

## MEMORIES OF MY YEARS AT THE YMCA (December 1966 – early 1975)

This period of my life covers the first years of my time in Hong Kong when I first came here to teach at a local secondary school. It covers my times at the (old) YMCA in Salisbury Road where I lived while teaching at the school.

**Note:** This account is not primarily an historical record of Hong Kong. For images of Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s Hong Kong in which I lived, type “1960s hong kong” into a Google search box. For 1970s, change the 1960 to 1970. Another site is as follows:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/65603462@N03/>

### Arrival at the YMCA

I came to Hong Kong from New Zealand where I had been teaching at a secondary school in Christchurch. I finished work at the school in December 1966, one or two weeks before the academic school year actually ended. (The photograph shows my departure from Christchurch airport. Note how formally people dressed up in those days when travelling!) Hence I arrived in Hong Kong at the end of the first term of the academic year (according to the Northern hemisphere timetable). On arrival at Kai Tak airport (the old airport), I was met by Rex King, the principal of the school (and incidentally a prominent figure in the YMCA), and taken to the YMCA.

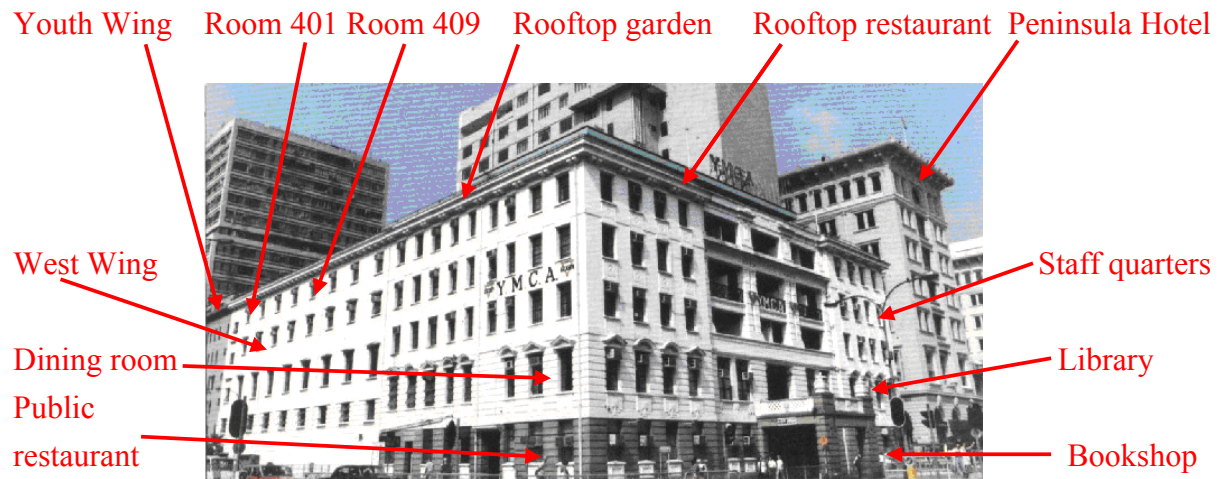


### The old YMCA building

The European YMCA (as distinct from the Chinese YMCA) was established in 1904. Construction of the original building in Salisbury Road began in 1924 and the West Wing (where most of the guest rooms are and where I stayed) began in 1931. The photograph at the top of the next page shows the main parts of the building as I knew it.

At the back of this building was the youth department wing (the grey area just visible on the left of the photo) while the other side was an open car park. The photograph on the right shows the car park with the Peninsula Hotel across the road. (I think the small white car parked at an angle is my car.)





### Life in the old building

- **Residential accommodation:** Many of the rooms were occupied by long-term residents like me. As a result, there were relatively few rooms for tourists though the youth wing had simple accommodation mainly for younger travellers. The 3<sup>rd</sup> floor was exclusively for women and the 4<sup>th</sup> floor for men and segregation was strictly enforced!
- **Room 409:** This was my room for most of my stay. It was very simple. There was a bed, a wardrobe, a set of drawers, a table and chair and a wash-basin with cold water only. There was no air-conditioning. There was no toilet; we used common toilets and showers at the end of the corridor. The room was noisy when the (one) window was open, which it had to be in the summers. There was no TV and no telephone; for the latter, there was one phone booth in the corridor and for incoming calls, staff on duty on the floor would knock on the doors of the rooms of residents. In a small storeroom at the end of the corridor I kept a large rough wooden box, which had been used to send essential stuff from New Zealand. During the last two or three years there, I bought a (very) small second-hand fridge and a rice cooker and cooked my only meals. For this, they increased the rent slightly to cover additional electricity costs. I also bought a radio-stereo set. I played some of the records I had sent over plus a few others I bought here.
- **Rent:** Initially my monthly rent was HK\$340, which was about one-third of my then monthly salary of about HK\$1200! Fortunately, a few months after I arrived, the salary was increased to about HK\$1800. The rent was for the room only, not meals.
- **Other residents:** There was a mixture of younger people like me and older people on our floor. The guy on one side of me was a nuisance. Every time he thought my music was too loud (which it wasn't), he would bang on the wall until I reduced the volume!
- **Rooftop restaurant:** On the roof there was an open restaurant with a good view over the harbour. The restaurant area had a television for guests to watch. The only TV station in Hong Kong when I arrived was RTV (Redivision TV), the predecessor of ATV. TVB opened sometime later.

- **Rooftop garden and drying area:** On the roof of the West Wing was a 'garden' which consisted mainly of pot plants that were to be used throughout the building. On the weekends in the summer, I would often use this area for sunbathing (photograph). There was also an area for the YMCA to hang out its washing to dry.



- **Dining room:** On the first floor, there was a dining room for residents and YMCA members. For the first few years I used it for breakfast (at \$2.50) and evening dinner (\$4.50). Only Western food was served. There was a group of us who would often eat at one table (four seats) at about the same time. This included Tom Lung, a minister who officiated at my wedding, and Jordan Guy, a Canadian working in a local law firm.
- **Staff:** Most of the senior YMCA staff were Westerners. The General Secretary (top position) all the time I was there was Ken Thornton from New Zealand. The youth director, Bill Painter, was also from New Zealand; in fact he was from the Gisborne YMCA and his wife's family were friends of my family, so I already knew them. As a result, I would quite often be invited to their flat for meals. When they returned to Gisborne, they were replaced by another couple from New Zealand, who I did not know. The youth department also employed one or two younger unmarried people from the UK.
- **Membership:** As the YMCA is a private organisation/club, one has to join to become a member. This did not include residents or other guests. I was a YMCA member in New Zealand and also joined here. So I was both a member and a guest/resident.
- **Saturday evening movies:** The building contained a large hall. On most Saturday evenings, a 16 mm projector would be set up and a movie shown for members and guests.
- **Armchair group:** During the cooler months, there would be Sunday evening talks by prominent people and visitors. These were usually very interesting and I would often attend.
- **Chapel:** As the YMCA is a Christian organisation, there was also a small chapel. They would have a 10-15 minute service early each weekday. I sometimes went and even conducted the service a few times.

### **Exercise in those early days**

- **Gymnasium:** There was an indoor heated(?) pool but until 1972, when a new gymnasium was built, the pool was covered (with a very rickety wooden floor) and used as a gymnasium. I would occasionally use the gym for target training. Some of the exercises in my target training included use of weights, which I would move out from the adjacent weight room and place on the floor of the gym.
- **Swimming:** Once the pool was opened full time in 1972, I would regularly use it for lap swimming. I remember the pool was a strange size – about 20 yards in length.

- **Weight room:** On the ground floor of the youth department wing was a primitive weight room which I used. In 1971, I painted the weights to improve their appearance. Later, when the gym was upgraded, these weights were not needed so they let me take a bar and weights with me to my new home.
- **Runs:** I did these in three places. Sometimes I ran along the waterfront alongside the old railway yards from opposite the YMCA up to the Hung Hom area and back. (This would be impossible now as the railway yards have gone and the area is all built up.) For other runs, in 1971 and 1972, I would sometimes drive over to the Kowloon Tsai park and use the running track there (pictured). This ground was even closer to the airport than Ming Yin College (where I worked); one could almost touch the planes as they flew over to land; also one could see passengers at the windows as this was the point where planes had to bank steeply to line up with the runway. In 1973, I would go after school to the police sports grounds in Boundary Street (the same grounds that the YMCA used for Rugby matches) which was close to my school.



### Surrounding the YMCA

Below my window was the original Tsim Sha Tsui fire station. They had a volleyball court for the firemen to use. Looking further from my room was the Star Ferry and bus terminus (much as they are now) while across the road by the harbour and stretching towards the Star Ferry was the original KCR (Kowloon Canton Railway) terminus with its clock tower (pictured right; only the latter remains). In those days, diesel locomotives were used. Star Ferry rides when I arrived were 20c downstairs (second class, all open) and 50c upstairs (first class with parts enclosed). On the other side of the YMCA building was the Peninsula Hotel.

The second photograph shows a view from the YMCA rooftop of part of the surrounding



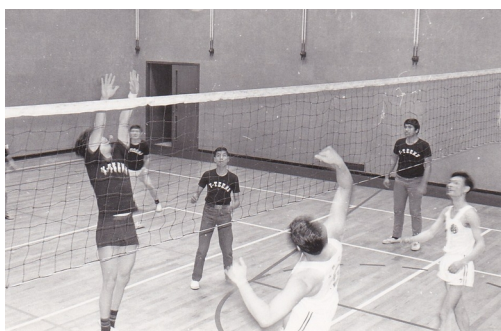
area. It shows the KCR terminus, the clock tower, the old TST Post Office (just visible bottom centre) and a car park (not visible), which I would use before using the YMCA car park. In those days, travel by ship was much more common than by plane. The ship in the upper picture is the 'Oronsay' one of the many passenger liners that visited Hong Kong in those days. The YMCA washing area and roof garden are on the left in the upper picture. As you might ask, the building below the arrow is the old Bank of China (the communist bank in colonial Hong Kong in those days).

### Volunteer help

While at the YMCA, I did quite a lot of unpaid, volunteer work with the youth department. Occasionally I would help out when youth camps were held, most of these being in the New Territories, which in those days was in the middle of nowhere and not easy to get to.

**Y-Teens:** This was a youth club for local teenagers which I was asked to lead. People from a variety of ethnicities formed the group. There were Chinese, Eurasians, Portuguese and Europeans. We had regular weekly activities, camps, sports competitions and were involved in charity activities. Just a few sample pictures are included here to illustrate what we did. I have a number of pictures of such activities; please refer to the separate file in this folder for more details on the Y-Teens.

1. Distributing gifts to children in primary school in the (now gone) notorious Walled City (right).
2. Taking part in a volleyball tournament at the Chinese YMCA. Note that two of them are not wearing shorts, much to my displeasure! (below, left).
3. At a camp in Fanling (below, middle).
4. A club dinner in the YMCA hall (below, right).



**Boys' Brigade camp:** The YMCA also had a Boy's Brigade company. I was not involved though they did ask me to help once with a weekend camp at the Chinese YMCA camp-site at Wu Kai Sha. [This is opposite Chinese University though it was not built up then. The only access to what was then just a small village was via a ferry from CUHK station.] We

travelled by (the old diesel KCR train) from the terminus opposite the YMCA to the University Station (which in those days was right on the edge of Tolo Harbour). From there we took a junk to the camp-site. On an excursion in the Ma On Shan mountain area, we lost the track on the way back while I was leading! This necessitated a rough descent through thick bush down the mountainside to the road.

### Getting around

Within a few weeks of arriving in Hong Kong, I bought a car. It was a used Morris 1100, white in colour (identical to that in the photograph), which I saw in the showroom of a garage in Waterloo Road. Most of the road vehicles in those days were English; the Japanese vehicle invasion had not yet begun. I used the car



mainly to travel to and from school instead of using public transport which, in those days, was appalling.

- **Parking:** At first I would park the car on the roadside near the YMCA or in one of the car parks across the road (cf photo above again). I would have to feed the meters which at first were just until about 7 pm. Later, when it was necessary to pay for parking all night, I parked in the YMCA car park even though it was more expensive. In 1971, YMCA car park fees were increased to \$120 per month for residents. Partly for this reason, I sold the car in 1972.
- **Fuel:** Petrol was not expensive. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1971 the price actually went up to all of 10c a gallon – that is, an *imperial* gallon not the smaller US gallon. Then in February of that year it went up again to 15c a gallon!
- **Stolen:** One night, while parked outside the YMCA (I can remember the spot exactly), the car was stolen. The next morning, after discovering the loss, I reported it at a Police station, and went to school on the bus. On the way home in the bus, I am pretty sure I saw it parked on the roadside in Nathan Road – right outside the Mongkok Police Station. The police themselves soon located it and I got it back without any damage.
- **Maintenance:** The car was a lemon and it was not helped by always being in the open exposed to the hot and humid Hong Kong climate. Something was always going wrong. The husband of one of the teachers at my school owned a garage so I took the car to him when repairs and oil changes and lubrication were needed. Examples of things that happened just in 1971, as I was keeping a diary that year:
  - Water getting inside: To solve this problem, I drilled holes in the floor for it to drain out.

- Once the exhaust pipe broke and partly dropped off. I took it off and drove to school with a very noisy car. A new exhaust cost \$90.
- The starter motor would not work as it had rust in it.
- While driving, a front disc break jammed. It got very hot and lots of smoke began pouring out.
- In 1972, the frame had corroded to the extent that it started to break!

I think it was in 1972 when I finally decided to get rid of the car. It was becoming too expensive to keep it. Also, in that year, a new block was to be built in the open car park at the YMCA so there would be nowhere to park it.

- **Beach outings:** As well as using it to go to school, the car was used for a while in the first couple of years for outings to Big Wave Bay on Hong Kong Island (photograph) on Sunday afternoons by a group of guys from the YMCA. As there was no cross-harbour tunnel then (not until 1972), it was



necessary to cross the harbour by one of the vehicular ferries. For these outings, we used the vehicular ferry crossing near Kai Tak airport.

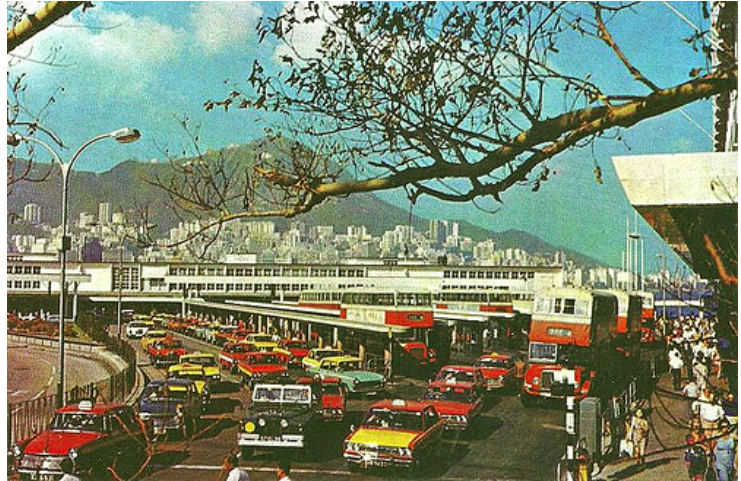
- **Russian bodyguards in the car:** About 1968 or 1969, in order to get some Russian tuition, I would go to the Ocean Terminal and visit a (very small) Soviet liner that travelled between Hong Kong and Yokohama, Japan when it was in port. The main ship that came here was the “Baikal” (named after a lake in Siberia) and is shown



as it leaves Hong Kong in the photograph taken from the YMCA roof. There was one lady who was quite helpful so I asked her if she would like to have a brief tour of the city in my car. She was not sure about this so went away for a while then came back saying it was all right but that I would have to have male escorts! [This was at the height of the cold war between the US and the Soviet Union so I guess they were afraid she might defect!] So, we drove around Kowloon with three burly 'bodyguards' squashed into the rear set of my none-too-large car. She did not defect! (I am not sure which year this incident was, but it is probably after 1968, the year in which I visited the USSR and travelled across most of the country on the Trans-Siberian railway – but that is another story.)

- **Travel without the car:** Once the car was sold, I had to rely on public transport, which in those days was appalling. Buses were invariably crowded with people often squashed like

sardines on the lower floor (of the double-decker buses). Smoking was allowed on the upper floors. Rides were always jerky as the buses did not have automatic transmission; drivers had a very long gear-shift which always seemed difficult to operate. In the hot weather, many drivers wore a (dirty) white singlet, “Bombay bloomers” (baggy khaki shorts that used to be part of the British army uniform – phased out in 1972) with a cigarette invariably hanging out of their mouths. The drivers did not take the fares: these were taken by a conductor who sat near the entrance door and who issued a small paper ticket. Such rides were a treat you have missed! (Photos show the Tsim Sha Tsui terminus in the 1960s and bus tickets.)



So without the car, I had to take such buses to and from the area closest to the school. Getting from the bus stop to the school and back necessitated a walk through the resettlement areas in the area (see photographs later). The stench was often almost unbearable.

**Pick-pocketed:** On one occasion I was getting into a bus (competing may be a better word as it was common to have to elbow your way on board!!), along with a thousand others it seemed, to return to the YMCA when someone picked my pocket. Of course, in the press of the throng I felt nothing. However, he (I suppose it was a 'he') must have been very disappointed as all he got was about 50 cents and the key to my room

## Happenings while at the YMCA

While living at the YCMA, there were a number of interesting and sometimes dramatic happenings in Hong Kong. Here are some of them.

- **YMCA and the threat to blow up airliners**

One evening in October, 1970, at about 6.50 pm I was speaking to Jim Hill (probably in the corridor), a long-term resident in the opposite room to me when a high-pitched buzzer went off in the toilet at the end of the corridor. Suddenly, three men rushed down to investigate. I of course was curious and also went down to investigate. On my arrival at the toilets, the said blokes were rushing back to Room 401 (the room opposite the toilets – see



photo on page 2) with an American guest from Room 412. At the same time I was grabbed and questioned as to why I was there but instead I asked them to identify themselves. They said they were police. I was taken into Room 401 but refused to answer any questions unless I was charged. The guy from 412 was being interrogated as to where he lived and what he had been doing that day. I was then taken along to my room (Room 409) and got Jim Hill to tell the cops that I lived there. Then they told us that a man was threatening to kill and that the 'thing' was about to go off. After writing an official report, they carried on with their investigations.

Later, Room 412 was sealed, the toilets finger-printed and the guy from 412 bundled into a car and taken away. At that time I was the only person in the YMCA who knew the details though most people knew the place was bristling with policemen.

As it turned out, the guy had sent a letter to the local manager of BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation, today part of British Airways) demanding US\$100 000 or two BOAC VC-10 aircraft (pictured) would be blown up and the YMCA toilet [on my floor] was to be



the place where the money was to be deposited. The resident in Room 401 opposite the toilets had 'loaned' his room to the cops and spent the night in a hotel suite for \$180 at their expense. The next day, everybody was curious about what had happened to me and what I knew.

Dodgson, the American guy appeared in court a few days later and about a month later, at the end of his trial, was acquitted of his blackmail charge! Quite surprising!

#### • **HK riots and a bomb outside my window**



In 1967, shortly after my arrival, the cultural-revolution in China inspired riots in Hong Kong. The rioters wanted to overthrow the Hong Kong government and place the territory under Chinese rule. They had almost succeeded in doing this in the Portuguese colony of Macau a few months earlier and that territory was never fully under Portuguese rule thereafter. The area of Shek Kip Mei, right where Ming Yin College is, was at the centre

of these riots and I would travel to the school there every day in my car. Was I frightened? Not in the least! (But folks outside of Hong Kong who knew me were terrified based on the news reports they were hearing!) Also, while travelling to and from school, I had to cross the Princess Margaret flyover. Next to this flyover was a communist secondary school which at that time was rumoured to be a bomb making 'factory'. During the frequent traffic jams on this flyover, I could look down into the school and imagine what was going on.

Anyway, I was not terribly worried as most of the rioting was in the evenings and by then I was back at the YMCA. But one day a bomb was placed on the footpath below my window! I was unaware of this until I heard sirens and saw riot police running around. Naturally, I stuck my head out of the window to see what was going on. I got screamed out by a policeman to get back inside and get under cover! They then detonated the 'bomb' which turned out to be a fake. But they had to take these incidents seriously. Several members of the bomb squad were killed or maimed because of the bombs.

The riots lasted for seven months but failed. They were not supported by the general population. They came to an end in December of 1967, when China's Premier, Zhou Enlai, ordered a halt to the leftist rioting. He and Chairman Mao Zedong agreed to keep China's relationship with Hong Kong at the uneasy status quo, and in fact had relayed this to the British authorities. Most of China's trade with the world passed through Hong Kong so China really needed Hong Kong.

- **The sinking of the Queen Elizabeth**

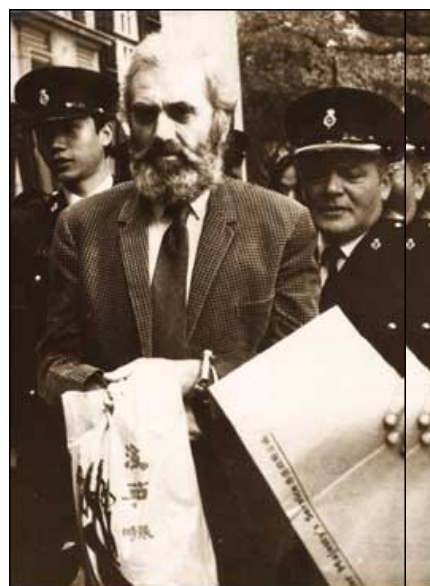
On Sunday, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1972, the former liner "Queen Elizabeth" caught fire. It had been bought by the shipping magnate Mr C Y Tung (the father of the first HKSAR chief executive, C H Tung) and converted into a floating international university and renamed the "Seawise University". [Note that the word "seawise" comes from the initials "C Y".] It was moored in the harbour (that is now reclaimed land) off the Mei Foo housing estate, undergoing renovation, when it caught fire. It burnt all that afternoon. It was given a disaster alarm and the smoke from the fire was affecting the approach of aircraft landing at Kai Tak airport. Another chap and I went to the roof



of the Ocean Terminal and watched it burn. The next day, the ship capsized and settled on the bottom of the sea. The newspapers were full of it. It was revealed that all the bulkhead fire doors of the ship were open, and there were suspicions, never proven, that it was deliberately scuttled as there seemed little use for a floating university. Most of the ship still remains buried under the former harbour so vehicles going to Kowloon from the airport probably pass over the remains of the ship.

- **Police corruption:**

For much of Hong Kong's history, there was a lot of corruption, especially in the Police Force. Many of the local station sergeants, who had important positions, especially in the New Territories stations, became very rich through corruption. Many expatriate officers were also up to their necks in it as well. One infamous case involved a Chief Superintendent by the name of Peter Godber, who had been a hero during the 1967 riots. In May of 1973, it was announced that he was to be arrested for corruption but he escaped by using his police airport pass to bypass immigration and passport checks and walked onto a plane for London! He was extradited back to Hong Kong the next year where he was convicted and



sentenced to four years in prison. On his release he moved to Spain with most of his ill-gotten gains where he set up residence. As a result of his conviction and other corruption activities in Hong Kong in the 1970s, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) was set up in 1974 by the then governor Sir Murray MacLehose, widely regarded as the best governor Hong Kong has had. The picture above shows Godber on his return to Hong Kong for trial, with a beard that he did not have before. Here is a very interesting ICAC website on this case:

[http://www.icac.org.hk/new\\_icac/eng/cases/godber/html/case1.html](http://www.icac.org.hk/new_icac/eng/cases/godber/html/case1.html)

- **Cross-harbour swims:**

From 1906 until 1978, there was an annual cross-harbour swimming race, usually in October. The race began at the Kowloon pier (next to the Star Ferry terminal, see photograph) and ended at Queen's pier on Hong Kong side. Many hundreds would take part. I took part in 1969 and 1970. The distance was roughly 1600 yards (just under a mile, which is 1760 yards). In



1969, it took me 30 minutes while in 1970 I was two minutes faster. In this year, a European boy was drowned – the first in the history of the race – possibly due to swallowing oil from the thick layer of oil near the finish. On competing the race, swimmers, including myself, would be covered in a film of muck. The races were eventually stopped because of the deteriorating quality of the water which was indeed very filthy.

- **Severe asthma attack:**

Diary entries in November, 1971 said that I started taking penicillin antibiotics for a chest 'bug' and that I would have trouble finishing runs. Then, in my last few weeks at the YMCA, in early 1975, I had a very severe attack of asthma which would not break. I think it might have been caused by my runs along the (old) Kowloon waterfront from the YMCA to the Hung Hom area and back. At that time, Hong Kong was developing rapidly and air pollution was becoming bad. Anyway, the attack was life-threatening and I was rushed to Queen Elizabeth Hospital by people at the YMCA. I received emergency intra-venous treatment (much like that I received later in 1985 when we were in the USA) and spent a couple of days in hospital recovering.

### **The YMCA expands**

In 1972, a new wing was built over the then existing car park. (The photograph on the right shows piling work in progress.) It contained a large gymnasium and hotel accommodation for tourists – not for the long-term guests who had to remain in the old building (which also remained cheaper than the new rooms). The existing pool in the old block was opened permanently and was heated in the winter. The new building was opened by the governor Sir Murray MacLehose. It was in a suite in this new block that my brother Keith lived for a while when he came to Hong Kong to work at the YMCA. Well after I left, the whole YMCA, including this building, was demolished and the current building erected.



### **Leaving the YMCA**

In 1974, I got the job at a newly established teachers' college. As this was a government job and I was regarded as an expatriate employee, I was entitled to government housing. While waiting for a flat, I could have moved to a hotel, but decided to remain in the YMCA. Either way, the government would pay the rent. So the YMCA installed an air-conditioner in my

room and bumped up the rent to the government room rate as the government and not I was paying. I eventually moved out in early 1975 after getting a government flat. After so many years, I was not too sorry to leave the old YMCA, though I did enjoy my time there.