For more than two hundred years, Ma Wan Island was home to an isolated community of hard-working farmers and fishermen who enjoyed a simple and unhurried life - but their livelihoods were in recession, and their numbers were falling. This island community was in danger of disappearing...

Except for a brief exploratory landing from the British in 1794, and the occasional visit from a colourful local pirate, the island of Ma Wan was virtually ignored, existing almost unnoticed until 1897, when the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs set up a check point there to monitor trade between the Pearl River Delta and Hong Kong.

In the main, the islanders lived in one of two locations: Tin Liu Village - a farming community established by a branch of the Chan family from Tsing Yi Island; or Ma Wan Town - originally a natural sheltered harbour used by local fishermen.

Tin Liu Village lay at the centre of the island, and the Chan family grew rice and basic vegetable crops in the fields on the lower north-eastern side. They sold any surplus to their neighbours.

Ma Wan Town lies nestled in a bay on the south-western side of the island. It has a harbour, pier, and typhoon shelter; for many years, a Kai-to ferry service between here and Sham Tseng was, basically, the only way on and off the island. The service stopped running in 2005.
Long before the Tsing Ma Bridge was built, the town evolved into a small, out-of-the-way settlement with a sprinkling of family-run seafood restaurants and convenience stores. The town was also well known for shrimp paste, and its pungent smell was the first thing you noticed as you stepped off the ferry.

Life on the island was, at first glance, almost idyllic; sadly though, its simple economy put the community just above subsistence level and acted as a brake on the natural growth of the population.

During the 1950s and 1960s, fishing and farming in Hong Kong became "sunset industries" - industries in long-term decline. "Capture" fishing (using nets and lines) reached the point where traditional fishing families living on boats were finding it difficult to survive. Many abandoned the struggle, tied up their boats, and went to work in the factories.

The fishing families using Ma Wan Harbour were no exception and some gave up fishing completely. Others tried their hand at "culture" fishing (breeding fish in nets hanging from rafts), and in the early 1970s a cluster of fishing rafts appeared, continuing the island's fishing traditions.

Soon, though, the boat people in the harbour and their poor living conditions became an issue.

In 1965, helped by a generous donation from a US charity, the government built them twenty-four tiny housing units on the hill overlooking the harbour. These dwellings became known as "the Fishermen's Village". These houses were so simple (they had no baths or showers) the families had to share communal shower and toilet blocks.

The resultant increase in the number of families in the town put pressure on the island's delicately balanced economy and resources.
At that time, Fong Yuen Study Hall, which belonged to Tin Liu Village, was the only school on the island, and it could not cope with more students. So, in 1963, the Ma Wan Fong Yuen School, with proper classrooms and a playground, was built nearby to meet the demand.

Near the pier was a factory making vacuum flasks, which provided some islanders with jobs. However, after it closed in the 1960s, and because there was no other large-scale employer, the younger generation were compelled to leave the island. This had a significant aging effect on the community.

Census records show the population of the island in 1911 was 473; in contrast, at the end of the 1980s, the traditional fishing industry was almost nonexistent, the fields lay untended and overgrown, the number of people living on the island had fallen below 400, and their average age had risen... the future looked bleak.

Then, in 1989, the government announced what the islanders thought would be their salvation: the route of the new “Lantau Link” (two bridges and a raised viaduct joining the New Territories with Lantau) would cut across, and be supported on, Ma Wan Island... imagine how they felt when they later learnt it would be “physically impossible” to connect this new super highway to their little island!

“We felt very disappointed when we heard there would be no access to the island from the road above,” said Chan Sung Ip, the current chairman of the Ma Wan Rural Committee. “Without an access road, there could be no development - and without development, our community would have suffered further decline,” he told me.

Therefore, it’s not surprising that these independent and spirited people, used to looking after themselves and solving their own problems, decided to do something.

Over the next few years, they protested, debated and argued for an access road - and their efforts eventually proved successful.

In 1994, the government gave a conditional go-ahead for the design and construction of an access road and a “comprehensive
residential development" on the island - but there was a snag: the access road could not be built until the Lantau Link was complete... the islanders had to wait.

After the 1997 official opening of the Lantau Link, things moved fast: the new, resort-style residential development (Park Island) started growing out of the abandoned fields on the northeastern side of the island; the sweeping, curved access road appeared; the much larger "New Tin Liu Village" rose up from where the old village once stood; and 2004 saw the process of decanting the families from the old town into the new village begin.

Today, Ma Wan Town is the last remnant of pre-1990 life on the island - but it's almost a ghost town. The restaurants closed years ago, nearly all the houses are empty, and the narrow streets are deserted. It won't be long before the inevitable arrival of bulldozers herald the end of this old settlement.

Sitting on the pier in the afternoon sun, I try to imagine what the town must have been like in it's heyday: fishing boats moving in and out of the harbour; restaurateurs and store owners touting for business; neighbours chatting and joking; and the kai-to ferry disgorging tourists looking either for a meal or the ideal place to cast a fishing line.

Now, this motley collection of old grey concrete buildings - which must have witnessed so much life - lie silent and neglected. Yet, for those born and raised here, these boarded up houses, shops and restaurants stir emotive memories of a bygone age when life seemed less intense, when planes didn't fly overhead, and when you didn't need to lock your front door.

Everyone I spoke to (young and old) sees the sense in leaving their old homes for the new houses in the new village, with modern plumbing and all the mod cons. The younger generation accepted the change with enthusiasm. For the young, change is good.

The older generation, however, were not so willing. For the elders, change is uncertainty, and they had some misgivings because their old houses and neighbourhoods are filled with memories: schooldays; marriage; the birth of children; and old friends. But mostly, they fear the loss of comfortable traditions and a community spirit built up over many years.

The lifestyle that once existed here has gone: wishing it otherwise is pointless. But I do think that the memories and traditions of the people of Ma Wan ought to be protected and preserved for posterity.

However, except for the small Tin Hau Temple, I don't think these buildings around the harbour deserve the same fate: they should make way for something new.

I pray whatever replaces the old town won't be based on the same drab, repetitive and unimaginative design used for the new village. I hope it reflects the island's history and traditions, and continues attracting visitors and tourists... we'll have to wait and see.

Happily, some of those who left the island have returned. Today, the population of Ma Wan Island exceeds 10,000. Its economy has changed, and a good portion of the islanders now commute daily to and from the rest of Hong Kong. Many of them use the ferries, but most travel on the buses, which use the access road - the road that saved their community. ❧