



AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DHOBIES OF SILIBIN ROAD LAUNDRY

Interview Record Sheet

Ref: ika/050807

Name	See Text Details	Company	None
Date/Time	7 August 2005 / 1300	Place	Jalan Silibin
Interviewer	Commander Ian Anderson RM (Rtd.)		Ipoh, Perak

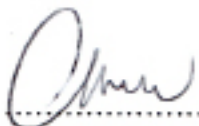

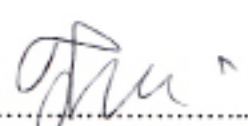
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CERTIFICATION

The original of the following certificate, signed by Chin Meng Wai, A Jayabalan and S Subramanium, is part of the bound master copy of the interview held in the ipohWorld library.

To whom it may concern:			
This is to confirm that the above is an accurate record of the interview of 2005 and the subsequent clarifications with me.			
 CHIN MENG WAI	 A JAYABALAN	 S SUBRAMANIUM	11/09/05 DATE

The Dhobies of Silibin Road Laundry

This was another challenging task for a foreigner as the interviews required a mixture of spoken English, Tamil, Bahasa Malaysia and Cantonese. I am therefore deeply grateful to my wife, Chin Meng Wai and the families of the dhobi community who helped with the translations. As is becoming the norm for researching Ipoh's history, there were almost no old photographs available.



On a dry day, towards the end of the morning, a multicoloured panorama may greet you as you turn into Jalan Silibin from what was Maxwell Road, Ipoh. This is your introduction to the old Silibin Indian families who are still continuing their family traditions, of dhobies to the Ipoh people, just as their fathers and grandfathers did before them.

As you will see from the photograph, the laundry is actually made up of what appears to be three wooden houses surrounded by an array of washing lines, concrete boilers and other miscellaneous structures. In fact, these were originally six houses or dhobi quarters, as they are actually semi-detached, and each was occupied by one family who ran their businesses as entirely separate entities. Today there are only 4 houses occupied and not with the traditional large families of old, but sadly only by one or two people in each. Nonetheless the laundries survive and are busy every day although perhaps not as busy as they used to be.

But what of the history of this capsule in time? Well today the four families still operating continue to work separately. The family names (starting from the house nearest Ipoh Town) are: Jayabalan s/u Arumugam, Subramaniam s/o Thuraikanne, Subramaniam s/o T Suppiah and Sinniyah s/o Vires. We spoke to each in turn and here are their stories.

1. Jayabalan s/o Arumugam



Jayabalan Hard at Work in his Laundry Station

Aged 60 years, Jayabalan has lived at the same house at the laundry site since he was one year old. He inherited the business 40 years ago from his father, Arumugam s/u Sivasamy, who had previously inherited from his father Sivasamy. This clearly puts the laundry as at least 80 to 100 years old. Married in 1975 and with four sons, Jayabalan and his wife used to work the business between them, but unfortunately his wife passed away in 2001 from a heart condition. Since then he has been running the business single-handedly. Although he is unable to give a date for the start of the laundry, he knows that his grandfather came from India as a young man and

became a dhobi man at the Silibin site. The family have been there ever since.

With six sons, none of whom live at the laundry and are not interested in continuing the family business, Jayabalan recognises that one day it will have to close down, but nonetheless is determined to continue for as long as he can and put off the sad day when his family's little bit of Ipoh history disappears for ever.

As you can imagine, being a single-handed laundry business is no easy task, especially for one like Jayabalan who has many loyal customers that have stayed with him over many years, as they prefer their clothes to be washed the traditional way, feeling that it is cleaner and better than modern automatic laundries. There was a time, before his wife passed away, when he also had contracts with the Ipoh Hospital, the Batu Gajah Hospital and several army camps, to wash bed sheets and pillowcases. However, his present customers are mainly individuals or families, many of whom knew his father and used to bring their laundry to him. These regulars will miss his laundry service when he decides it is time to put away his scrubbing brush for the last time.



**Arumugam s/o
Sivasamy, Father**

So what is a typical day in Jayabalan's life? Well it starts early in the morning, around 7.00am with sorting the laundry before washing it. Unlike one of the other families who light a fire and boil the clothes first, Jayabalan washes everything by hand using generic laundry detergent. Should they need it the items are also scrubbed and when clean, they are rinsed by hand and either hung on lines or laid out on the grass to dry. Hence the colourful array that greets you as you arrive in Silibin Road. Then it is time for breakfast and to catch up on any ironing left from the previous day. Around noon or a little after when the laundry is dry the arduous task of ironing continues with today's freshly washed and dried items, each customer's items being neatly bundled up ready for collection. Ironing, being a lengthy and painstaking task, takes until around 7.00pm. A normal day's work means washing, drying and ironing up to 150 articles on a good day and the typical cost of one piece around RM1.00 to RM1.50 depending on the article. Dry cleaning is also available. All this at the hands of one man!



Jayabalan and One of his Sons

One thing is sure, despite his 40 years of long days and hard work, these have not done Jayabalan any harm at all. As a younger man he was a great runner, taking part in several of the large annual runs that have become part of the Malaysian scene and he has many trophies to prove it. From the photograph here, taken with his son it is clear that he looks nowhere near his 60 years. He is living proof of that old saying “Hard work never hurt anyone”. Jayabalan, through his son, also told us about the other laundries that used to operate across the Silibin Road from his house. Directly opposite there was an old Chinese laundry which disappeared some 20 years ago and of which there is apparently no trace. Also on Maxwell Road, where it joins Silibin Road,

there were five more Indian dhobi quarters and some remains of these buildings can be seen among the undergrowth. They also disappeared a long time ago leaving the present four families to carry on the tradition, but for how long? No doubt the time will come when the only evidence of these laundries being in existence will be the stories passed down from father to son. That is why we have produced this article, a true record of what we found on the 7th August 2005.

2. Subramaniam s/o Thuraikanne

At the third house there is the laundry of Subramaniam s/o Thuraikanne. One of the first things that can be seen between the second and third houses is a small shrine, beautifully laid out in a special area and under its own tin roof.



Osman is Busy



The Shrine of ‘The Big Man’

Osman who works with Subramaniam and lives in the third house (the second house is unoccupied) told us that the shrine was dedicated to a special god whom the Indians called ‘The Big Man’ in their own language. He also told us that he was seventy-five years old and had been working at this same laundry since 1962. Unfortunately on two occasions we tried, Subramaniam himself was too busy to talk to us, but Osman filled us in on the details while he continued with his chores, hardly stopping to draw a breath. There did not seem to be quite as much work here as some of the other laundries, but nonetheless by 9.00 a.m. all the washing had been done and was already drying with the ironing yet to come. At that stage Osman sat down and ate his breakfast.

3. Subramaniam s/o T. Suppiah



Subramaniam is Busy with the Iron

At the fourth house we found S. Subramaniam, who also inherited the dhobi business from his father T. Suppiah, who he says, started it up again in 1946 after the war had ended and the Japanese left. It is not entirely clear who worked in this laundry before the war, but it seems likely that his father (who passed away some 15 years ago) did as a young man, as Subramaniam knows that his father was a dhobi then and believes that he was at Silibin. Whether it was Subramaniam's grandfather who started the business no one will ever know. Originally from Kampar they moved the family home to Ipoh in 1950, by which time the family business was certainly operating under his father.

Subramaniam, born in Kampar in 1946 started as a dhobi in 1956 at the age of 10, having only completed five years schooling and he has worked at the same ironing table for the last 49 years. He has nine brothers and two sisters. While he no longer lives at the house, his younger brother, T. Sinnadurai still does and works with him at the laundry during the day.

Another brother, S Shanmugam and on a part-time basis, Subramaniam's wife, Elanggovathi, also help with the laundry. Sadly, although they have four children, (two girls and two boys) like Jayabalan's sons, none of them have any interest in keeping the family business going and Subramaniam plans to work as long as he can and then hand over to Sinnadurai. After the latter retires the laundry will have to switch off its irons and put out its boiler fires for ever.

With up to four people working together they divide the work and provide a 24-hour service for their customers. Living in the house, Sinnadurai starts early by lighting the boiler fire and when the water is hot he gets on with the washing. This is very much a team effort and Shanmugam can also be seen at the boiler or in the washing area as well as at the ironing table, and while Subramaniam does much of the ironing, he often joins his brothers sorting the laundry, at the boiler or at the thrashing slab. The working day starts at 7.00am for Sinnadurai, while the others start a little later and by the time they finish and as the day draws to a close, some 100 plus items have been washed and ironed and neatly folded. Shirts currently cost RM1.00 per piece, much cheaper than the more modern laundrettes.

The customers are interesting as they come from all races and walks of life, but today there are no European customers like there used to be as they have mostly gone home. But one niche market that Subramaniam and his brothers hold on to is the brightly coloured tablecloths from Chinese Restaurants and others in the catering trade. This is very good for business at festival times like Chinese New Year and these are welcome and regular customers who have been using the laundry services for many years.

Questions about relaxation and hobbies did not really give any insight to what the family does in their spare time and it seems that they have no particular hobbies or past-times, but prefer to enjoy themselves with their families in a variety of ways. Not that there is very much time for relaxation with the long hours they put in at the laundry.

With this laundry using the truly traditional tools of boiler, washing enclosure, thrashing block, scrubbing, rinsing, drying and ironing, it seems essential that this operation be recorded in pictures as

before long there will be no laundries like this anywhere in Malaysia, for already the other three laundries on this site no longer practice the trade as it used to be. Here then, told in photographs, is a normal day in the life of the Silibin dhobiemen.

The Subramaniam s/o T. Suppiah Laundry at Work



1. Bundles of Dirty Laundry Waiting to be Washed



2. T. Sinnadurai Boiling the Clothes on an Open Fire



3. Clothes Boiling Completed, now for the Tablecloths



4. Sorting the Tablecloths for Boiling



5. Hand-Washing Clothes and Curtains after Boiling



6. Scrubbing Badly Soiled Areas



7. Threshing out the Dirt on a Granite Block



8. Rinsing in Clean Water



9. Elanggovathi Putting Sheets Out to Dry



10. Quality Control, Checking the Completed Items



11. Collecting the Dry Items



12. Shanmugam Takes a turn with the Iron



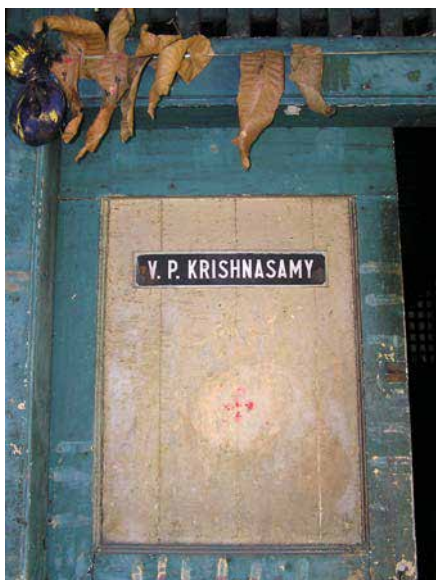
13. Yesterday's Laundry delivered to the Roadside



14. Not Any Old Iron!

One final thing to note in this pictorial record of the laundry at work in process is the iron they use to smooth and finish the laundry to the satisfaction of their customers. Pictured here, this iron has been in use for as long as Subramaniam has worked in the laundry (49 years). As can be seen it is a heavy model with a special "Extended" sole, which can pass easily under buttons, thereby allowing the material to be made completely wrinkle-free, without damage to the buttons. What can also be seen is the bare wires at the rear, a bolt without any apparent purpose and the white element sticking out at the side and back. The reason for these shortcomings are simply that it is just not possible to get the correct spares for an iron this old and therefore anything that will almost fit is used. A suggestion to Subramaniam that he does away with this old iron and buys a modern replacement is met with a quick rebuff. Apparently they do not make irons like they used to and modern ones simply cannot do the job!

4. Sinniyah s/o Vires



The Door at the Fifth House

House number 5 is the laundry run by two widowed sisters led by Menaga (41) as it was originally the business of her husband who started it 19 years ago, but when he passed away three years ago, Menaga kept it going. Apart from her sister she has no help other than her children who, although not interested in the business, do help her at weekends. She worries about the decreasing business and is not sure quite how long she can keep it going.

Despite the family at number 5 being relatively new dhobis, the house is around the same age as the others and was probably built at the same time. The previous owner of this business was V. P. Krishnasamy who was a school teacher and employed laundry workers rather than running it as a family business. As you can see his name is still on the door, but the present occupants know nothing about him.

In conclusion therefore it seems that the Silbin Road laundry business continues to run pretty much as it used to, but the number of dhobies is steadily decreasing. Quite how long this traditional trade can continue here is not known, but clearly it will not be too long before some 100 years of tradition disappears under a building site or road improvement.

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