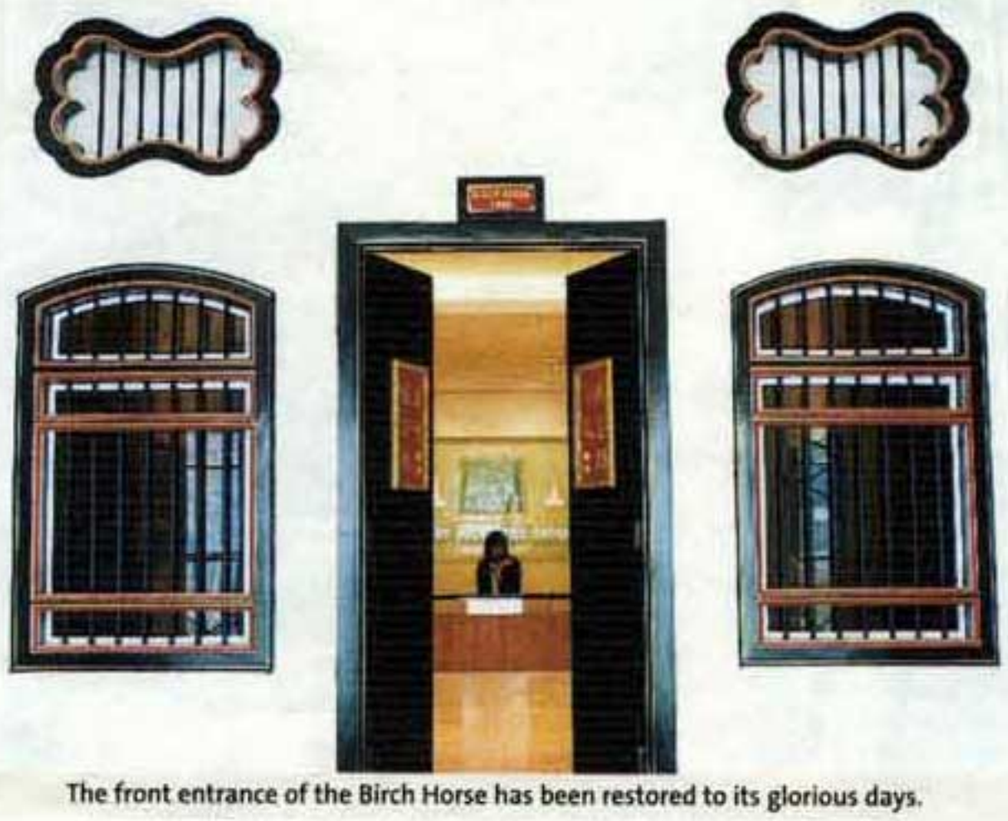
The original building structure is in pretty good shape
– Ivory Properties Group general manager Chok Keng Vui


The front entrance of the Birch Horse has been restored to its glorious days.

The twin staircase inside the Birch House in immaculate condition.

RM2.5mil facelift for Birch House

By SIOW YUEN CHING
Photos by H. N. LEONG

THE 97-year-old Birch House at Jalan Datuk Keramat in Penang is being given a new lease of life with a RM2.5mil conservation project.

Restoration work on the former tin smelting office, which has been converted into the headquarters of the Ivory Properties Group, began in August last year and is about 90% completed.

"We are still waiting for the Penang Municipal Council's approval to restore the facade of the building," the group's general manager Chok Keng Vui said.

He said restoration of the facade and landscaping work would take about three months to complete after approval was granted.

Ivory Properties, which is developing the surrounding site for the prestigious Penang Times Square project, moved into the two-storey building in March this year.

Chok said the original building structure was in "pretty good shape" although one of the corners was tilting slightly.

He said the electrical wires inside the building were replaced and concealed.

"We also removed the old air-conditioning system and replaced it with a modern centralised one," he said in a recent interview.

Chok said the solid wood used for the door and window frames and staircases, as well as the wooden flooring of the upper level were maintained.

The ceiling height for the ground floor, however, has been reduced from the original 4.6m to 3.7m.

"We placed another ceiling to conceal the wiring and piping for the air-conditioning system. But we recreated the original cornice design at the sides of the new ceiling," Chok explained.

He added that there was a long-term plan to relocate their office to another premises and turn the historical building into a tourist destination.

"In the mean time, we are dedicating a corner on the ground floor to showcase the history of Birch House and the tin-mining industry for the benefit of those who visit our office," he said.

On the Penang Times Square project, Chok said construction work on Phase One was scheduled to start in November and completed in about three years.

Phase One comprises a 0.8ha open space and the 18-storey Birch The Plaza service suites and commercial units.

Penang Times Square will sit on the 5.3ha site of what was once the country's second-largest tin smelting plant in Jalan Datuk Keramat – Escoy Smelting – which produced the world-famous Straits Refined Tin from 1898 until its closure in 1998.

Chok showing the nearly completed refurbished Birch House.

The original wooden-shutter windows at the Birch House have been changed to glass panels.

Mansion named after firm's first chairman

THE Birch House was built in 1908 to be the family mansion of Lee Chin Ho, founder of the Eastern Smelting Company.

Lee named his house after Sir Ernest Birch, the first chairman of the company.

Lee and his family stayed in the double-storey Straits Chinese mansion while his relatives and workers lived in the surrounding rows of houses.

With elaborate gilded Chinese doors, windows and an impressive main hall, the family mansion eventually became the company's administrative office.

Its original facade was, however, demolished in 1965 and replaced with a modern facade.

By the early 1920s, Eastern Smelting occupied most of the present 2.8ha site.

The Patino family from Bolivia merged several of the world's tin smelters, including Eastern Smelting, into Consolidated Tin Smelters in 1929.

A Japanese company, Toyo Kozau Kabushiki Kaisha, ran the Eastern Smelting plant during the World War II Japanese Occupation.

The smelting plant resumed operations under the British after the war. The last British managing director was R. J. Tolley, who retired in 1988.

Eastern Smelting underwent two name changes, to Datuk Keramat Smelting in 1976 and Escoy Smelting in 1993, and numerous boardroom and management changes.

After 100 years of rolling out high grade 99.85% refined tin ingots, the second largest tin smelting plant in Malaysia wound up its operations in 1998. The property was then sold to Ivory Properties Group.