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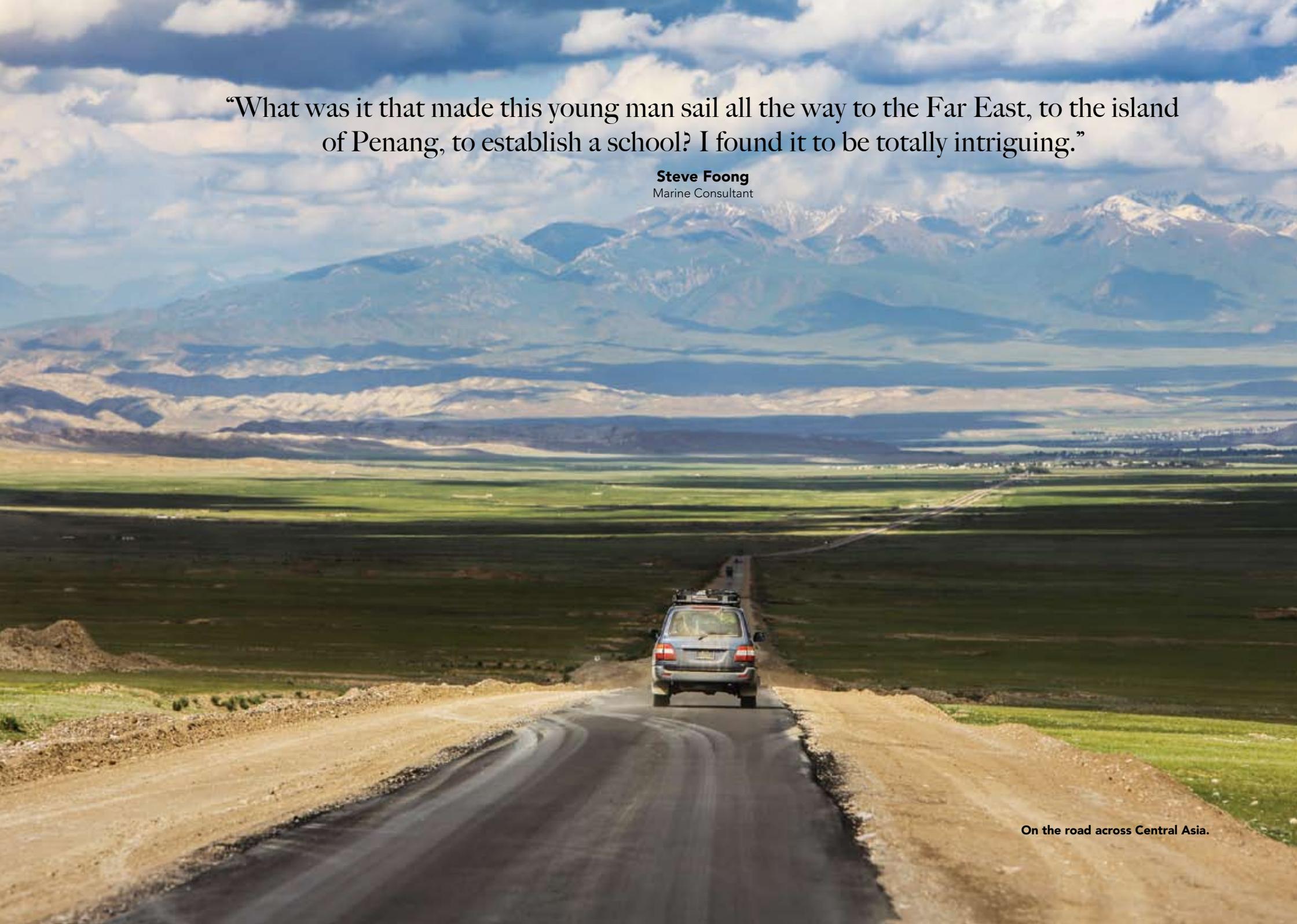
From George Town to Dittisham

WINDOW INTO THE PAST

“What was it that made this young man sail all the way to the Far East, to the island of Penang, to establish a school? I found it to be totally intriguing.”

Steve Foong
Marine Consultant

On the road across Central Asia.



Of all the inspirational people associated with Penang Free School, one name stood out: Robert Sparke Hutchings, its founder.

It was this name that drove a passionate Old Free, marine consultant Steve Foong, to travel 22,000 kilometres on a two-month journey across half the world to uncover the school's past.

As Steve puts it, "What was it that made this young man sail all the way to the Far East, to the island of Penang, to establish a school? I found it to be totally intriguing."

STRUGGLE IN EARLY YEARS

One of the younger members of The Old Frees' Association, Singapore, Steve was in Penang Free School from 1994 to 1998, which he entered after leaving Jelutong Barat Primary School, a feeder school.

"There were 10 of us and we were initially quite fearful as to how we could cope as we were literally moving from a kampong

school to an educational institution that was tops not only in Penang but also in Malaysia," he said.

Indeed, in the first year, he found himself struggling to cope. Yet, even though he fared badly, ending up in the bottom 10 of the class, he was elected to become a prefect.

He said, "I then realised that the school looked at students differently and gave us opportunities to excel in other ways. I also represented the school in karate, rugby, swimming, scouting and canoeing. In fact, I was doing more sports than attending classes!

"All of us representing the school in national and state events were all very proud. We were very strong as one and we would go all out just for the sake of the school. We were taught to keep up the good name of the school. It trained us to be champions from the start.

"All this served to mould our characters. As one of our teachers used to say, education

and intelligence can only bring you so far but character is important.

"But our teachers tried to help academically too. In fact, one of my teachers, Goh Teng Kiang, my physics and class teacher warned me that if I did not buck up in my studies, I might end up selling Hokkien mee!"

And so he bucked up; for his 'O' levels, he dropped all his games to study and did well in his final year examinations.

So well that he was able to clinch a job in Singapore in 1999 with Neptune Orient Lines (NOL) that came with a three-year scholarship to do nautical studies at Singapore Polytechnic. After graduating in 2003, he worked for two years on NOL's container ships to serve his bond.

Today, Steve is a manager in a private company in the offshore gas industry overseeing marine operations of offshore vessels to ensure they comply with industry standards.



Expedition members in Dittisham.

FUND-RAISING CHARITY RIDE

While carving out his career, Steve still entertained the idea of researching the roots of Penang Free School’s founder and indirectly that of the school. In 2010, a visit that he and his wife, Suchin Koay, made to a children’s home in Penang provided the unexpected catalyst. Their decision to do a world tour to raise funds for disadvantaged children while travelling from Penang to Europe ended up giving them the opportunity to research Hutchings’ origins.

Thus was born the “From Malaysia with Love World Tour for Children”

transcontinental journey, which took over a year to organise. Essentially, it would raise funds, through donations from supporters and sponsors, for the Borneo Child Aid Society, a non-governmental organisation based in Sabah, Malaysia, on the island of Borneo.

The society operates over 128 plantation schools for more than 12,000 children of poor plantation workers who would not otherwise have access to education.

The plan was to drive north from Penang through Thailand, Laos and China, then across the Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to

board a ferry for Baku in Azerbaijan and to continue the journey through Armenia, Georgia, Turkey and Western Europe, ending at Dunkirk in France. From here it turned out to be a short ferry crossing and drive to Dittisham, the hometown of Hutchings where the key to Penang Free School’s heritage lay.

It was to be an Old Free event, supported by the Old Frees Association in Penang and in Singapore. Seven members (mostly Old Frees from different cohorts then aged between 32 and 59) comprised the expedition team. Because of the rugged conditions in especially Central Asia, only four-wheel drive vehicles — a Toyota Hilux and a Toyota Land Cruiser — could be used.

The other participating Old Frees were Hoe Kek Fei, Cheah Chuan Lok, Neoh Soon Heng, Saw Sek Lam, Saw Saik Mun and Adrian King. Two non-Old Frees who went along were Lee Huat Hin better known as Haha Lee, a professional



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cameraman tasked with recording the expedition in pictures and Hoe Cher Hoe, the wife of Kek Fei.

Saw Saik Mun and Neoh Soon Heng joined the team mid-way on two different segments — Soon Heng from Chiangrai, Thailand to Jiuzhaigou, China and Saik Mun from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to Beyneu, Uzbekistan.

The cost of the expedition, covering 20 countries in 63 days, was between RM150, 000 and RM200, 000. Apart from sponsorship from motor oil company Kendall, Papago which supplied the navigational system, Toyota Prima Pearl Auto, which provided the vehicles and Penang Global Tourism, the rest was paid for by the seven participants themselves.

WORLD TOUR FLAGS OFF

The intrepid travellers were flagged off on 31 May, 2012 from the Penang Town Hall by Old Frees’ Association president MS



(Above and top) Interacting with the locals in Central Asia.

Rajendran in the presence of Penang Global Tourism’s then managing director Ooi Geok Ling and chairman of the Penang Free School’s board of directors Dato’ Haji Abdul Rafique bin Abdul Karim.

If there is one word that best describes the experience the expedition team went through on their gruelling transcontinental driving trip, it is “extreme”.

They had to contend with many rough and pot-holed roads in parts of Central Asia, abrupt changes in weather conditions which sometimes saw them going through four seasons in one day and primitive accommodation facilities. They battled foggy mists, muddy roads and sometimes had to struggle to find diesel, which was in short supply in some places.

But there were ample compensations: Spectacular mountain scenery, beautiful lakes and the chance to interact with people along the way especially in the rural villages where they stayed. The opportunity to learn



St George's Church towering above the thatched roof cottages of Dittisham.

about other cultures and especially the rich history and heritage of countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was priceless.

As Steve explains, “We chose this route because it was the Old Silk Road. This was where the world’s three main religions interacted and we saw some very precious religious artefacts such as the mantle of Christ in Georgia as well as some of the

earliest Holy Koran scripts written on buckskins that are kept in the Tashkent Library in Uzbekistan. In Samarkand, we saw a book of the Koran that was as big as a table. We certainly learnt a lot of history on our tour than in our 11 years in school.”

What’s more, they were also able to fulfil another of their goals — raising awareness of underprivileged children in China and Central Asia through their visits to

orphanages where they donated educational books and supplies from Penang sponsors.

JOURNEY'S END

After 63 days on the road, the World Tour for Children team was nearing journey’s end — Dittisham — a name that Steve remembered from his schooldays as the village where Hutchings’ family came from.

Ironically, the team had not planned to visit Dittisham until they were in France when they realised they were two days ahead of schedule. It was Kek Fei who came up with the idea of travelling to Dittisham from Dunkirk to learn more about their school’s revered founder.

So on 1 August, the team sailed from Dunkirk in France to Dover in the south of England. After exploring Stonehenge, they drove to the county of Devon, where Dittisham is located.

Situated beside the river Dart in idyllic surrounds, Dittisham is a small but

attractive village of stone-built and thatched cottages. Brightly coloured boats huddle on the river front. It is interesting to note that modern Dittisham has perhaps not changed much from the past at least in terms of its population. In 2011, it was listed as having 424 residents, fewer than the 639 inhabitants living there in 1801 during the time of Hutchings, who was then 19 years old. In 1901, it had a population of 549.

SCHOOL HISTORY COMES ALIVE

As in any English village, the pub in Dittisham is at the heart of the community and it was here that Steve and his team-mates dropped in for they knew this was the place to ask where they could find the person who knew St George's Church well.

The person turned out to be Helen, considered the village historian.

Traditionally, English village life revolved largely around churches and this was no exception in Dittisham where St George's



Hutchings' family crest in a window panel of St George's Church.

Church played a central role in society.

St George's Church, dedicated to the patron saint of England, in its present form dates back from 1333 when it was rebuilt on the site of a Norman church which had replaced an even earlier Saxon Church that had been established after the Saxon conquest of Devon in 755.

Despite its long and illustrious history,



The village of Dittisham in Devon county.



Village historian Helen briefing the OFA expedition team in St George's Church. Expedition leader Steve Foong is on the right.

St. George's is now no longer able to have a rector of its own and in 1982 became part of the Benefice of Dartmouth and Dittisham.

But things were different in Robert Sparke Hutchings' time. His father, Reverend John Hutchings was the rector of St. George's Church Dittisham from 1768 to 1802. His mother was Sarah Sparke from Dartmouth and he was the youngest of 16 children.



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The young Hutchings, who was born in 1782, followed the same path trodden by his father, matriculating at Christ Church College in Oxford University in 1798 and taking over as rector of St George’s Church in 1805 after obtaining his MA degree.

As rector, Robert Hutchings was credited with building a new magnificent rectory house that still stands today and for constructing the first road for carriages going from Dartmouth to Dittisham.

In 1814, apparently due to financial difficulties, Hutchings gave up his position at St George’s Church to travel to India to take up a Chaplaincy in Bengal. It was from here that he was posted to Prince of Wales Island (as Penang was then called) in 1816 to succeed Rev Alwill Lake, who was the first Resident Chaplain appointed in 1804. It was common then for the British East India Company to appoint Anglican chaplains to serve as part of its overseas military service.

Hutchings thrived in his new environment and became adept in the Malay language. He produced one of the first books and dictionaries on Malay grammar and was responsible for translating the Old and New Testaments of the Bible into Malay.

On the tour of St George’s Church, Steve saw the beautiful memorial window dedicated to Hutchings and his father. He also noticed that one of the church panels had a Hutchings family crest that he recognised was similar to the crest etched on the side and front of Penang Free School when it moved to Farquhar Street and was later converted into the Hutchings Primary School.

Today, it houses the Penang State Museum. The letters in both crests were written in a similar cursive style.

“Even the fort in a Dittisham banner we saw during our visit was the same fort that was later reproduced in our school crest,” observed Steve. “Our visit revealed how passionate the English were of their heritage as they borrowed many symbols and names from their birthplace for use in their adopted countries. Now I know why St George’s Church in Penang got its name as it was the same name of Hutchings’ parish in Dittisham.”

For Steve and his team-mates, the answers they found in Dittisham made for a satisfying conclusion to an epic journey. ■