

Istana Woodneuk - Our Grand Old Dame

By Dahlia Osman

I used to try and not think about this old dame. Then in 2006, I was unexpectedly reminded of Istana Woodneuk when a student showed me photographs of “this big mansion off Holland Road”. However, it wasn’t the palace itself that interested her; she was more excited about her paranormal experience there. What I saw in those photos greatly saddened me. Such brutal damage had been done; the former palace was dilapidated; the ceiling had collapsed; the wooden staircase was damaged; and the building had been defaced. There was graffiti on the walls and damage caused by arsonists.

I want to preserve my memories of Istana Woodneuk, as I remember it from when I was growing up; before its manicured lawns and tidy paths were covered by the aggressive tropical jungle; before the vegetation came too close and creepers invaded the building; before intruders disrespected such a beautiful historical building; before Grandpa Handair passed away and before Grandma Armidah had to leave.



L to R: Mom and my Aunt with Grandma behind them at Tyersall Park, 1961



Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, Lady Marcella and Tunku Miriam, 1950s

For me, Istana Woodneuk was a beauty, a treasure so special that I want to keep my memory of the house as it should be, just sitting there still in time, like a secret. I’d like to keep it that way, to protect it from Singapore’s rapid urbanisation and the ever-expanding development of the land. I’d always hoped that the thick foliage surrounding Istana Woodneuk would work as a safe barrier against public knowledge and intrusion, except from a few photography and paranormal enthusiasts.

Perched higher uphill on this land was a larger palace called Istana Tyersall, which was demolished in 1935. On a smaller hill stood Istana Woodneuk, which was built in the 1800s and burned down in 1925. In its stead, Istana

Wooden York was erected, referred to fondly amongst its occupants as Istana Woodneuk. This was bequeathed to Sultana Siti Khadijah, the fourth wife of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor. Sultan Abu Bakar’s son, Sultan Ibrahim and his Scottish wife, Sultana Helen, lived here. On this 60 acres of land there was a park, a lush garden and also an orchard of tropical fruit, enough to provide for the sultan’s household and the many servants who took care of the palace and estate. The sultan also had his own horse jumping arena where after his death, residents claimed to have seen an apparition of him riding his horse.

Grandma and her family moved to Tyersall Park when her father, Great-grandpa Ahmad, got a job as a gardener at Istana Woodneuk in

1951. My mother was three years old. She and her younger sister grew up there and at times played with Tunku (Princess) Miriam. My grandfather, Handair bin Haji Sidek was Sultan Ibrahim’s chief servant. He was promoted when the previous one was caught trying to sell a truckload of fruit grown here. The sultan had made it clear that all the fruit from the estate’s orchard was free for everyone there, but was not for sale. He was summarily dismissed.



Grandpa Handair (on the right), at Istana Woodneuk



Mom and dad at their wedding, 1968

There was a whole community living on the estate. Old photographs reveal happy events and smiling faces. In 1968, my parents held their wedding celebration in the grounds, attended by the whole community. They moved out of Tyersall a year later. Sometime in the early 80s, I remember going to a wedding celebration there, with a traditional Javanese performance called *Kuda Kepang* or *Kuda Lumping* included in the event. Men danced in a trance while 'riding' on decorated cardboard horses. It went quite crazy as some of them were swallowing glass and stripping coconut husks off with their teeth. They could easily be alarmed into charging when they saw the colour red. My mother must have forgotten that little detail because I was wearing red.

When I was growing up, we would visit our grandparents every Hari Raya and enter the grounds from a gap along Holland Road, almost opposite the road leading up to Dempsey Hill; a spot only former occupants and the postmen knew about. A relic of a letter box stood by a tiny crooked entrance, not obvious from the level of the main road. There used to be a rickety wooden bridge. Walking straight on could fill your senses with the rich scents of nature. On the right stood a very long house on stilts, where several families lived. I remember it clearly because I was amazed by the colour of the wood, black but unpainted. Our grandparents' house was at the far end, past a grass patch large enough for children and chickens to run about in and for hanging out laundry. They lived in this house the whole time. It was at the foot of the hill where Istana Woodneuk stands. An inscription on a kitchen step states that their house was erected in 1952.

My brother and I would run uphill and venture into the jungle or sneak into the empty istana through the wooden louvres. We marvelled at the grand staircase and the kitchen's saloon-like swing doors. Upstairs we found bathtubs, each leg a unique design, and fancy faucets. While standing in the grand, wood-panelled main room, the smell of the timber filled the air. I could imagine the clinking of glasses and people twirling and dancing the night away.

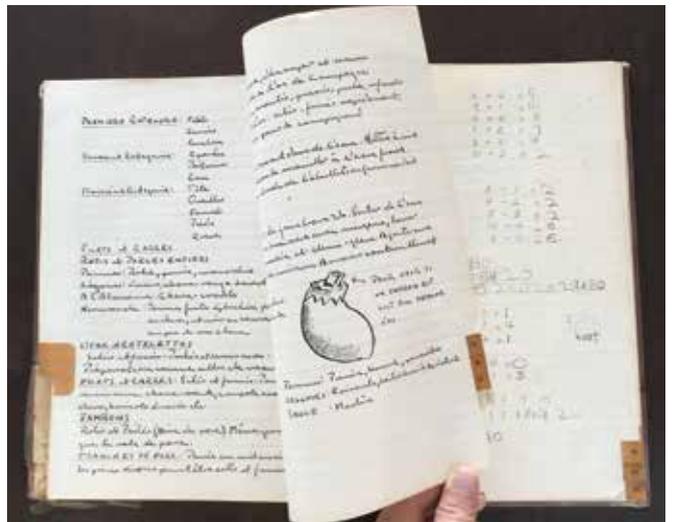
Sometime in the mid-90s, when I was already a young adult, my late Grandpa and I were walking through, opening windows and doors and airing the istana, when he asked if I wanted a Philco fridge and a New World Radiation stove. He also asked about the star-shaped pendant light dangling over the porch and the two light fixtures guarding the main doors because he knew that I loved old furniture and objects. I would usually grab such treasures, but not this time. It seemed too much like desecration of this beautiful old dame. As we left the kitchen, I saw an old recipe book, handwritten in French. What attracted me was the childish handwriting on its blank pages. It was my cousin's scribbles of basic counting and spelling. I kept only that.



L to R front row: Grandma, mom and me at Istana Woodneuk, 2002

When Grandpa passed away in the late 90s, we wrote to inform the Sultan of Johor that we would be unable to continue maintaining the property. Not too long after that, I went back to visit. Like vultures, thieves had stripped the palace bare. Unfortunately, that was only the start of the abuse. With Grandpa gone, I was worried for Istana Woodneuk.

Grandma continued living at Tyersall for a couple more years. However, it gradually became dangerous for an old lady to live alone at the foot of the hill, with squatters and thieves hiding out in the many acres of unguarded jungle. It was hard for her to leave her home of half a century, but in 2001, she finally did. Grandma gave me what looked like a refectory dining table and two armchairs, which she said were from the istana. I am still trying to date this unique table, which is currently in my kitchen.



French cookbook with scribbles found late 1990s at Istana Woodneuk

I took Grandma and mum to visit Istana Woodneuk one last time in 2002. I have not been there since. Every time I pass by Tyersall Avenue, I try to sense our grand dame's presence, but there is only silence. Another piece of history is fading away.

Dahlia Osman has been an art educator and curriculum specialist for over 25 years. A multidisciplinary artist, she examines neuroplasticity and the mapping of the human experience.

All photos courtesy of the author