

Miri's overlooked industrial heritage



By Terry Justin Dit

On 17 January 2024, it was announced that the Brooke Dockyard Industrial Heritage Museum in Kuching would be opened to the public by the end of the year. Industrial heritage is a part of our cultural heritage. It demonstrates the development of industrial technology, the changing production methods, and working conditions in bygone days, and helps us understand society's history and development more broadly.

Nowadays, industrial heritage can be seen in historic factories, refineries, drilling towers, mills, railways, lighthouses, other old buildings and structures, and historic documents. Kuching, the capital of Sarawak which dates back to more 185 years, is not the only place that has an industrial heritage in the state. Miri, the second largest city, which was commonly known as 'The Oil Town' before assuming its current moniker 'Resort City', also has the potential to highlight her industrial heritage.

Industrial heritage tourism is a growing trend, and is an excellent opportunity to preserve and present old production facilities, equipment, and the knowledge and skills that were used to operate them.

The old Lutong Oil Refinery, which began operations in July 1919, was originally built in Miri town but moved to Lutong in December 1918. It was decommissioned in 2003 and demolished in 2004. With its demolition, Miri lost a very important part of her tangible industrial heritage and it was a shame that not even a small part of the refinery was preserved as a memory of its glorious oil and gas past.

However, all is not lost for Miri still has a few tangible industrial treasures that are still visible, but are in danger of being lost if they are neglected further. Below are three examples of Miri's industrial heritage, which are linked to its heyday as an oil and gas hub which can and should be preserved and promoted properly as part of her industrial heritage.

The Salome Dam

Rediscovered by the public in 2020, the Salome Dam was completed in 1921 and was used to supply water to Miri town. The dam had a capacity of 11,000 tons of water. However, whether or not the dam was used by the Japanese occupying troops for ritual purposes during the Second World War remains a conjecture.



Bricks used in its construction came from the Alexandra Brickworks in Singapore as evidenced by some of the loose bricks on site with the initials 'ABW' on them. The Alexandra Brickworks was owned by Borneo Company Limited (BCL). BCL was founded in London on 8 May 1856 as a joint stock limited liability company to exploit business opportunities in Sarawak.



Salome Dam. Picture by Eliza Johannes 11/9/2020

Steam Engine at 'The Oil Well', Lambir Hills National Park and Asam Paya

Located three kilometres from the Lambir Hills National Park headquarters, this steam engine is a probable remnant of Sarawak Oilfield Limited's oil exploration activities. It was most probably used for drilling operations in the area. A similar steam engine was also discovered by villagers at Asam Paya close to the Miri/Brunei border.



Steam engine at the Oil Well, Lambir Hills National Park. Picture by Silbelmic Searn. 1/3/2015

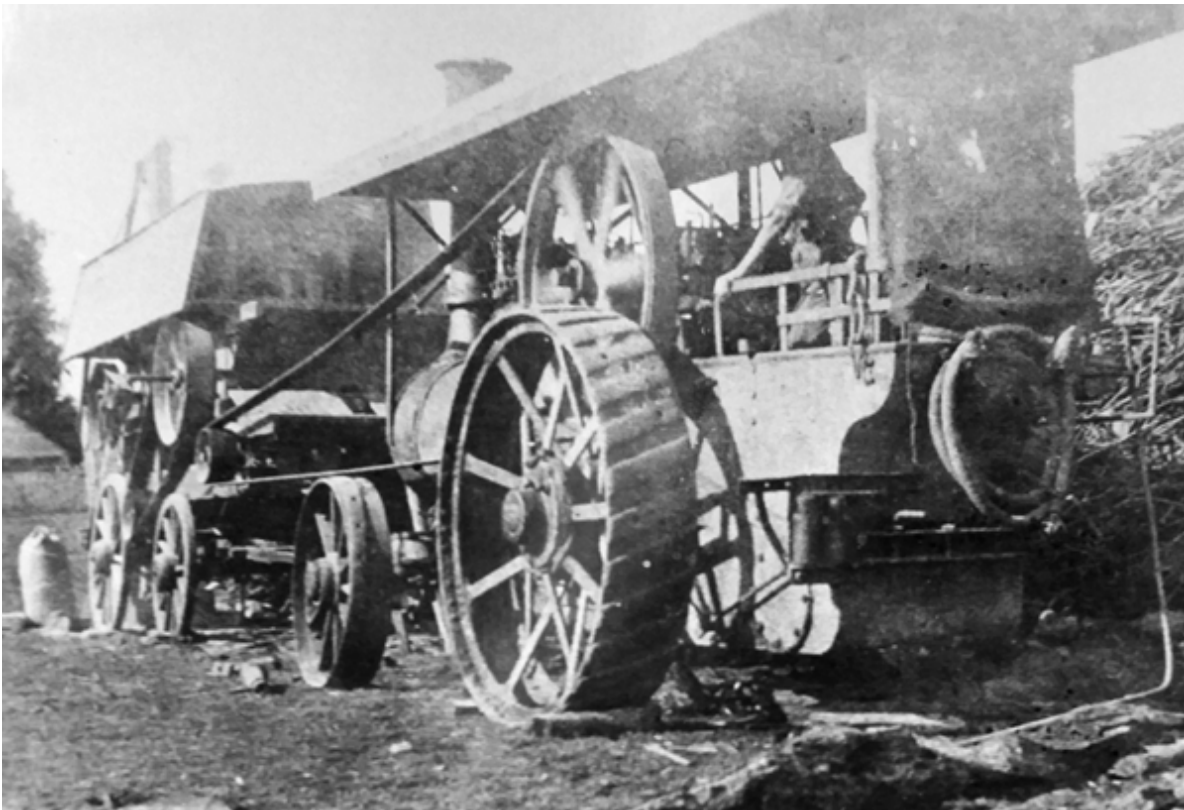


Remnants of steam engine at the Oil Well, Lambir Hills National Park. Picture by Silbelmic Searn. 1/3/2015



Restored 1890 Richard Hornsby traction engine (No 7089) during its first test run in August 2017. While the exact model of the steam engines located at the Oil Well and Asam Paya are not known, the above picture is a good indication of how they might have looked while still brand new. Leahy, M. Heritage Machines.

<https://heritagemachines.com/restorations/richard-hornsby-traction-engine/>



A steam engine/tractor had many uses. The Hornsby engine photographed – possibly – in the 1930s, towards the end of its working days for Morey at Swansea, in Tasmania. Leahy, M. Heritage Machines.

<https://heritagemachines.com/restorations/richard-hornsby-traction-engine/>

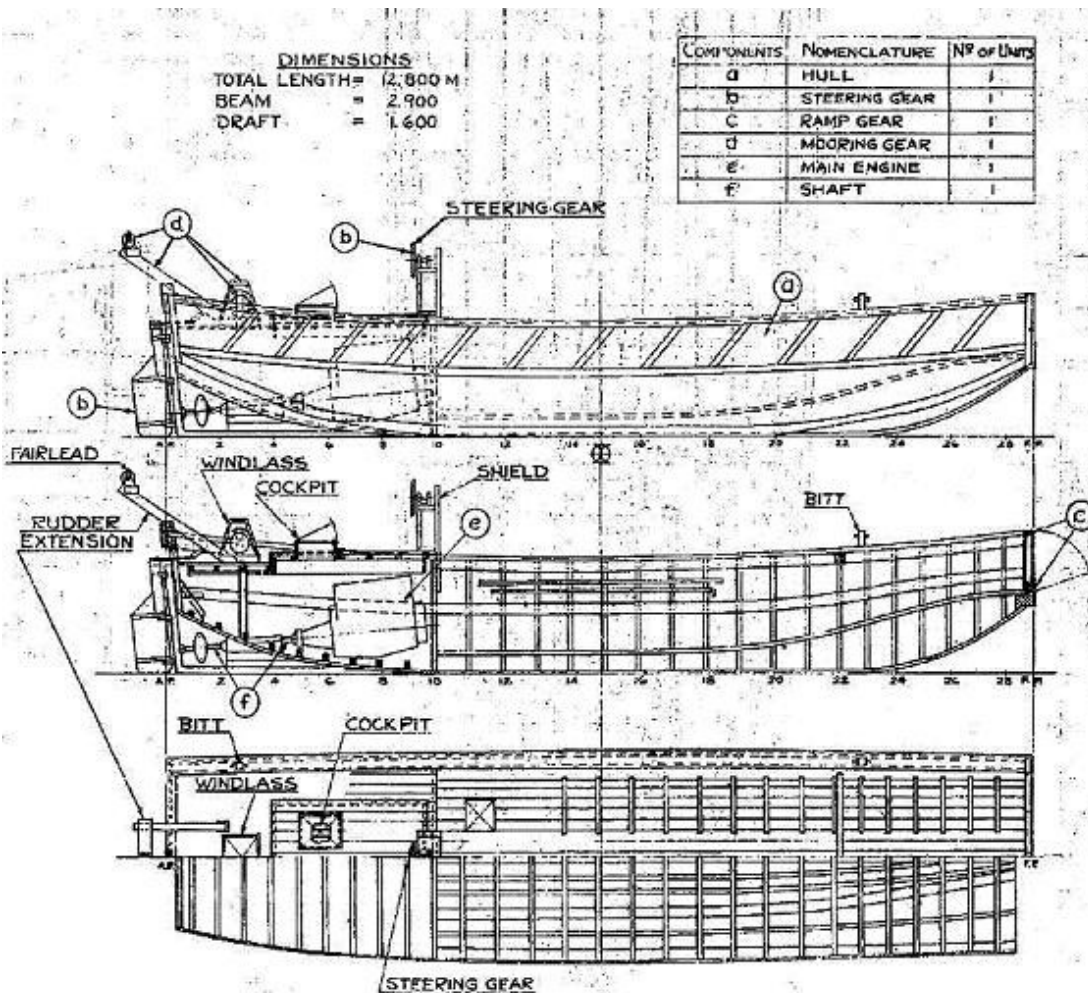
‘Japanese landing craft’ at Tanjong Lobang Beach

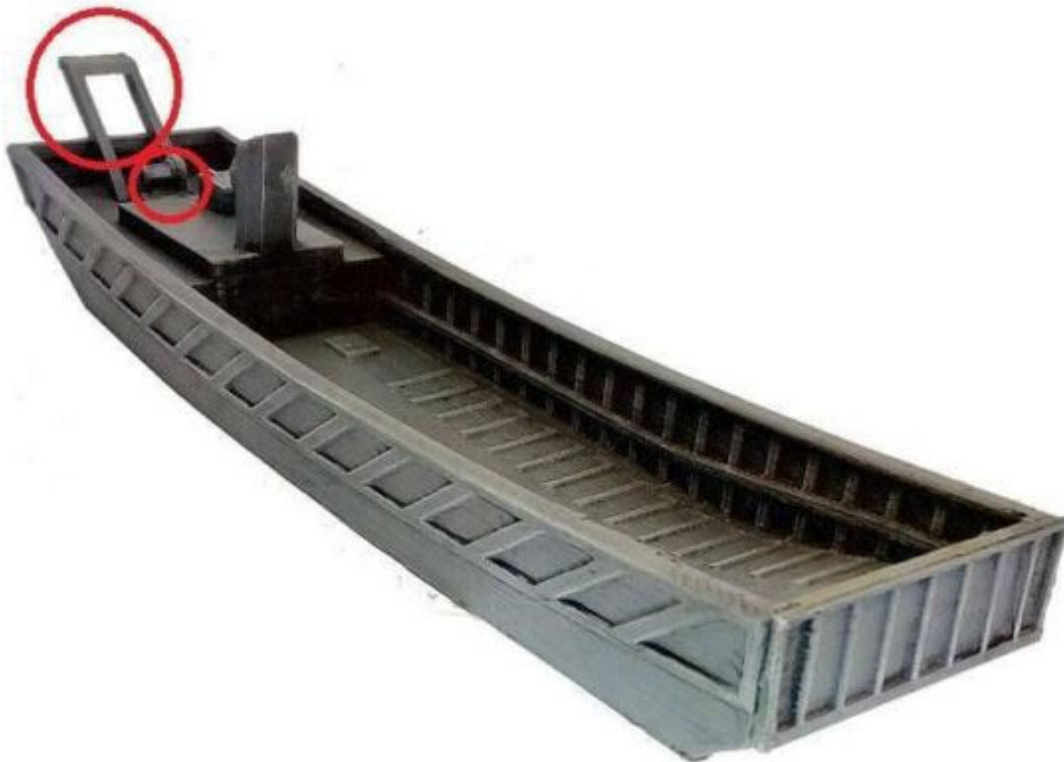
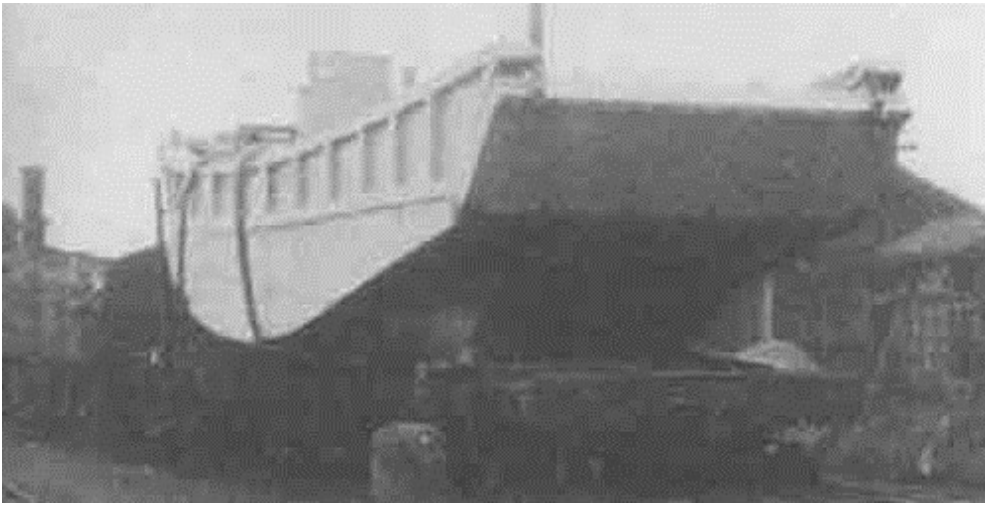
For decades, there has been a local legend that in a not too distant part of Tanjong Lobang Beach there lies the wreck of a ‘Japanese boat’. Speculation that it might be the remnants of a Japanese landing craft from the Second World War is worthy of further research. Could the rusted remains be really part of a Japanese landing craft? If true, then is it the remains of a Moku Daihatsu class of landing craft that were used by the Japanese for beach landings during the war?





Picture taken by Lilian Baun Pulo. 27/12/2022





Blueprint, picture and model of a Moku Daihatsu landing craft (circle indicating what probably remains at Tanjong Lobang Beach) used by the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN). Pictures taken from <https://www.barrageminiatures.com/boats/207-moku-daihatsu-class-landing-craft-156-28mm.html>. Accessed on 19/1/2024

Industrial heritage exists in different stages of human history. A significant part of industrial culture, industrial heritage includes a wide range of social, architectural, technological, and historical ideals. Miri's industrial past involves the oil and gas industry and her strategic importance during the Second World War should not be forgotten. More efforts should be made to promote and preserve these currently tangible elements of industrial heritage to the public.

A city with its industrial heritage preserved can be a source of pride for its inhabitants, who through viewing and accessing these monuments and artefacts would have a personal connection to a place and time in history. Who knows, there might be more industrial artefacts still to be unearthed in Miri. It is up to all of us to be curious and to have the desire to explore Miri to find out.

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