'Tycoons have never had it so good as it was in 1900'

Rubber planting in Malaya 60 years ago

Group photograph of some of the European rubber planters in Malaya during the 1900's, taken 'somewhere in central Malaya.'

"ADULT Europeans should not come out to the Federated States before they are twenty years of age," declared Mr. H. Conneay Belfield, British Resident of Selangor, "and should make up their minds to conform from the first to the cardinal rules for the preservation of health."

The "rules" as he listed them seemed calculated to keep all adult Europeans out of Malaya for ever.

"Go to bed and get up early; avoid all excesses in eating and drinking; never go out between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4.30 p.m. without wearing a sun hat.

"When possible, always wear flannel next to the skin; change clothes as soon as possible after exercise; avoid bathing in the middle of the day or more than twice a day.

"If doubtful about the purity of drinking water, always see for yourself that it is boiled and do not take the servant's word for it.

"When travelling, drink as little as possible during the heat of the day and always avoid roadside streams."

Advice on dress

His sartorial advice was equally discouraging to any prospective settler with pretensions to elegance.

"The following head-gear is recommended: A pith hat, with wide brim (not a helmet); a soft felt hat with a broad brim and a puggaree, of the description known as the Double Terai.

"A straw hat and a couple of caps; do not bring more boots than can be kept in use as leather quickly goes to pieces in this climate. And do not bring boots with very heavy soles, nor 'Field' boots. They will never be worn.

"If addicted to outdoor exercise, do not forget white flannels, flannel coat and half a dozen pairs of hand - knit knickerbocker stockings."

'The first world war sent the cost of living soaring sky-high; the second world war spiralled it higher. And the production costs of rubber rose accordingly. Fortunately, for the rubber planters, increased yield from better trees have kept pace. And demand with it. Only the price of rubber has remained roughly the same.'

Jobs opening

Mr. Belfield was giving advice to immigrant Englishmen and the conditions he described in 1900 make interesting comparison with prosperous Malaya, 1960.

Openings to the professions were very limited indeed, according to Belfield.

Apart from employment under government, there was no opening for European skilled labour.

"There are no openings for clerks. All this work is done by locally educated Eurasians and natives."

Why then, did Belfield bother to write a book which he called "The Malay States Handbook", if his readers could never find employment in the Malay States?

The one exception, with which Belfield dealt in great detail, was planting. And there, the prospects were excellent.

It is interesting to find, however, that he recommended plantations of coffee, coconut and rubber, in that order.

But although he recommended coffee for planting, the rewards he promised would-be settlers were far from encouraging.

"The over-production of the Brazils has brought down the price of coffee to a point which, except in a few favoured estates, renders its profitable cultivation almost an impossibility.

Good promise

"Planters have, therefore, almost without exception, introduced at varying distances apart, coconuts and para rubber."

Rubber, on the other hand, though production was still very small, showed excellent promise.

"Several millions of these trees have been planted in the States during the last three years", he wrote, "when the growing demand for rubber, and the success which had attended the planting of a few specimens some ten years ago began to attract the attention of planters."

First trees

Experimental tapping of the first trees in Ridley's nurseries at Penang had produced 12½ lbs. of rubber in two years - and at $1.50-$1.75 a lb., that was good business.

To help would-be planters, Belfield produced some facts and figures about rubber planting which bear interesting comparison with costs of modern rubber planting.

He based his calculations upon eight years of planting, starting with 500 acres of jungle which he cleared in two years.

Clearing cost $10 an acre and preparation of the land for planting, $7 an acre. The establishment of nurseries cost $800 and seed, (375,000 of them at 1 cent each) cost $3,750. Planting and shading could be done for $3 an acre; roads and drains constructed for $10 an acre.

Weeding of the plantation and supervision of workers cost another $10,000. Buildings (house for superintendent $1,000, house for assistant $500, house for overseer $100) and coolie lines $2,100.

Then, adding $15,000 each year for the upkeep of the estate and rebuilding the houses and coolie lines in the sixth year, by the end of the 8th year the total outlay was $136,500.

Profits? Belfield was cautious in his estimate of yields. But the sum still came out right.

"I believe a good return of at least ½ lb per tree could be had from a five-year-old tree", he declared, "but I do not calculate on anything until the sixth year when I feel certain that rubber planted on good alluvial land will yield at least 1lb per tree. Planting 14' x 14' there should be 222 trees per acre, but I have calculated on only 200."

His table of expected results should have reassured the most sceptical of settlers.

Clear profit

Sixth Year 250 acres or 50,000 trees at 1 lb. per tree; 50,000 lbs. at $1.25—$62,500.

Seventh Year: 250 acres at 1 lb. per tree — $62,500; 250 acres at 2 lb. per tree — $125,000.

Eighth Year: 500 acres at 2 lb. per tree — $250,000: Total $490,000.

Which gave a clear profit of $353,500 from trees producing a mere trickle of 2 lbs. of rubber a year!

Perhaps there was something in Malaya for a prospective settler, after all.

But there was a simple explanation for this remarkable profit margin. Inflation had not yet entered the economic fields.

Beer in England was still a penny a pint, and the railways of Malaya would carry a passenger 100 miles first-class for $3 or a picul of merchandise the same distance for 25 cents.

A domestic cook could earn $10 — $15 a month; a syce, $9 — $12 and a labourer $4 — $5 a month.

Boat charges

The boat fare from Singapore to Penang was $20 first-class; $10 second-class. The first-class fare from London to Singapore by mail boat was $570 (25 days) or $300 (35 days) by ordinary steamer.

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Fortunately for the rubber planters, increased yields from better trees have kept pace. And demand with it. Only the price of rubber has remained roughly the same.

The rubber tycoons have never had it so good as it was in 1900. But the tappers, and curers and hewers of wood and drawers of water have never had it better than it is now.

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