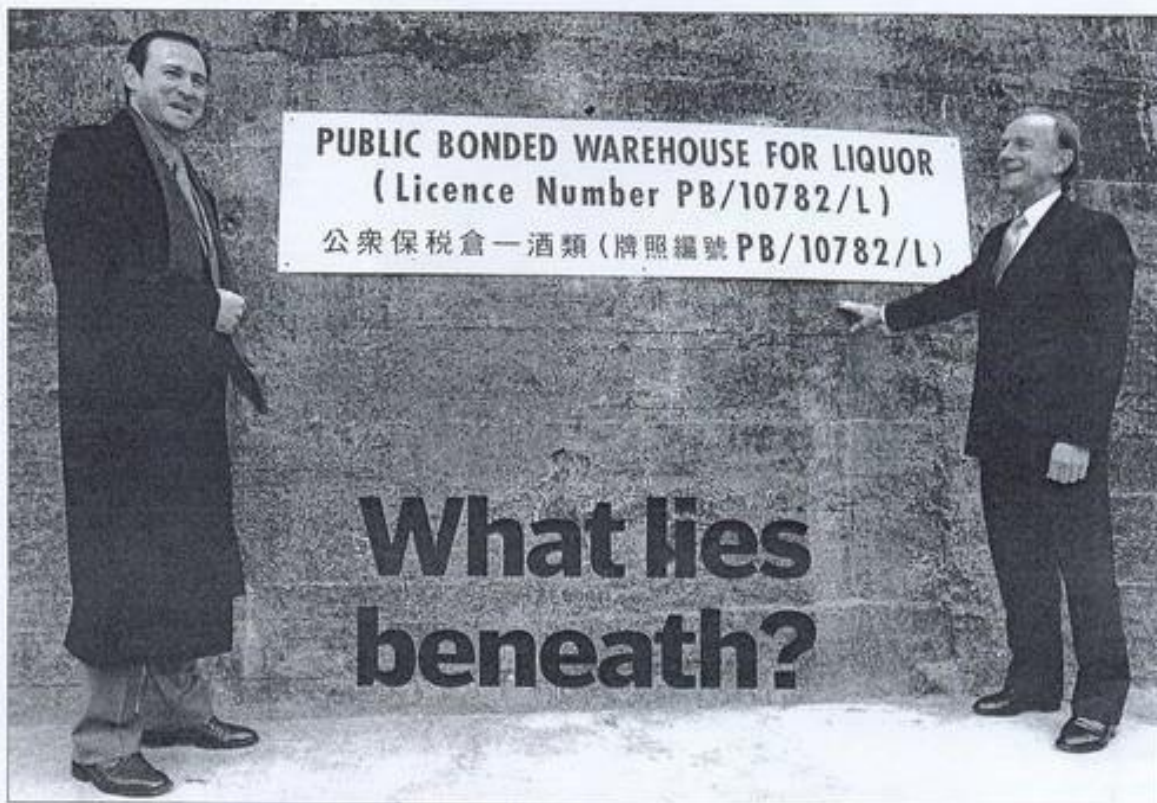


# Spectrum



Hong Kong wine collectors will soon be able to store their liquid treasures in the perfect environment — a high-tech complex of old World War II bunkers under Shouson Hill, writes **Paris Lord**

The now-ignored bunkers on Shouson Hill that once housed ammunition for Hong Kong's futile World War II defence against the Japanese are about to protect something new — some of Hong Kong's most valuable wine collections.

At least the new owners hope so. They have bet at least HK\$38 million and two years fighting red tape to prove that Hong Kong's bibblers will see the need to store their most precious reds and whites in secure air-conditioned, dehumidified, specially lighted, feng shui-guaranteed bunkers, that in December 1941 were the last place to fall before Hong Kong surrendered.

Indeed, well before it has opened, the club has about 50 paid members, with 150 more feverish to sign, according to Crown Wine Cellars general manager Greg De'eb, 37, formerly the acting South African Consul General.

The company has already almost exceeded its expected annual intake of around 300 members, and the site can only cater for about 1,000 people and roughly 100,000 bottles.

De'eb expects a waiting list. There are some 200,000-plus wine drinkers and 20,000-odd wine collectors in Hong Kong, he says.

So, later this month, following a multi-million dollar renovation, the bunkers are to reopen to become Hong Kong's first professional wine storage and members club.

The bunkers themselves will feature stained wooden ceilings, curved to give a cave-like effect and cover the solid steel beams supporting the roof.

The clubhouse is to feature oak floors and furnishings such as plasma screens, leather chairs and wooden wine cases in the "platinum" library, as well as a 50-seat conference room. A European-style library is separated from the premium wine cellar by a frosted glass window. "There's nothing like it in Asia," De'eb declares.

The cellars are the newest arm of Jim Thompson's Crown Worldwide Group, joining its relocation, logistics and records management businesses. While there seems to be little synergy between the businesses, there is one: Thompson, a 61-year-old American, is a serious oenophile, as is De'eb.

The company wanted "to maintain the historical aspect of this because so much of the colonial history was lost", Thompson says, to the thump of workmen's hammers outside the club.

"That war time period... was almost the end of Hong Kong and I think it should be commemorated," Thompson adds.

Aside from the stainless steel and glass clubhouse, the site includes six pairs of bunkers — each with reinforced concrete walls 2.5 metres thick.

One pair adjoins the club house —

one housing a 50-person conference room with the latest in video, audio and internet facilities.

Two cellars are for bonded wine under the Customs and Excise Department's open bonded system which allows duty free storage without customs officials present.

The remaining four are for duty-paid wine — currently 80 per cent of value — although Thompson and De'eb are hoping to "encourage" the government to cut the tariffs, ideally to zero, or at least implement a simpler per-bottle standard fee such as in use in Singapore today.

Besides being redolent of Hong Kong's disastrous World War II history, the cellars can tap interests of wine drinkers in both the territory and the mainland, Thompson says, adding that he hopes to make Hong Kong the wine centre for the region.

The bullets-to-bottles story started in 1999 when a Hong Kong trade delegation led by then-financial secretary Donald Tsang and including Thompson trundled off to South Africa. Sampling wineries near Cape Town was part of the tour.

Rich and famous:  
Which Hong Kong  
entertainers earned  
the most last year,  
and how did they do  
it?

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Lunch with...  
Hutchinson  
Whampoa's  
Canning Fox breaks  
bread with the  
Weekend Standard

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Greg De'eb and Jim Thompson, previous page, aim to see these non-descript entrances to the Shouson Hill bunkers, right, become the most sought-after address in Hong Kong for oenophiles. Thompson, far right, checks security while De'eb, below right, explains the structure of the bunkers where wine, below, will be stored in precise conditions

Mung Chung Hung

After that expedition, Tsang was moved to declare that Hong Kong could become the Asian region's wine centre.

The germ of the idea to use the bunkers as wine cellars appeared later that year, when the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre hosted a conference to promote Tsang's idea. About 300 wine industry-related people from across Hong Kong, including De'eb, attended.

The government came up with several ideas to entice conference-goers to back its wine centre push, one of them being to use the various military sites scattered across the territory for wine storage. It added that it was keen to help private companies become involved.

Most delegates ignored the suggestions, and "there were no takers for two years," Thompson says. "No one gave it a second thought."

Except for De'eb, who sat there, stunned. He then began developing a business plan.

Although they moved in the same social circles, the diplomat and the businessman had not become good friends until after Thompson's visit to South Africa.

On his return, Thompson mentioned to his wife Sally that he was considering starting a wine storage business. In the

meantime, De'eb had described to her his business model for the bunkers. Sally brought them together and, over a dinner in August 2001, they agreed to approach the government with the idea.

The bunkers, 90 square metres each, were built in 1936 and 1937 in preparation for the expected war in East Asia.

Canadian and Punjabi soldiers held out in the bunkers against the Japanese until December 27 — two days after the

rest of the colony was captured. Although the Japanese raised their flag in Central early on December 27, they did not have complete control of the island because some Royal Engineers refused to surrender, according to military historian Tony Banham.

The occupiers found the Japanese-speaking Lewis Bush and ordered him to tell the Wong Ngai Chung Gap soldiers to surrender, which they did later that day, De'eb says.

The occupiers marched the soldiers to a concentration camp, where they were treated with slightly more care because the Japanese respected their fighting abilities, he adds.

Eventually, the site may commemorate a little known hero of the Battle for Hong Kong — a Canadian dog called Gander, who ran off with a Japanese-lobbed grenade meant for Canadian soldiers near Lei Yue Mun in December 1941. Owned by a Canadian soldier, the Newfoundland breed — a long haired dog similar to the Labrador — possibly knew he had to save his master, or thought the grenade was a play thing.

"Either way, the story is that because he grabbed it and ran, he saved the lives of one or two people," Canadian Consul-General Anthony Burger says.

The British military continued to use the site until 1977, when it was handed over to the police driver training school.

From 1982 until mid-2003 the Geotechnical Engineering Office made minor renovations to the bunkers and added racks to store rock core samples.

Of the 24 bunkers that originally dotted Shouson Hill, 16 were destroyed. Three pairs remain in their original condition.

Also intact is a guard house believed to be built during the Japanese occupation, now used for the site's security guard.

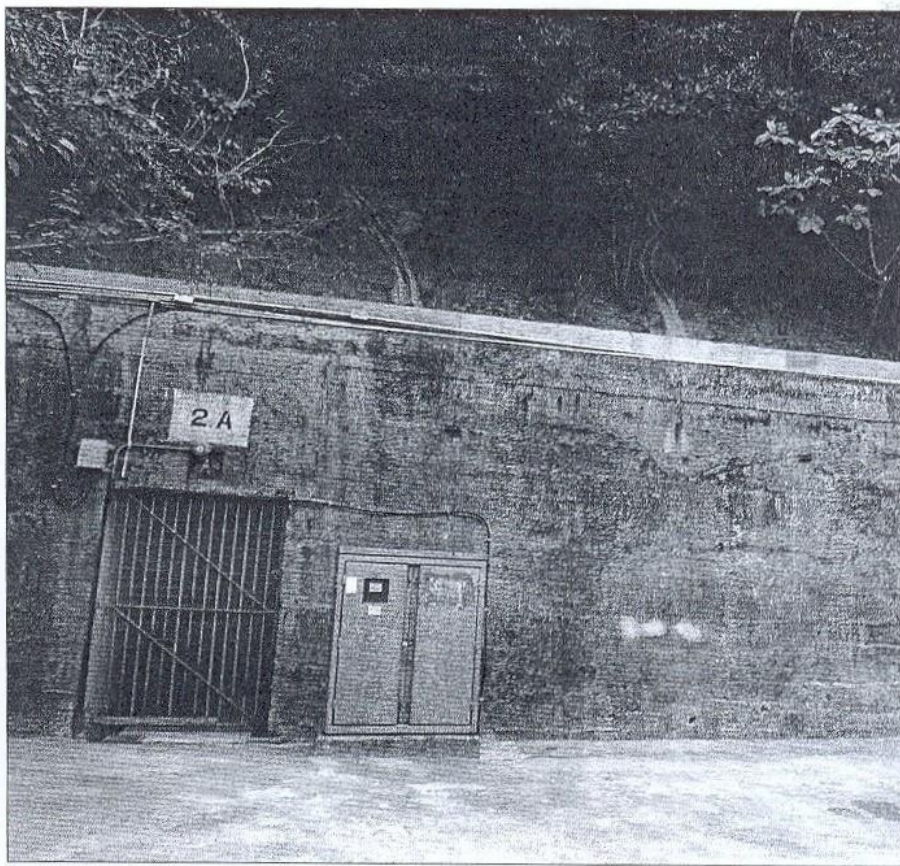
Aside from those adjoining the 270-square-metre clubhouse, most of the bunkers on the Shouson Hill cul-de-sac are unrecognisable.

Indeed, despite living nearby for the past 17 years and regularly jogging around the area, Thompson says he never noticed them until he and De'eb first inspected the site in early 2002. The company took over the site in August 2003.

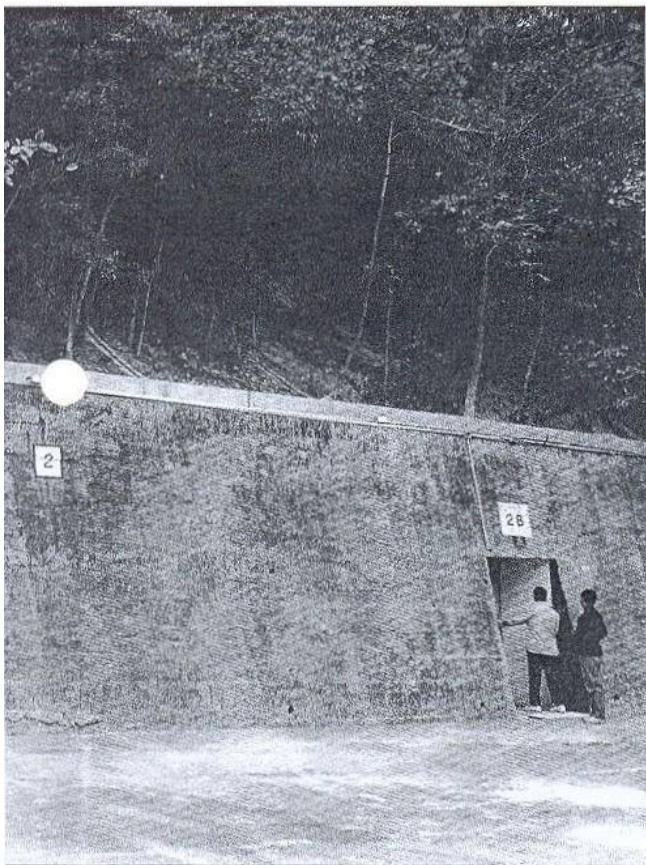
About 15 metres uphill from the footpath, between the clubhouse and the four other bunkers, is one covered by soil almost to its roof, which Thompson hopes the government will let him renovate.

Crown has leased the six bunkers from the government for seven years, at a cost De'eb declined to reveal. Should the cellars prove a success, he thinks the government may renew the lease for a further seven.

Escape tunnels were built into each of







the bunkers, although some, such as in the premium library, are now used for air-conditioning vents.

The bunkers are 20 metres below ground in some sections, and around each of their thick inner walls is an outer wall cavity which collects water from the soil and redirects it down internal drains.

For HK\$288 monthly, a member can store up to 96 bottles, with additional bottles stored for HK\$3 each. Members pay a single payment registration fee of HK\$3 per bottle.

The latest air-conditioning technology from Europe and Japan will ensure the wines are kept at between 12.5 to 13.5 degrees Celsius, and between 65 per cent and 75 per cent humidity, the ideal conditions for preserving both the wine labels and corks, De'eb says.

When staff deliver or remove bottles, specially made lamps from Holland — which look like orange street lights — slowly turn themselves on, protecting the stock from white or natural light.

A bar code is affixed to every shelf, bottle and box, and a system similar to Crown's record management division documents members' collections down to individual bottles, with their stock count viewable on a website.

Another system registers every detail of each cellar, such as its current temperature and humidity, the times the doors were opened and by whom and

which lights were switched on, while digital video cameras also monitor pathways and cellar entrances.

Sensors help keep the temperature at the correct levels, and such is the door sealing that, should the air-conditioning fail, the temperature can be maintained virtually unchanged for 36 hours, De'eb says.

If at any stage a customer wants to sell their wine and needs to prove its provenance, information regarding the precise aspects of its storage can be downloaded and given to the prospective buyer.

Why would a customer want to do all that? Take the bottle of 1946 Lafite that has lived in an apartment without air-conditioning for the past 10 years and appears to be in perfect condition.

"That wine is as good as valueless, because you know the contents of the wine are going to be absolutely messed up," De'eb says.

"We want to be able to prove to our client or the purchaser that these wines have been impeccably looked after."

The cellars are guarded 24-hours a day and a monitoring system alerts company security and police to any breaches.

So confident is De'eb in the company's security measures that should thieves manage to escape with any of the wine, he says that he will let them keep it.

