a coaling station for the Royal Navy". ↩

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