



INTERVIEW WITH **DATO' HENRY BARLOW**

Interview conducted by Chander Velu and Rob Glew



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TECHNOLOGY
POLICY

(1) COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR FAMILY AND HOW THEY DEVELOPED BUSINESS INTERESTS IN MALAYSIA?

The Barlow family originated from the North West of England where for many generations they had been yeoman farmers. My direct ancestors had been among the earliest Quakers in the 1640s. Because they were no longer associated with the Church of England, which alone at that time kept records of births, deaths and marriages, the Quakers were especially meticulous in maintaining these records.

In the 1850s my great grandfather, Thomas Barlow, the youngest son of his father John Barlow, married to Deborah Neild, was due to take over the family farm. However this proved impossible since the farm was bisected and made uneconomic by the construction of the London to Manchester railway. Thomas Barlow therefore moved to Manchester and became involved in the cotton industry, entering into various short-lived partnerships, including one with a man named Bolton, to spin up cotton into piece goods which were then exported. Towards the end of the 1850s Thomas Barlow set up on his own, with financial assistance from his elder brother, John, who was by then Professor of Veterinary Medicine at Edinburgh University. Hence the name of the partnership was Thomas Barlow & Brother. This coincided with the American Civil War, and meant that cotton had to be smuggled out of the southern states of America, transhipped in Bermuda (effectively 'laundered' to make it legal) and brought to Manchester for spinning up into cloth for subsequent export.

Thomas Barlow was exceptionally lucky in that all of his cotton consignments got through, except for one which was insured. Before the Barlow documents went to Cambridge, I came across Thomas Barlow's early cash book, which revealed that though he could not have been worth more than a couple of thousand pounds, he was at times indebted to the banks for up to £7.5 million. So he made his fortune, but the worry caused him to have a nervous breakdown. Correspondence at Cambridge indicates he was not a particularly pleasant individual. He fell out with his Quaker colleagues by taking out court proceedings against them over commercial matters. This was taboo in Quaker circles, so he was more or less excommunicated.

Many shipments of cotton goods were sold to Indian and South East Asian markets, particularly Singapore and Manila. By 1890 the business had largely been passed on to Thomas Barlow's sons, including my grandfather, John Emmott Barlow.

The opportunity occurred in 1890 in Singapore to take over the textile importers, Scott & Co, which was more or less bankrupt and allegedly was founded, if not owned by a descendant of one of Francis Light's colleagues from Penang. The only 'asset' in Scott & Co. was its managing director, J.M. Allinson, Eurasian, who knew everyone and everything in Singapore, and travelled up the West coast of Malaya selling cotton goods from Barlows in Manchester.

In 1898 Allinson reported to my grandfather and his brothers that the coffee crop on the West coast of Peninsular Malaya had failed, and there were as a result potentially a lot of bad debts. However some of the planters had planted a new crop,

Hevea braziliensis (rubber) and he advised his UK colleagues to continue to grant credit, as it might turn out well. Of course it did, as motor cars, needing rubber tyres, were beginning to be produced in vast numbers in the western world.

Allinson then discovered that the banks were charging exorbitant commissions remitting money back from Singapore to UK. So he hit upon the idea of buying cargoes of rubber in Singapore, and selling them on arrival in UK, in a rising market. That helped further establish the business.

In the first decade of the 20th century, in response to the boom in rubber prices, family owned estates sought to raise cash to expand their rubber areas. They had known Allinson for years, so turned to him to prevail on the Thomas Barlow & Brother partnership in London, which had a banking license, to raise funds and float their companies on the London Stock Exchange. The best known, to be so floated was Highlands & Lowlands Para Rubber Co. Ltd., under the chairmanship of Sir Frank Swettenham. See my 'Swettenham' for details.

Between 1910 and 1920, John Emmott Barlow and his two brothers, Frank and Percy who had taken over the business on the death of their father in 1897, fell out, and one of the 2, Frank or Percy departed for Australia, and ceased communication with the rest of the family, presumably over business matters. That family still continues in Australia. Once in the 1970s I found myself sitting next to an Australian Barlow on a plane between Fiji and Australia. He admitted to being part of the Australian branch, but refused to talk about the problem, 50 years later!

My grandfather John Emmott Barlow married in 1895, Anna Maria Heywood Denman. She converted to the Quaker faith, becoming very devout. My grandfather pursued a career in Liberal politics, followed by my grandmother who was the first woman to stand as an MP in the UK Parliament (although she lost the election.) Her Quaker teaching taught her to forego jewels, and it is said that just such a decision enabled my grandfather to purchase Torkington Estate on the coast in N. Selangor from the custodian of enemy (German) property after WWI.

By the time my father and uncle took over the business in the early '30s (my grandfather J E Barlow died in 1931/2) the Great Depression had set in. My father Thomas Bradwall Barlow often told me that with rubber at ½ penny per lb, he did not know from one morning to the next if he was bankrupt.



With father and sister in 1948-49

However the estates survived the depression and WWII, albeit with the loss of many lives, and the Emergency. As the families of the different rubber companies either died off or children moved off, their family holdings diminished, and Thomas Barlow

& Bro. as Secretaries became ever more influential in appointing board members. Moreover when there were more than adequate profits to give decent dividends, my father and uncle arranged for the companies to buy shares in each other, thus creating a financially impregnable spiders web of cross holdings. The exception was Highlands, where in the late 1950s, my father as successor to Swettenham as chairman, went on a takeover spree, absorbing a number of Scottish rubber companies, in the process making that company vulnerable to takeover.

The one eventuality that they had not provided for was political change in independent Malay(si)a. In the 1960s the cotton and general import/export business in Singapore which had developed in the early years of the century languished, and in 1965 a deal was done with Bousteads (essentially the Roper-Caldbeck family in UK) under which Bousteads took over all the Barlow Singapore business interests, while Barlows in Kuala Lumpur, which had developed into an estates management business, expanded to allow Bousteads a 25% stake in what became known as Barlow Boustead Estates Agency Sdn. Bhd. (BBEA). Bousteads put all their estates with BBEA.

The 1970s-80s saw the implementation of the Malaysian New Economic policy, which produced political pressures for fundamental change in the largely British controlled plantation industry. The financially secure spiders web of cross holdings was no match for Malaysian political pressures.

(2) WHAT DID YOU STUDY IN CAMBRIDGE AND WHEN YOU LOOK BACK ON YOUR TIME HERE, WHAT ARE YOUR GREATEST MEMORIES?

At Cambridge I studied languages (all of which I have now forgotten). My best memories are learning to fly on Chipmunk aircraft, courtesy of Cambridge University Air Squadron, and my summer vacation 1965 when I led an undergraduate 3 man expedition to collect butterflies and moths on Mt Kinabalu.

(3) WHAT MADE YOU GO TO MALAYSIA AND WHY?

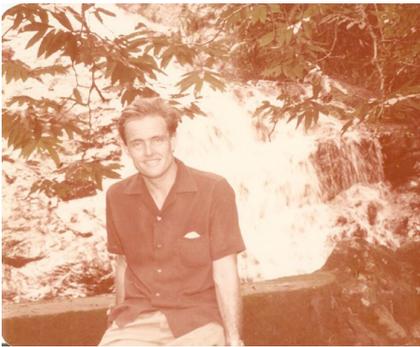
After Cambridge my father encouraged me to get a professional qualification – in accountancy, for 3 years. I hated the training but it prepared me well for my later career. My father had always wanted me to enter the family business. I had a brief flirtation with the Foreign Office: luckily I did not proceed with it, as I would have hated the constant moving and socializing. So on completion of my accountancy training I joined Thomas Barlow & Bro.



After award of Datoship by Sultan of Selangor

(4) WHAT WAS YOUR MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE OF WORKING IN MALAYSIA?

My most memorable experience of Malaysia was when I purchased Genting Tea Estate.



Waterfall at Genting Tea Estate

(5) WHAT MADE YOU DEPOSIT THE BARLOW PAPERS IN CAMBRIDGE AND HOW WOULD YOU SEE THEM BENEFITING SCHOLARS AND SOCIETY?



Henry Sackville Barlow at 4 years old

My father was the last to marry, in a family of four, so when my grandfather's house was sold up on his death in 1932, my father inherited everything the other siblings had not requested. This involved a mass of

hideous Victorian furniture and several tea chests of family letters, which lay in a junk room at the back of Thornby House, Thornby, Northampton till my father's death in 1988. When my grandmother died in 1965, my youngest aunt went through her papers (they were of great interest) in some detail, throwing many on the fire. When as a 21 years old, I tried to remonstrate I was roundly ticked off: 'I will not have my mother's reputation sullied by the papers she left.' Alas not much now remains. She appears to have had admirers, if not lovers of both sexes. Most of the early business correspondence was stored in a warehouse in Manchester and thrown out as fire risk in WWII. In London my father had shared an office with his brother in Mansion House (now redeveloped) for over 30 years. The 2 brothers sat facing each other at Victorian desks, stacked with papers and rattled their phones at each other on the rare occasions they were in the office together. Fine roller maps of the individual Malay States dating to the 1940s gathered dust and bats in the corridor outside. My father's part of the office, including his desk contained papers and series of company accounts dating back to the 1930s. Indeed I found that he had not bothered to clear his desk when he took it over from my grandfather. It contained interesting documents from the 1890s. After my father's death, the family home at Thornby was to be completely refurbished, with the junk rooms at the back, with boxes of family documents, to be turned into flats. So I was faced with the decision of either burning the lot, from both Thornby and London, or send to an archive. Dr Anil Seal of Trinity College was instrumental in persuading me to choose the latter. Only 5 years later came the sting in the tail, when the Librarian of the time approached me. He indicated that valuable as the archives were,

they were not so important (unlike the Churchill archives) that the state or the university were prepared to pay for cataloguing them. Without a catalogue, the archives were all but useless and the catalogue would cost £xxxxxx to create. So I paid up!

The papers should over the years benefit scholars, not only of Malaysia, but scholars of liberal UK politics in the first half of the 20th century, and sociologists keen to study the of life of an English county family, 1850-1960, with their traditional interests in farming, country estates and horses.

(6) COULD YOU BRIEFLY DESCRIBE SOME OF THE MOST EXCITING CONTENTS OF THE BARLOW COLLECTION OF PAPERS IN CAMBRIDGE?

Although I am not familiar with all the contents of the archives, it includes a letter from a senior lawyer to my grandfather, about 1912(?) replying my grandfather's enquiry as to whether he could purchase baronetcy. The answer was yes, it could certainly arranged at a price. In fact my grandfather chose not to follow this up, and several years later was awarded a baronetcy in recognition of the political work he had undertaken as a Liberal MP for his constituency. Other highlights include his wife's (my grandmother's) papers on liberal politics. I remember her well.

(7) WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG SCHOLARS WHO WANT TO CONDUCT RESEARCH ON THE BARLOW PAPERS?

Before you start work, go through the catalogue in detail, marking what is of interest. Bear in mind that the contents in the catalogue may not be a complete record of what is in the files/boxes.

(8) COULD GIVE US YOUR THOUGHTS FROM YOUR FAMILY'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE 'MALAYSIANIZATION OF BARLOW BOUSTEAD ESTATES AGENCY' IN LIGHT OF THE PAPER PUBLISHED IN THE JOURNAL OF THE MALAYSIAN BRANCH OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY ON THE TOPIC?

Apart from me, the other members of the Barlow family had no particular interest in Malaysia, so when Malaysianization took place their primary interest was to maximise capital profits and minimise UK Capital Gains Tax.

Glew, R. and Velu. C. (2020). Malaysianization and the Barlow Boustead Estates Agency, Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 93(1), 318, 43-66.

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/758553>

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December 2021*



At Genting Tea Estate



Smokehouse in a BBEA Rubber Plantation



At an event with Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard

BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY SACKVILLE BARLOW

Henry Sackville Barlow was born on 4th July 1944 in Northampton, UK eldest child of Elizabeth Mary Barlow née Sackville West and Thomas Bradwall Barlow.

His and his sister Anna's childhood was not entirely happy as his mother developed schizophrenia (which lasted all her life) when he was 4 years old, after the birth of his sister Anna. As a result from the age of about 4 to 9 they were looked after by a series of often less than kindly nannies. Eventually a motherly housekeeper arrived, for 3 months, became effectively a foster mother and stayed with the family till her death, over 40 years later.

Henry received his early education at Thornby village school and at the age of 8 was sent as a boarder to a preparatory school, Maidwell Hall.

Henry left Maidwell at the age of 12 for Eton College, where he won a scholarship, in the house of Nigel Wykes, who gave him every encouragement to pursue and develop his lifelong interest in lepidoptera. During his last 2 years at Eton he operated a mercury vapour moth trap, and wrote up the results, earning him a Trevelyan Scholarship which covered all his costs for 3 years at Cambridge – and silenced his father's grave reservations about taking up such a hobby.

Between school and university he worked for 6 months as a volunteer schoolteacher, of English, at what was then known as the Government English School in Labuan, arriving just after the troops were sent to Labuan

as a base to deal with the Azahari revolt in Brunei, and leaving just before British North Borneo joined Malaysia as Sabah.

At Cambridge he studied languages: German, Russian and Chinese, all of which he has now forgotten, and travelled widely in the long vacations. In the first year he worked on a ranch in Montana, then bought a Honda 150cc motorcycle on which he travelled through the Rockies to Los Angeles. In the second year he led a 3 man undergraduate expedition to collect lepidoptera on Mt Kinabalu, which he had first visited while serving in Labuan. The 20,000 specimens collected now form part of the collection at the Natural History Museum, London and formed the basis for the life work of one of the expedition members, Dr Jeremy Holloway, in the 18 volume series, 'The Moths of Borneo', which Henry saw through the press.

During his last long vacation he worked on a United Nations workcamp in Benin City, Nigeria, followed by an extensive tour, largely by mammy wagon, through West Africa to Dakar.

From 1966-1969 he worked on his father's advice as an articled clerk in what was Cooper Brothers (now PWC), qualified as a Chartered Accountant and moved to Malaysia in January 1970. Initially he was posted for 5 months to Chersonese Estate, near Taiping to maximise his familiarity with the key estate crops at that time: rubber, oil palm, coconuts and cocoa. In mid-1970 he moved to work as accountant and later financial

director of Barlow Boustead Estates Agency Sdn Bhd, which administered rubber and oil palm.



At Barlow Boustead 1971

In 1971 one of his favourite butterfly collecting sites, Genting Tea Estate, came unexpectedly onto the market. He bought it and has lived there ever since. The continuing entomological work there, other wildlife, and the arboretum of rare dipterocarp trees which he established, has been a constant source of delight and relaxation.



At home, butterfly cabinet in background

The next 10 years saw the Malaysianization under the NEP of, first the Highlands and Lowlands Group of companies. This was a stressful experience, heading the Malaysianization from the Barlow side, with sustained opposition from London, matched only by sustained suspicion by a number of senior Malays, headed by Tun Ismail Mohd Ali, with whom he later developed a warm relationship. It cost his relationship with his father. The personal side is documented in the Barlow Collection in the Cambridge University Library.

By 1983 the Malaysianization was complete, and he spent the next 10 years writing a biography of Sir Frank Swettenham, updating with others H.F. MacMillan's 'Tropical Planting and Gardening' and seeing through press a number of books for the Malaysian Nature Society and the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

In the mid-nineties the Malay chairmen of Guthries and Golden Hope more or less simultaneously invited him to join their boards, which kept him occupied (together with a longstanding directorship of HSBC (M) Bhd) till 2007, when Guthries and Golden Hope were merged with Sime Darby Bhd, of which he became a director, and with which he has remained involved up till today.

Details from 1983 are recorded in his diaries from 1983 with Cambridge University Library. They will be available for public consultation several years after his death.

24th December 2021



The Bungalow at Genting Tea Estate

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