

Letter from

Heritage Centre

IIT Madras

1 May 2018

Time Machine Wanted

A couple of years ago, the Heritage Centre identified two Heritage Trails in the campus.

Trail One winds through some of the structures that were built during the first phase of construction in the campus. These structures include Gajendra Circle (which during most of the 1960s was very different from its present version), the Central Workshop, BSB and Cauvery and Narmada hostels. Other places on this trail are the Open Air Theatre, Ad Block and the old Central Library (now known as DOMS). The most intriguing structure on Trail One is what the Heritage Centre chose to call the 'Mystery Structure'.



Below Taramani Guest House, the Mystery Structure of Trail One, as it appeared around 2010. Photo: P. Senthil

We called this construction the Mystery Structure partly because its purpose is not clear. One could only judge from its shape and size that it served as a basic shelter for a guard or gamekeeper of the 'Guindy Forest'.

The architectural features of the Mystery Structure are fascinating. They remind you of a fort although the structure is tiny. You could imagine that it was built to provide protection against enemy fire. It looks so historical, so colonial.

Does the Mystery Structure have British origins then? Well, we do not know. That is another mysterious thing about it. None of the accounts available in the *Annual Numbers*, for instance, mention any construction being present on the land when it became IITM's. In the beginning, it was 'lovely wooded land of about 300 acres, lakes and tanks of about 100 acres and dry land for the rest'. I guess that the Mystery Structure was considered too small and insignificant to deserve mention.

But present it was on the land before IIT Madras came into existence for there is an identical structure in Guindy National Park. This 'clone' of the Mystery Structure is situated close, as the crow flies, to the Velacheri Gate of IIT Madras. Obviously, the two structures are siblings, identical twins if you would, constructed at a time when the forest was a single unit in terms of administration.

According to R.K. Menon's history of Guindy National Park (*Blackbuck*, Volume 2, Number 1 (January 1986), pp. 14–21), some time between 1671 and 1678, Sir William Langhorne, Governor ('Agent') of Madras carved out a garden-house from the forest at Guindy. This Guindy Lodge changed hands many times in the following 150 years or so. In 1821, it was acquired by the Government (East India Company), Sir Thomas Munro being responsible for the purchase. He made it the country residence and weekend resort of the Governors of Madras. Two adjacent pieces of land were bought by 1823. In March 1958, much of the Raj Bhavan forest was handed over to the state forest department. It would be interesting to find out just when in this three-century history the Mystery Structure was built. Does it date back to the 17th century?

At any rate, it is a strong candidate for the title of 'Oldest Surviving Structure on Campus'. The only other contenders I can think of are the three temples on campus: Peeliamman Temple, near the stadium, the Vinayakar Temple, behind Taramani Guest House, and the Jalakanteswara Temple. The farmers who cultivated crops on the land that became the Hostel Zone may have worshipped at these temples. Interestingly, Peeliamman Temple alone is marked on the campus plans of 1960.



Views of the identical structure in Guindy National Park, January 2016

I recollect that in the 1980s the Peeliamman Temple was very small—it may have been little more than just an idol below a tree. It has grown much larger since then. Maybe the other two temples too were very small in the pre-IIT days. It was pointed out to me recently that the stone fence-posts of the Vinayakar Temple are of a style not seen anywhere else in the IIT campus. Maybe those posts too predate the institute.

So much for the oldest surviving structures. What structures have *not* survived? What constructions were put up before the British period that have disappeared? Did the Cholas or the Pallavas construct anything here? Oh for a time machine that we could take for a spin in the campus!

We could witness great changes in climate taking place rapidly. We could watch the sea retreat during the Ice Ages and advance in the interim periods. We could view animals that are extinct today. Rocks would be created and destroyed. We would go back to the Big Bang. There would be a singularity!

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Stone fence posts, temple behind Taramani Guest House

Your response to Letter from Heritage Centre is welcome. Please send mail to heritage@iitm.ac.in.

The Heritage Centre is located in the ground floor of the Administration Building, IIT Madras. It is open on weekdays from 9.30 am to 5.30 pm.

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