

# From the Suburb to saving our shared heritage in faraway Rangoon

Britain has left its own very distinctive mark on the farthest corners of the earth – in Asia, Africa, the Americas, the West Indies, Australia and the Pacific. Britain built much of the modern world and its heritage does not end at Dover.

Some of our most evocative buildings and monuments can be found across the Commonwealth, in the former Empire and beyond. This extraordinary shared heritage is highly valued by many nations as a major economic and cultural resource, not least, surprisingly, in distant Burma.

Rangoon is one of the world's great historic cities. Larger than Paris or Rome, the 'Havana of the East' is a sleeping giant with huge potential for the future economic development of the country. Like Burma as a whole, for the past fifty years it has lain isolated behind a bamboo curtain, a forgotten city in a secretive and forgotten country. However with the advent of a new reforming government, the country is now embracing democracy and re-opening to the wider world. Its remarkable architectural heritage is becoming more widely known, but, in the process, threatened by ill-considered new development.

In 2005 the government decided to move the capital to a

greenfield site at Naypyidaw two hundred miles to the north of Rangoon. Virtually overnight whole groups of superb late 19th and early 20th century colonial era buildings were abandoned with no consideration given to their adaptation or re-use. However the new government is now aware that what survives is an economic, social and cultural asset of international significance, and the race is on to save it from speculative development.

In 2012, along with a handful of other campaigners, I helped Dr Thant Myint U, the eminent Burmese writer and historian (the grandson of U Thant, the former Secretary General of the UN) to set up the Yangon Heritage Trust ([www.yangonheritagetrust.org](http://www.yangonheritagetrust.org)) with local Burmese trustees to champion the cause of conservation-led regeneration, and to fight for what survives. We held a major international conference in Rangoon to highlight the global significance of its heritage, and to promote the work of the Trust, since when it has become a major player with the explicit support of the reforming President, Thein Sein, and Aung San Suu Kyi.

One hundred years ago Rangoon was one of the great trading cities of Asia. In its heyday



in the 1920s it was the most cosmopolitan capital in Asia, a wonderful garden city, frequented by Somerset Maugham, Aldous Huxley, H.G. Wells and Pablo Neruda. 'Rangoon opens its arms to the world' boasted the Rangoon Times in 1940, just as the curtain came down on it forever.

However, today entire streetscapes remain containing hundreds of important historic buildings, which coalesce to confer a very distinctive sense of place. Here are the former offices of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Standard and Chartered, the Bank of India, the palatial Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, the romantic Bombay Burmah Trading Company and the rambling teak portals of the

once exclusive Pegu Club, now a derelict ruin. Nearly all the great civic buildings survive including the Secretariat, the High Court, the elegant colonnaded New Law Courts and City Hall, which is a wonderful amalgamation of classical and Burmese styles. Alongside ancient Buddhist pagodas are an Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedral, Baptist and Methodist churches, Chinese temples, dozens of Shia and Sunni mosques, Hindu and Parsee temples, and even a Jewish synagogue.

With increasing recognition that this remarkable legacy is inextricably part of the national cultural identity of modern Burma, there is now a strong desire to save it for future generations, but, in a country emerging from decades of isolation and authoritarian government, there is little expertise.

With only scant resources, the Yangon Heritage Trust has a central role to play in saving Burma's heritage. In a country with only a rudimentary legal and planning system and minimal conservation skills, it is leading the way by showcasing international best practice and drawing in selected institutions to enhance local capacity, including the Princes Trust for Building Community, the World Monuments Fund and Turquoise Mountain, which has done excellent work in the regeneration of the old city of Kabul, Afghanistan.

A huge amount has been achieved in just two years. There is now widespread acceptance

that important historic buildings should be kept. The Trust has carried out a rapid survey of the city centre recommending that the current (1996) list of heritage buildings should be increased from 187 to over 2,500 coupled with the designation of conservation zones around key areas of the downtown city. In an historic visit to London last summer, the President pledged that all the colonial era buildings would be kept and restored for exciting new uses.

Fuelled by speculation and over ambitious expectations of making a quick killing, land prices are now comparable to New York. The real challenge is to maintain the unique low-rise, multicultural character of the downtown city in the face of intense development pressure for high-rise buildings. Encouragingly a five storey height limit has been agreed for the historic core and permission for a harmful skyscraper rescinded.

London too faces similar pressures with speculative proposals coming forward for

over 200 high rise buildings driven by foreign investment, but offering little benefit for Londoners desperate for affordable housing. This will transform the character and skyline of the capital irrevocably, not least locally at Swiss Cottage, where there is a current application for a 25 storey tower.

It would be ironic that just as we are advising the Burmese to protect their capital from uncoordinated proposals for speculative skyscrapers, we allow the same to happen here. It is as though we have learned nothing from the past 40 years and are determined to revert to the discredited ideas of the 1960s.

PHILIP DAVIES

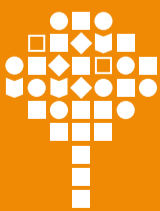
*Philip Davies is a lifelong Suburb resident, an international expert in heritage and planning and the principal of his own practice. A best-selling author, his next book is due for publication in 2015. 'England's Lost Warrior – Seagrim of Burma' is an epic account of the finest story ever to emerge from the Second World War in the Far East.*



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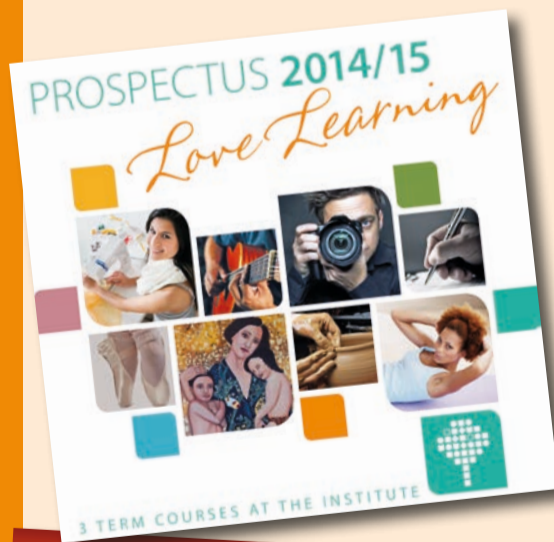
## Insight

# Love Learning



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Even if you are lucky enough to live amid the greenery of the Suburb, life can sometimes be incredibly stressful. You rush to and fro, doing everything you need to do for everyone else – but do you ever feel you have no time in your life for yourself? Between work and family, children and caring responsibilities, you just never find time to do that extra something you would so love to.

If that's you, then do take a look at the new 2014-15 prospectus from The Institute in East Finchley or dip into our attractive Autumn Short Courses brochure. You will find a choice of over 300 courses offering you a chance to discover your hidden talents, to learn something new and to share your interests and ideas with like-minded people from many different backgrounds. The Institute's links with the Suburb remain strong and you may well find yourself studying alongside old friends and acquaintances.

Our courses range right across the subject spectrum from one day workshops costing only £40 to full 3 term courses. You can choose from Art, Design and Creative courses, Computer and Accounts Skills, Cookery, Digital Media and Photography, Fashion and Textiles, Humanities, Wellbeing and Modern Foreign Languages. So, whatever it is you would like to learn, you can almost certainly do it at The Institute. Unfortunately we are unable to offer Pottery, Sculpture, Stained Glass and Antique & Modern Furniture Restoration classes in the Autumn term. The Institute Council is working hard to secure suitable accommodation for these classes and we confidently expect them to resume early in 2015.

We have been providing adult education in North London for over 100 years but we make sure that we keep changing with the times. Alongside our regular favourites, here are just some of the exciting brand new courses we will be offering from September:-

**Create Your Own Graphic Novel** – a one day workshop

**Topical Cartooning** – a 5 week course

**Fabric Painting** – choose from a 1 day taster workshop or a 5 week course

**iPhoneography** – learn how to take better pictures on your smartphone – a 1 day workshop

**Social Media for Business** – a 1 day workshop

**Recreate Your Favourite Garment** – a 1 day workshop

Our autumn term starts on Monday 15 September. All our daytime courses now take place at Bishop Douglass School but many evening classes are still continuing at the Archer Academy – so do make sure to double check the venue of your class when you enrol. To find out more about all our upcoming courses – including Cookery, Dance, Music and Modern Languages – take a look at our website now [www.hgsi.ac.uk](http://www.hgsi.ac.uk) or give us a ring on 020 8829 4229. We look forward to welcoming you back at The Institute this September.

For further details ring 020 8829 4229 or visit [www.hgsi.ac.uk](http://www.hgsi.ac.uk)