

CHAPTER

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# On the Road to 200 Years

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HOW IT ALL BEGAN



Original PFS school crest

The year was 1786. Until then, the island of Penang or *Pulo* (later changed to *Pulau Pinang*, a name attributed to its native *areca catechu* palm known as pinang in Malay, was part of the Sultanate of Kedah.

However, faced with the threats of invasion from then Siam and Burma, Sultan Abdullah Mukarram Shah of Kedah ceded the island in July to the British in return for military protection.

Thus on 11 August, Captain Francis Light on behalf of the East India Company raised the Union Jack in Penang to take possession of the island, which he renamed Prince of Wales, after the heir to the British throne.

That date was to mark the pivotal point for Penang and Penang Free School.

### ARRIVAL OF HUTCHINGS

The British had long recognised the strategic importance of Penang not just as

an anchorage for their trading ships thanks to its natural harbour but also as a base to counter increasing French influence in Indochina in the north and as a means of checking Dutch expansion in Sumatra in the south.

For the first 19 years, Penang was administered as a “Residency” under the control of the Governor of Bengal.

In 1805, it became an independent Presidency which essentially meant that it was an administrative subdivision in its own right and subject to control from the higher authority of the Governor-General of India. A governor, Philip Dundas, was appointed to head the administration.

In 1813, Penang received a new chaplain of the presidency. He was Reverend Robert Sparke Hutchings, who was previously based in Bengal.

He had been sent to replace Reverend Atwill Lake, who was the first resident chaplain appointed in 1804.



Reverend Hutchings arrived at a time when Penang was enjoying a boom. It was prospering thanks to increasing trade and economic development and there was a spike in population as immigration was encouraged.



**Penang Free School today: The main gate and arch.**



## SOWING THE SEEDS OF EDUCATION

Reverend Hutchings arrived at a time when Penang was enjoying a boom. It was prospering thanks to increasing trade and economic development and there was a spike in population as immigration was encouraged.

Education was available to the children of Europeans and government officials but not to the growing number of children of mainly migrant Asians and Hutchings was concerned.

In 1815, he submitted a proposal to the then governor William Petrie to establish a “free school” with suggestions on how it should be managed.

In response, the governor convened a seven-member committee, headed by Reverend Hutchings to study in detail the specifics of establishing such a school.

## PRINCE OF WALES ISLAND FREE SCHOOL IS BORN

In its submission on 6 February 1816, the committee declared as part of its vision:

*That it will be the first object of the institution to provide for the education of such children as would be otherwise, brought up in idleness and consequent vice, and without any means of obtaining instruction either in useful learning or in any manual employment, and to implant in them the early habits of industry, order and a good conduct.”*

—THE ORIGINAL PLAN OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PRINCE OF WALES ISLAND FREE SCHOOL 1816.

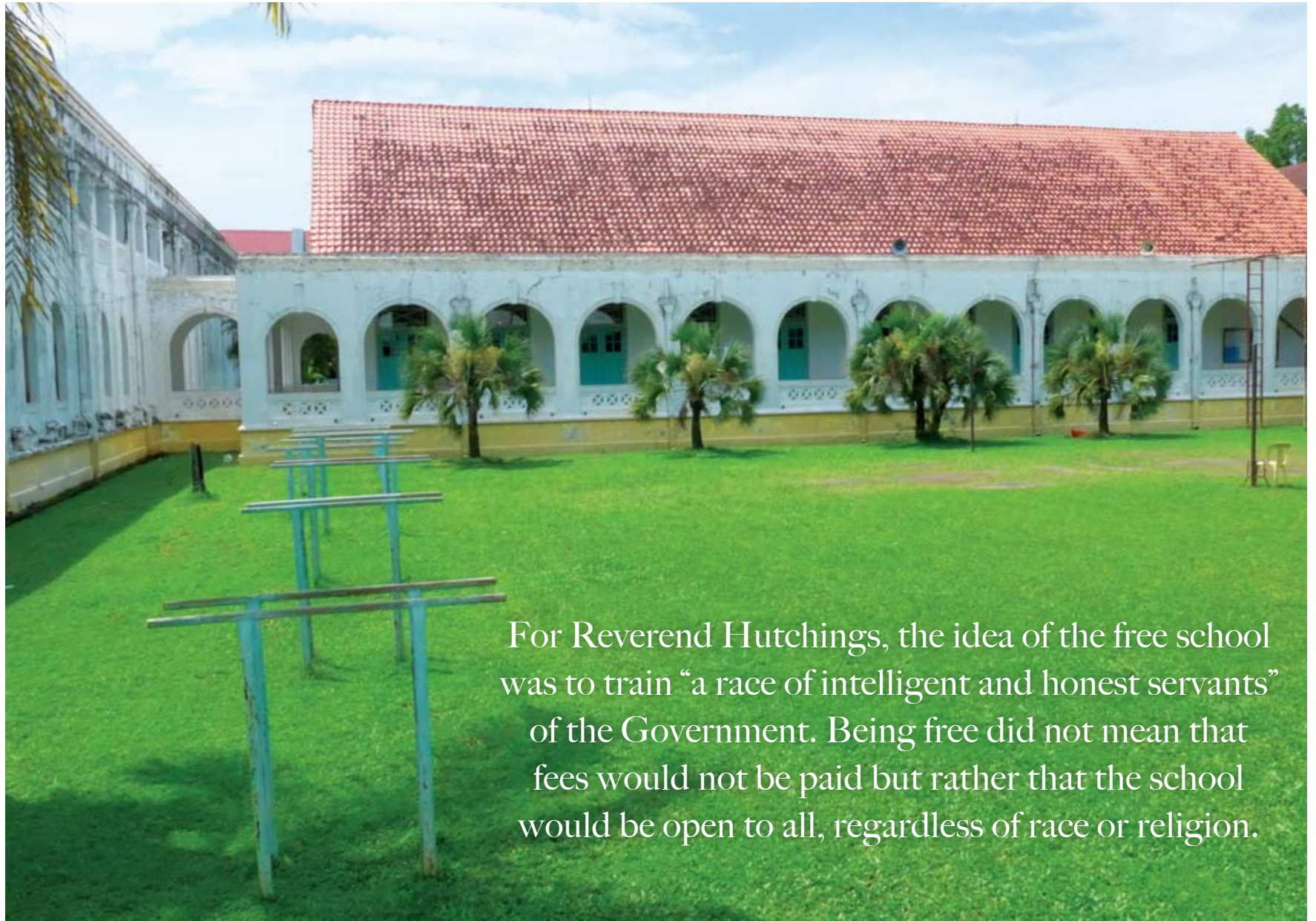
The proposal was to have two schools – one for boys and another for girls – and that there would be boarders as well as day pupils. Fees would be paid by parents who could afford them while the children of



Love Lane, the location of the first Penang Free School.



Penang Free School building in Farquhar Street.



For Reverend Hutchings, the idea of the free school was to train “a race of intelligent and honest servants” of the Government. Being free did not mean that fees would not be paid but rather that the school would be open to all, regardless of race or religion.

**One of two quadrangles in Penang Free School once used for gymnastics.**



parents without means and orphans would be exempt. In addition, children living far from the school could be admitted as boarders. It was also stated that children should be taught in their own languages if they did not wish to learn English.

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Thus, the Prince of Wales Island Free School for boys was opened on 21 October 1816, in a rented house in Love Lane with an enrolment of 25 boys. Because of the problem of finding a suitable teacher, the school intended for girls could not be opened at the same time. Nor could the boarding school be launched due to the arduous task of finding a suitable location and the problem of providing regular meals.



**Hutchings also laid the foundation stone of the Anglican Church of St George the Martyr in Penang in 1817, naming it after the church in his hometown of Dittisham in Devon, England where he had served as rector.**

## Hutchings' role in founding Singapore's pre-eminent school

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PENANG FREE SCHOOLS' founder was to play a significant role in the founding of another prestigious school in Southeast Asia – Raffles Institution in Singapore.

It all started when Stamford Raffles, who founded Singapore in 1819, was in Penang to work as the Deputy Secretary to the Governor of Penang, Philip Dundas from 1805 to 1810.

In April 1823, Raffles invited Hutchings to Singapore for a meeting with Dr Robert Morrison, an educationist and missionary from Malacca together with the Sultan and Temenggong of Johor, previously the ruler of Singapore, and other leading members of the local community. During this meeting Raffles shared his vision and plans for setting up the Singapore Institution.

This was to “educate the sons of the higher order of natives and others; to afford means of instruction in the native languages to the Company’s servants and others as may desire it; to collect the scattered literature and traditions of the country with whatever may illustrate their [sic] laws and customs, and to publish and circulate in a correct form the most important of these, with such other works as may be calculated to raise the character of the institution and to be useful and instructive to the people”.

On 10 April, three patrons including Raffles were appointed as well as an 18-member board of trustees for the school. Hutchings was among them. He also was present at the school’s ground-breaking ceremony.

The Singapore Institution is today’s Raffles Institution, Singapore’s oldest school.



A girls' school was opened a year later in 1817. It closed from 1821 to 1828 before re-opening and operating until 1851.

In 1821, the school moved to a new building erected in Church Square on a plot of land granted by the East India Company. With this relocation to premises of its own, it was able to cater to students wishing to be schooled in their own languages. The Tamil School ran for two years while the Malay School operated till 1826 after which a branch was opened in Glugor and functioned until 1863. In 1867, when the Prince of Wales Island reverted to its original name of Pinang, the school was renamed Pinang Free School.

However, the school in its present form did not take shape until 1928. In 1827, it had moved from Church Square to occupy half of a parcel of land adjacent to St George's Church on Farquhar Street. In 1897, the school underwent reconstruction. In 1907, another building occupying the

other half of land was added to cater to an expanding student population.

### **FOUNDING OF ST GEORGE'S CHURCH**

Apart from his role in founding the school, Reverend Hutchings also laid the foundation stone of the Anglican Church of St George the Martyr in Penang in 1817, naming it after the church in his hometown of Dittisham in Devon, England where he had served as rector and his father before him.

Located at the corner of Farquhar Street (now Lebuh Farquhar) and Pitt Street (renamed Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling), the church was completed in 1818 and consecrated a year later in May 1819 by the Bishop of Calcutta, Thomas Fanshawe Middleton. Today, it is the oldest Anglican church in Southeast Asia and like Penang Free School has become a major landmark in George Town. Facing the church is the Francis Light Memorial commemorating



**The clock tower (back view) of Penang Free School.**

the founding of Penang in 1786 by Francis Light. Hutchings served as its chaplain for seven years from 1820 to 1827.

### A PERMANENT HOME

There would be another move for Penang Free School, this time a permanent one, to Green Lane (renamed Jalan Masjid Negeri) on 31 December 1927 where the school stands today. The move was imperative as it was becoming overcrowded by 1919. In 1924, the government provided a site of 30 acres on Green Lane for the construction of new buildings, including staff quarters. A year later, the new premises of Penang Free School were inaugurated.

The vacant buildings left behind by the school at its Farquhar Street premises were retained and renamed Hutchings School to cater to primary school children in honour of its founder. It was to become one of the most important feeder institutions to Penang Free School.



Digital countdown calendar to 200th anniversary

In 1826, Penang became part of the Straits Settlements together with two other British colonies – Malacca and Singapore. A year later, Reverend Hutchings succumbed to malaria and died on 20 April 1827 in Penang. He was buried at the Northam Road (now Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah) Protestant Cemetery in Penang.

So great was Reverend Hutchings' legacy and the respect held for him that every year, on Founder's Day (21 October), school prefects and teachers from the Free School that he founded would visit his tomb for prayers presided over by an



Northam Protestant Cemetery, resting place of Reverend Hutchings.

Anglican priest from St George's Church at 7 am. The thanksgiving memorial service is also attended by representatives from Hutchings Primary School and Hutchings Secondary School. ■