



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. 89 No. 110

December 2025

THE SARAWAK MUSEUM
JOURNAL

ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Dit, T. J. (2025). Rust and Remembrance: Documenting and Reviving Miri's Forgotten Industrial and Wartime Heritage. The Sarawak Museum Journal, 89 (110): 23-42

RUST AND REMEMBRANCE: DOCUMENTING AND REVIVING MIRI'S FORGOTTEN INDUSTRIAL AND WARTIME HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the disparities in heritage preservation efforts, with a particular focus on Miri, Malaysia. Miri's rapid urban growth, driven by the oil and gas industry, is leading to the neglect of historical sites vital to the region's early petroleum history and wartime experiences. This neglect can be attributed to several factors, including rapid economic development that overshadows historical significance. As Sarawak attempts to modernise her economy, there is a tendency to prioritise new developments over the preservation of the past. Furthermore, a lack of public awareness and interest in these sites hinders preservation efforts. Many Sarawakians are unaware of their historical significance and potential to contribute to cultural identity and tourism. This study suggests that a rethinking of heritage conservation objectives in Sarawak is urgently required. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining first-hand fieldwork, archival research, and analysis of primary and secondary sources to assess the challenges and opportunities in preserving Miri's industrial and wartime heritage. Preserving Miri's industrial and wartime heritage offers Sarawak a dual advantage: safeguarding its unique cultural identity and fostering sustainable tourism that honours the past while building the future. This study underscores the critical role of heritage preservation in enriching Sarawak's cultural landscape and driving responsible tourism.

Keywords: Industrial Heritage, Wartime Heritage, Second World War



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INTRODUCTION

Industrial heritage is a fragment of our cultural legacy. It reveals the progress of industrial technology, the changing construction methods and working conditions, and supports us in understanding society's history and development more broadly. Currently, industrial heritage examples can be seen in historic factories, refineries, drilling towers, mills, railways, lighthouses, other man-made installations of significance, and historic documents. While Kuching had unveiled the Brooke Dockyard Industrial Heritage Museum on January 17, 2024, it is also crucial to acknowledge that Sarawak's industrial heritage extends beyond its capital. Miri, formerly 'The Oil Town' and now a 'Resort City,' possesses a significant industrial history that warrants highlighting. Industrial heritage tourism is a growing trend, and an excellent opportunity to preserve and present old production facilities, equipment, and the skills to use them. The well-known Lutong Oil Refinery which began operations in July 1919, was originally built in Miri town but moved to Lutong in December of 1918, was decommissioned in 2003 and demolished in 2004. Miri suffered a substantial loss of its historical industrial heritage with the refinery's demolition, and the failure to conserve even a small section as a memorial represents a wasted opportunity to honour its oil and gas history. The preservation of Miri's industrial and wartime heritage, particularly sites related to the petroleum industry and the Second World War, has received less attention compared to the preservation of sites associated with the Brooke Dynasty. While there are admirable efforts to preserving and promoting the historical legacy of the Brooke family and their rule, as demonstrated by the Sarawak Museum's exemplary work on forts and buildings, the same level of focus is not consistently applied to other crucial aspects of Sarawak's modern history. This research paper posits that the disparity in preservation efforts can be attributed to the rapid economic development of Sarawak in recent decades which has overshadowed its historical and cultural heritage. As the state transitions into a modern, industrialised economy, there is a tendency to prioritise new developments over the preservation of the past. This situation has led to the continued neglect of various historical sites, including those significant to Miri's petroleum and wartime past. Finally, a lack of public awareness and interest in these heritage sites further exacerbates the issue. Many Sarawakians are unaware of the significance of these sites and their potential to contribute to the state's cultural identity and tourism industry. This lack of public engagement hinders efforts to preserve and promote these sites.

Nonetheless, Miri retains certain discernible industrial assets that remain visible, yet are at risk of deterioration if neglected further. This review will utilise examples of Miri's industrial past, associated with its peak as an oil and gas hub and also as a strategic location during the Second World War, which can be effectively conserved and promoted as part of its industrial legacy.