



HISTORY 14 DECEMBER 2017 SHANNINE DANIEL

The History Of The Beira Lake

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The Beira Lake and its colonial history

The man-made lakes—or tanks—constructed in Sri Lanka were built with one purpose in mind: to hold the rainwater which would help with agricultural activities throughout the year.

There are several stories related to the history of such tanks, many of which were made by the kings. The Beira Lake, however, located in the city of Colombo, was built for a completely different reason—and not by one of our ancient kings either.

The construction of the lake took place all the way back in the year 1521 by the Portuguese. Its main purpose was to act as a protective barrier against invaders, and to also serve as a means of transporting weapons and soldiers in the event of invasion or conflict of any sort.



Some historians believe that the name Beira is a derivative of the name De Beer – a Dutch engineer who built the moats and water defences of the Colombo Fort in the early 18th century. Image courtesy exploresrilanka.lk

The Portuguese settlers gained control over the administration of Colombo in the year 1518, after which they built the fort in Colombo. As time went on, assaults on the fort by the people of the Kandyan kingdom became more frequent. The Portuguese colonists realised that they needed a suitable strategy to protect their fort from external invasions.

The fort was surrounded by the Colombo harbour on one side, and marshland in all other directions—the Portuguese decided to make use of this marshy area to protect the fort. At first they tried to cut a channel across the marshland, but the large size of the fort made it difficult to do so, and the construction work of this channel was not completed. During this time the Sinhalese leaders attacked the Portuguese once again, and a detachment of Portuguese soldiers under Captain Lopo de Brito had to defend the territory.

It is said that after the Portuguese had brought an end to this conflict, they discovered that a large amount of water had begun to flow through the area of land that lay between the Dematagoda hill and the Saint Sebastian hill. The

to the channel that they had not been able to complete, thus creating a completely new body of water.

There are many conjectures about how the lake was named. One such belief is that the lake was named after an engineer named Beira, who was assigned by Captain Lopo de Brito to construct it. Another belief is that the name Beira is a derivative of the name De Beer—a Dutch engineer who built the moats and water defences of the Colombo Fort around the year 1700.

The Beira Lake during the Dutch era



The Dutch expanded the Beira Lake after they took over the Colombo Fort.
exploresrilanka.lk

Even though it was the Portuguese who constructed the Beira Lake, it was during the Dutch era that the lake was put to best use. The Dutch colonisers expanded the Beira Lake by flooding the low-lying land outside of it. The Dutch also constructed a series of canals extending from the Beira Lake—and as a result of this, a few islands emerged from the waters of the lake.

Dutch kept their *kaffir* slaves. The area between the Fort and Maradana Railway stations, known as Captain's Garden, was also once an island that was surrounded by the waters of the Beira Lake. Devotees travelled by boat to worship at the kovil which stands even today. It is said that during the Dutch era there was once an island on the lake which was large enough to grow 600 coconut trees.

The Beira Lake and the British



During the British era, the purpose of the Beira lake was more aesthetic than defensive.
Image courtesy exploresrilanka.lk

When the British took control of the Maritime regions of the country, they inherited the Colombo Fort and the Beira Lake as well. The purpose of the

John Deschamps—a soldier in the British artillery—describes the beauty of the lake during this era, in the *Scenery and Reminiscences of Ceylon*: “The lake forms one of the greatest attractions of Colombo, and by its margin stand some of the most delightful residencies in the Island; whilst its waters afford the favourite and healthful recreation of boating to the officers of the garrison and other European inhabitants. An annual regatta has been established, and on these occasions the lake puts on a gay and animated appearance. Nearly all the crafts are dressed in bunting and at night illuminated using coloured lanterns.”

The lake was a venue for festivities too. Christmas celebrations, New Year celebrations and theatre performances took place here. The biggest celebration that was held here during the British era was the celebration of Napoleon’s historic defeat in the year 1815 (link in Sinhalese).

The renowned photographer Henry Cave too mentions the Beira Lake in his text *Ceylon Government Railway*:

“One is constantly coming across pretty nooks and corners, each fresh view presenting a wealth of foliage luxuriant beyond description. Palms in great variety intermingle with the gorgeous mass of scarlet flamboyant blossoms, the lovely lemon-yellow lettuce tree, the graceful bamboo, the crimson blossoms of the hibiscus . . . the whole forming to the rippling water a border of universal beauty and unfailing interest.”

Unfortunately the desecration of the Beira Lake also began in the British colonial era. The main reason was the dumping of waste into the waters of the lake by the various industries which were set up in Colombo at the time (link in Sinhalese).

relatively neglected, its waters murky and polluted, with many people associating this once tranquil lake with the disagreeable odour that sometimes wafts through this area of Colombo. Upcoming projects like 'The Beira Lake Intervention Area Development Plan', which will be conducted by the Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development and Urban Development Authority (UDA), will hopefully manage to restore the lake for future generations.

**Research by Achini Dissanayake*

Featured image holidayapartmentscolombo.com

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Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta

Surely, the most 'fascinating' story about the Beira would be the 1587 draining of it by the engineers of Sitavaka Rajasinghe I, to enable the Sinhala onslaught on the Portuguese encampment. And it is more than odd to claim the lake was built to protect it from 'invasion' when the Portuguese fort itself was meant as a base from which to continue their invasion of the rest of the country. This suggests that the writer, Daniel, and the Roar news site is still unclear on which side it is on in the great divides of our history... The lake was not just an invader's construct but an ancient watershed ... [See More](#)

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Pierre Moreira

Very nice history... Portuguese footprints in Sri Lanka 🇵🇹 are still very visible in architecture, gastronomy, vocabulary, folklore, religion, family names, etc.

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Tuan Farrhan

inhabited by a family or may be few, then during one's time with pres. K.F. Ramadas took over the island & converted to a children amusement island with all the kids stuff. Few years later with the leadership of incombernt nayaka Theo the island was converted to a vocational training center & current temple. I have visited the temple some time back. Recently I have seen few pictures the temple seem grand & beautiful. Some time back I had help the temple in relation to the annual parahrara. I am aware of tireless of nayak thero, to make the temple a very successful one, but never thought how did temple came to existence & become a iconic structure on this island. I am sure many roar members will appreciate the information.

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Dhanapala Godage

Temple is not on that island but on a new filling with timber piles carrying the structure. Famous architect Bawa developed the form I think. Good for someone to writeup.

Like · Reply · 2w



Wasantha Attygalle

At the position where the lake spills over to the sea is a non splash vier, a copy built by the British who found it so innovative in a period a before reinforced concrete had been invented used during the Anuradhapura period to protect the spill from spill over damage.

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Tikiri Bandara

Beira is a Portuguese word. There was a Beira Province in Portugal. It also means 'by the edge' in Portuguese'. Probably a common expression at the time to refer to the man made lake by the edge of the Portuguese fort. The fort was built by the Portuguese invaders. It was not a defensive structure to protect against Sinhala invaders. The Sitawaka Sinhala forces attacked the Colombo Fort many times before the Kandyans. Rajasinha I drained the Beira Lake during one his assaults. Unfortunately, the original article is poorly researched and replete with inaccuracies.

Like · Reply · 32w



Sukry Ronde

shut up, lets not dig the past talk about the future... no more colonial..it's not worth of talking..it's only history..you don't have anything do then digging the past..ha...????

Like · Reply · 33w



Thassim Akbar

Includes a link to a book written by Henry Cave which is quite informative.

Like · Reply · 34w



Dhanapala Godage

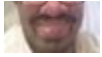
Present form of the Beira Lake scheme came into being after 1920s whose extensive details came in Ceylon Sessional Papers, 1920. Ceylon Sessional Paper XIV-1907 on Lake Scheme had recorded water level at 9.4 ft above MSL covering over 400 Acre. 1920 proposals to improve lake condition included activities as,

- * lowering of water level to 6.0 ft above MSL,
- * dredging of lake and reclamation of surrounding low lying areas,
- * lake to harbor canal construction,
- * McCallum and St Sebastian Lock systems and Galle Face spillway,
- * St Sebastian pump house.

On subsequent completion of the scheme lake area was 175 Acre and a fresh water body though connected to the sea.

Correspondence in Sessional Papers reported the lake condition in brief as, 1879- a pure lake... [See More](#)

Got it



It's impressive one.I used to think why this rubbish lake wouldn't disappear from Colombo.But now it has changed.Thank you Roar for giving such a rare insight for viewers.

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Swarna Gunaratna

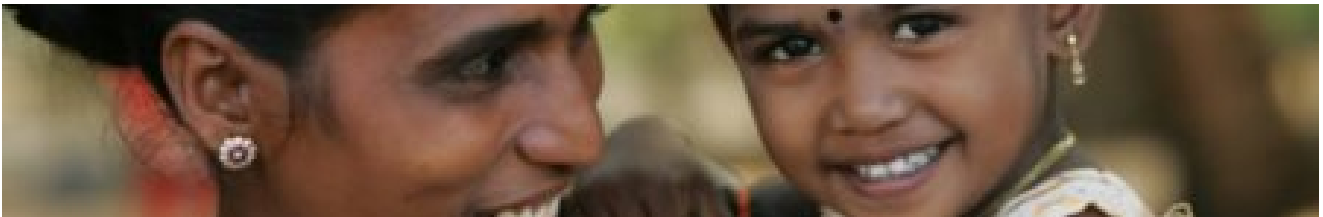
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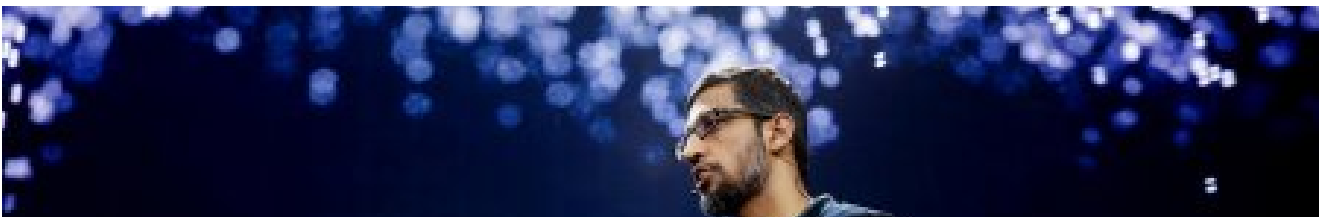
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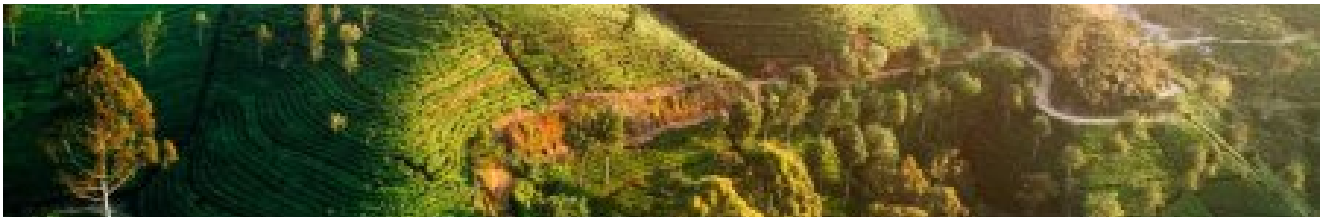
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