

**The Hong Kong Natural History Society Visit to
The Temple of Peace and Tranquility
Sunday 27 November 2016**

The 23-seater bus was almost full – just one spare seat due to a last-minute cancellation. At Kowloon Tong MTR station there was some discussion with the bus driver because he thought that was our final destination. We're not sure why he thought we needed a bus from Central to Kowloon Tong, but once persuaded to carry on, he seemed to know exactly where to go.

We arrived at Luk Keng noodle shop on schedule around 10.45am and began by walking alongside Sha Tau Kok Hoi, also known as Starling Inlet, looking across at the town Sha Tau Kok in China, on the other side of the inlet. Then we turned away from the inlet, heading inland through Nam Chung, a typical New Territories village with new village houses, falling-down older buildings, barking dogs, abandoned cars; some of it very photogenic, some less so. Jan pointed out our destination just visible on the hill, surrounded by trees - the epitome of 'nestled in the hillside'.



Nearer to the house we passed some interesting yellow mushrooms, one looking just like an abandoned shuttlecock. Research of previous NHS reports reveals this is *phallus indusiatus* (the one on the left living up to its name) or stinkhorn fungus, and the netted skirt only lasts for 12 hours and then rots away. On leaving, we noticed the one on the left had a skirt and the one on the right was losing it.



When we arrived, Veronica met us at the gate, which she carefully closed behind us. The notice on the gate says 'visits by appointment only' and gives the phone number. Veronica seems extremely happy to have visitors and welcomes those who've been before as old friends.

Walking in, you see immediately it's a beautiful garden.

Once in the house, Veronica gave a little talk pointing out the various rooms and facilities but then left us free to go around as we pleased. Although we could roam freely, if you met Veronica she was happy to talk about anything that was around.



In the kitchen, she talked about the cooker, which is a large wood-fired range that the amahs used for cooking their vegetarian food, the lack of washing facilities they had, and some history of the house.

The photo shows a bowl on a stand, which was where they washed, and the cooking range with other bowls displayed.

The main part of the history is that the building was, for some time, a refuge for retired amahs. Once they no longer had an employer's house to live in, these old ladies often had nowhere to go and little money so came to this refuge. They had few belongings, but it seems flip-flops and a chamber pot under their beds were important items.

The path we had used to the house had a bridge over the stream, which had not been there in the amahs' days. They had one way in and out involving a long walk down the hill and a train to Fanling or other nearby towns for any shopping.



The history talk done, we could tour the house, the garden, or just sit on the terrace in the sun. The latter did seem to be many people's preference.

In the house, we could see some objects collected from the amahs' time there, some ceramics collected by Veronica's late husband Ron, rooms decorated like temples, a video of Veronica and Ron's early days in the house in 1996 – including the removal of a (dead) goat's head from a large python. In the beautifully kept garden we saw Veronica's four guinea fowl – her only remaining livestock - the terraces, the stream which the house's water comes from, and many white-eyes and fork-tailed sunbirds – a real treat for those patient enough to spot them! – in the blossom-filled trees.



*Fork-tailed sunbird.
The picture is enlarged to show the small (3.5 inch) bird.
You can just about see the forked tail.*



Guinea fowl in the garden



The splendid buffet was very popular!

The NHS had arranged a fridge full of drinks and a curry lunch brought in by Shaffi's of Yuen Long. This really made our day special. It was warm and sunny so we ate on the terrace, in the sun, or in the shade. Everyone agreed it was a great meal and we even took some left overs away, so nothing was wasted.

Around 3.00pm we started to leave, but not before a group photo and a presentation of the latest NHS Memoirs and customised NHS 'Dopper' to Veronica for her hospitality. We walked back the same way and saw herons, Chinese pond herons, egrets and even a kingfisher.

On leaving the bus, everybody thanked Jan for arranging a great day out. We had perfect weather, excellent food, and an interesting, relaxing place with great views to visit. A real success!



View from the garden



Group photo just before leaving



Jan presenting an NHS dopper to Veronica

Report by Nick Florent. Photos by various Members.