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Some great Malay manuscripts are in Cambridge

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AMONG the six million books stored at the Cambridge University Library are some "great Malay manuscripts", many not available at home. A Malaysian professor was here recently to be among these great manuscripts.

Prof Muhammad Salleh is a director of the Institute of Malay World and Civilisation at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in Bangi. We met, by chance, at the Library when he was waiting for a temporary reader's ticket to be issued by the admission officer.

While it takes one week to process a reader's ticket - the university is processing tickets for about 10,000 students now - a visitor like Muhammad can get a temporary ticket that will let him use the facilities at the library.

The professor of Malay-Indonesian literature is in Cambridge for a few days to research materials on Malaysia's second prime minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein. "There are some great Malay manuscripts here."

"You should go through them while you are here," he added.

In addition to the six million books in the Library, Cambridge University gets about a million new books every year.

It has materials on the first Prime Minister, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj to the present Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The computer, which Cambridge claims was developed here in 1949, makes a book search easy. A student with a connected PC may access the University Library's Online Catalogue System to find out where a particular book he is looking for is located in the library building, whether it is borrowable or if the book has been taken out by another reader.

He can also request for the book to be "fetched" by the library staff and he can also indicate when he wants to pick up the book.

The on-line system also covers the other libraries at the various Colleges here.

But knowledge obtained from textbooks is nothing compared with those gained through experience. Mrs Eirlys (pronounced as Alice) Park, an authorised tourist guide with the City of Cambridge, is living proof of that.

The 60-something Englishwoman, who regularly takes visitors through Cambridge's "wonderland", has a living and moving treasury of information that has not been documented.

A visitor here can get around by reading the different printed materials from the Tourist Information Centre about the history of the respective colleges while standing in front of it but if he goes on a guided tour with Park, he is sure to get more information out of the materials than anyone else.

"A very famous man from your country studied at St Catharine's College," she addressed me during a tour of the colleges in Cambridge.

That famous man was the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, an undergraduate - or "Cats" in Cambridge lingo - in 1922. An authorised biography written by Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard on the Tunku found at the University Library said he did two years of law and a final year studying history and graduated with a BA in 1926. His lodging house at 11, Grange Road still stands today.

Taking visitors through one of the back lanes of Cambridge, Park pointed out a quaint pub called the Eagle.

"This was the first place Francis Crick and James D Watson burst into when they discovered the structure of the DNA," she said in front of the pub.

Crick, a biophysicist, and Watson, a geneticist, discovered the structure of DNA in 1958. For the discovery, Crick and Watson - together with Maurice Wilkins whose X-ray diffraction studies of DNA helped Crick and Watson determine its structure - shared the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1962.

Visitors will also be shown the area where the first stored-programme computer called Electronic Delay Automatic Calculator was pioneered by computer scientist Maurice Wilkes in 1949.

These and more from Park who has been Cambridge's tour guide for the past 15 years.

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