

The Straits Times

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Our Straits Times story

by Wong Wei Han

By most accounts, The Straits Times was an accidental baby

In the middle of the 19th century, the office of The Straits Times' editor resembled a war room, a primitive stock exchange and a bustling bazaar – all rolled into one. A stream of visitors from around the world, some fresh off ships, passed through it unhindered.

They carried a precious cargo: the latest news, spoken in a breathtaking array of unfamiliar accents. That made the office, at No 7, Commercial Square, which later came to be known as Raffles Place, the most happening place in town.

"It was a large room, 60 feet by 40, and contained more than 100 files of papers from all parts of the globe, most of them for exchanges, for the room was really the newspaper file-room of the editor of The Straits Times. It was also well supplied with current maps etc, and was the centre of the commercial part of the town.

"Officers of ships of war, commanders of merchant vessels and passengers who arrived by the many vessels constantly passing through the harbour, were admitted free of charge and from them the local inhabitants got much news, with the result that it was the most popular resort of the place."

This account of The Straits Times newsroom was left behind by Roland St John Braddell, a prominent lawyer and co-editor of a historical publication, *One Hundred Years Of Singapore*.

Braddell was writing about a period just three decades after Sir Stamford Raffles decided in 1819 that the lush island with its fine harbour and a convenient perch on shipping routes between India and China would be the ideal spot for a new trading settlement and free port for the British Empire.

Raffles' plan was a smash hit, attracting Arabs, Armenians, British, Chinese, Dutch, Germans,

Indians and Malays. Likewise, merchants, traders, sailors, soldiers, handymen, adventurers, opium dealers, convicts and coolies. Or just the plain curious. They all flocked to Singapore to seek their fortunes.

It wasn't long before the first newspaper rolled off the press.

No, not The Straits Times, but the Singapore Chronicle, a gazette started in 1824 by John Crawfurd, the Resident of Singapore, who ruled the island on behalf of the British East India Company. The main function of the Chronicle was to publish official notices and information on trade, commerce and shipping.

The Chronicle folded in 1837, walloped by the Singapore Free Press, a weekly set up in 1835.

Backed by influential men – William Napier, Singapore's first lawyer; **Edward Boustead**, a pioneering trader; and George Drumgoole Coleman, Raffles' town planner – the Free Press earned a reputation for its reliable portrayal of happenings in Singapore.

The third entrant, the Straits Messenger, made a splash in 1842 with what was then a novel offering: foreign news culled from British newspapers and overseas journals.

But it died a premature death a year later.

The Straits Times appeared in 1845, its parentage nowhere as formidable as that of the Singapore Free Press. By most accounts, it was an accidental baby and there was no reason to suspect it would be the newspaper to outlast them all.

In years to come, at least a dozen other newspapers would unfurl their banners only to close down eventually. The Straits Times is the only one to be published uninterrupted – now for 170 years – except during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945.