

Hong Kong Natural History Society
21 February 2016 Outing Report
Plover Cover Country Park, NE New Territories

The Society's February 2016 outing, billed as the 'Lost Villages Walk', was a 14 km hike starting at Wu Kau Tang with a woodland walk contouring around Tiu Tang Lung peak to the Yan Chau Tong Marine Park. The route then followed a coastal path to join the Lai Chi Wo Nature Trail, leading into and out of the old Hakka village. The stage from the village to Kuk Po entailed a challenging ascent and descent through Fan Shui Au. The final leg to Luk Keng followed the shores of Starling Inlet. The path was mainly dirt track and stone with areas close to villages set to concrete. On level ground the route was assessed at grade 2 to 3, with the Fan Shui Au ascent and descent rated at grade 4. A hire coach was used for the drop-off at Wu Kau Tang and pick-up at Luk Keng. Twenty-four members joined the outing which was conducted in comfortable overcast conditions with only a light breeze. Rain was forecast for late afternoon, but never arrived.

Shortly after leaving Wu Kau Tang the group found itself on a woodland path accompanied by a small stream heading for the same destination. It meandered and so did we, as it invited us several times to traverse stepping stones and narrow bridges. It was an enchanting journey and the stream made an excellent travelling companion. Along this route we came across remote abandoned villages with houses in a state of collapse or reduced to ruins. Outlying dry-stone walling and terracing often signalled our approach to a lost village. Some villages have been marked with headstones identifying the old communities.



At Sam A Chung the group said farewell to the stream; we had both reached our shared destination. Yan Chau Tong (Double Haven) is a harbour cradled by Double, Crescent and Crooked Islands and overlooked by wooded uplands. Being well shielded it is somewhat immune from seasonal monsoons. A number of small streams, such as ours, flow into the haven. Along stretches of the shoreline the iron-impregnated sedimentary rocks take on a magenta hue due to oxidation. The

area is renowned for its natural beauty and its calm seas. To conserve the wildlife and natural features the haven was designated a marine park in 1996. The group stopped by the water for a break, hoping to see egrets which had been spotted in abundance a few days prior, but on this occasion the birds had decided to feed elsewhere. Had someone told them that the NHS was coming?



The group then proceeded at a leisurely pace along the shores of Sam A Wan to Sam A Tsuen and then on to Siu Tan. The route bypasses younger, more recently abandoned villages, some with a handful of residents and some offering refreshment to hikers. Eventually our party joined the Lai Chi Wo Nature Trail which leads along the coast passing mudflats and mangrove swamps before arriving at the traditional Hakka village. It is liberally punctuated with information boards describing the local flora and fauna, compelling one to pause to absorb the particulars on offer.

At least seven mangrove species can be found in Lai Chi Wo. Their unique roots, leaves and seedlings allow them to adapt to the hostile growing environment of mudflats and thus offer food, shelter and breeding grounds for many creatures. This vibrant habitat provides a refuelling station and refuge for migratory birds.



A choice of venues for lunch was offered: most enjoyed a picnic on the shores of the haven, whilst a few proceeded on to Lai Chi Wo in search of the week-end noodle vendors.

Approaching Lai Chi Wo one is taken aback by the extent of the rejuvenation project which aims to restore the natural habitats for sustainable agriculture whilst maintaining local biodiversity. Coming under the auspices of 'Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark', the Geoheritage Centre at Lai Chi Wo is a collaborative venture set up by the government, NGOs and local villagers. Inter alia the centre pursues the objectives of conservation, sustainable development and the promotion of public awareness into the old Hakka village and its environs.

With a history of over 300 years Lai Chi Wo is one of the oldest villages in the New Territories and is considered a typical example of a Hakka village. Its fortunes improved greatly some hundred years ago when, on the advice of a fung shui master, a fung shui wall was built to retain wealth and to debar evil spirits. The village reached its prime in the 1950s when it had 450 residents. In the 1960s many villagers began moving to urban areas or emigrating which resulted in a sharp drop in population. The group mustered in the village to receive a personal account of its history from David Tsang Wai-keung, Chairman of the Cultural Development Society. Members were grateful to David for his interesting narrative which embraced the ancestral dimension.



The group returned to the Nature Trail which skirts the dense Fung Shui Woods. Following the changed fortunes of Lai Chi Wo, the villagers became faithful believers of fung shui and sought to protect the neighbouring forest, laying down strict rules regarding its use. Today it is designated a Special Area and continues to thrive. No doubt the trees themselves have many tales to tell. Our group passed the Hollow Tree, an autumn maple, and the Five-Finger Camphor. The latter, now a centenarian, established itself in the history books after losing a limb (finger) to the Japanese during the occupation.



One could spend a whole day in the area of Lai Chi Wo, but we had a bus to catch and the time had come for some purposeful hiking. The path away from Double Haven and the village involved a challenging ascent and descent over stones and rough ground which would have needed more careful negotiating had the forecast rain arrived. Eventually the group arrived in Kuk Po. The villages in the area are largely deserted, although a few residents have remained and the old rural school has been given a facelift.

The final stage of the hike was along a concrete path hugging the shores of Starling Inlet. Fringed with mangrove trees it was a pleasant coastal walk, although it appeared further over the ground than it looked on the map - perhaps some legs had started to tire.

Pyrostegia venusta (fire-cracker vine) welcomed us into Luk Keng, our final destination. Having become strung out over the last stage of our journey, members slowly regrouped at a local café for well-earned refreshment before boarding the coach.



Plover Cover Country Park and Double Haven provide a tranquil setting offering up stunning views, an abundance of flora and fauna, and a wealth of cultural heritage. This remote area is a Hong Kong gem which cannot be fully appreciated in one visit.

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Gallery

Lost Villages



Lost Souls

