

Memories of Istana Kenangan

HERITAGE: Raja Khalidatul Asrin takes a peek behind the closed doors of the palace and is transported to the time when Raja Kelsom lived there after the death of Sultan Iskandar Shah

WE often wonder what secrets or stories lie behind old buildings, especially old palaces. One such palace is Istana Kenangan, formerly called Istana Lembah, in Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

It was initially called Istana Lembah because of its location in a valley in Bukit Chandan. It was meant to be a temporary home for Sultan Iskandar Shah ibni Almarhum Sultan Idris I and Raja Perempuan Kelsom. They lived there from 1931 to 1934, while Istana Iskandariah was a work in progress.

Sultan Iskandar Shah was the 30th sultan of Perak. Like his father, who built Masjid Ubudiah, Sultan Iskandar Shah built Masjid Iskandariah, which resembles Istana Lembah. The mosque is in Lawin, Kuala Kangsar, and has been made a heritage building.

The nation's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, changed the name of the palace from Istana Lembah to Istana Kenangan in the 1960s. The name was deemed fit for Sultan Iskandar Shah's family, as it represented cherished memories by the family's existing members.

The story behind the palace revolves around Raja Kelsom. When Sultan Iskandar Shah died in 1934, Raja Kelsom moved into her own home, fondly called Istana Ladang.

In those days, the abode of prominent members of royalty were called *istana* (palace) by village folk, regardless of the structures' size and architecture, placing the royalty on a pedestal. A secondary school in Kuala Kangsar was also named

after Raja Kelsom.

The *New Sunday Times* spoke to the granddaughter of the late Sultan Iskandar Shah and Raja Kelsom, 68-year-old Raja Azmiatun Azfar Raja Mohd, to find out more about his grandmother.

"Bah (grandmother) was an avid gardener and even tried planting *padi* (rice), besides growing flowers. She grew *padi* in a plot near her house, hence, the name 'Istana Ladang' by villagers and Bukit Chandan folk."

Raja Kelsom was a versatile lady. She rode horses with the *orang puteh* and blended in with the village's womenfolk. An artistic woman, she was good at cooking, sewing and drawing.

She even did the *tekad* embroidery, which was uncommon at the time, said Raja Azmiatun Azfar.

Istana Kenangan, which belongs to the state, was home to students during the war in 1941.

When Raja Kelsom's son, Raja Idris, became the sultan of Perak, she moved into Istana Kenangan, while a bungalow was being built at the spot where Istana Ladang was located. Raja Kelsom lived in Istana Kenangan with her family till her last breath.

The architecture of Istana Kenangan is unique. From an aerial view,

the palace is shaped like a *keris*. Made of wood and *tepas*, the structure is not held together by nails.

The person who built the palace was a man called Suffian from Bukit Mertajam.

In the building, a small Balai Rong Seri can be seen as one goes up the stairs. Behind it is where the royal family took their meals and relaxed. There are also three bedrooms with stunning window views.

"Bah was full of empathy for Kampung Changkat folk. Every day, she would prepare meals for the less-fortunate, and they would flock to the palace," says Raja Azmiatun Azfar.

The palace was a lively place, where, sometimes, films were shown outdoors for the villagers. It was a treat for the villagers to be able to watch films on palace grounds.

"Raja Kelsom loved people and they loved her, too. She died in 1972 in Istana Kenangan. Her daughter, Raja Intan Soraya, stayed there for a while," says Raja Azmiatun Azfar.

Raja Intan Soraya's siblings died at a young age, and the palace was where their bodies were taken for the people to pay their last respects. In short, Istana Kenangan stood witness to many happy and sad episodes.

All good things must come to an

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj changed the name of the palace from Istana Lembah to Istana Kenangan in the 1960s.



Raja Perempuan Kelsom rode horses, among other pursuits.



Raja Azmiatun Azfar Raja Mohd

end, so they say. Istana Kenangan shared the same fate.

Raja Intan Soraya later moved into the new bungalow where Istana Ladang used to be, and Istana Kenangan was abandoned when Sultan Idris died.

In the 1980s, Istana Kenangan was turned into a museum. Now, all that remains are memories.