

■ IN PASSING ... TAN SRI LESLIE CLIFFORD BATEMAN 1915-2005

THE passing of Tan Sri Leslie Clifford Bateman about two weeks ago was marked by an elegant and discreetly placed announcement in this newspaper on Oct 26. It was placed by the director-general and staff of the Malaysian Rubber Board.

Many people noticed the announcement but one whole generation of Malaysians might have missed its significance.

Bateman was the last of the colonials. Literally. His appointment as Controller of Rubber Research in 1962 was the last of a foreigner to a government or semi-government establishment.

Even in 1962, a major head-hunting exercise was undertaken to find the right person.

The media discussed the RM80,000 a year job at great length. At the time, it was the highest salary of any government or quasi-government establishment.

The job — Controller of Rubber Research — was a singularly powerful position that could make or break the industry in its day.

At the time, the rubber industry was facing a massive challenge from the synthetic rubber industry. Rubber, as a commodity, was constantly harangued by the ups and downs of prices.

But, most of all, the social changes taking place in Malaysia needed to be managed intelligently.

Which is what Bateman did.

At nearly six foot tall, he had a majestic disposition that worked in his favour whenever he entered a negotiation.

The meeting room mood would be set by his engaging manner and a rare capacity to enthuse his colleagues.

Bateman is described as the principal architect of rubber's modernisation. His name will always be associated with the Standard Malaysian Rubber (SMR) scheme.

Technical grading of natural rubber was not a new idea in 1962 but Bateman's task was to wedge his foot in the door. This idea faced strong resistance from many quarters.

He started with a speech at a symposium organised by the International Rubber Study Group that same year.

Three years later, he had mobilised local research and development and the SMR scheme was a reality.

Natural rubber would no longer be graded by visual inspection (by its colours and texture). Instead, it could be technically analysed and graded for its properties.

This one development would change the future of natural rubber — it could compete with any material, synthetic or otherwise, in an increasingly material world.

The SMR brought new processing methods at the factory level that would demand higher skills, an effect that would show up at the smallholder level as well.

Bateman prepared the rubber industry for its total Malaysianisation during his 12 years.

Bateman bet on rubber and won



FRIENDS: Bateman chatting with Tunku Abdul Rahman when the country's first Prime Minister visited the Natural Rubber Producers' Research Association laboratories at Welwyn Garden City, England, in July 1962.

‘The exigencies of World War II had brought a synthetic rubber industry into being and quite clearly this has come to stay. The USA and other countries were determined never to be wholly dependent again on an overseas supply of such a key commodity.’

Bateman, int an address to the Royal Commonwealth Society on Jan 11, 1968.

He also wrote feature articles regularly for the *Financial Times* and *The Straits Times* in which he laid out these ideas, their rationale and thus invited debate.

Bateman's association with natural rubber began during World

War II when he was conscripted to research work. One of his earliest projects was to devise rubber hoses which could handle petrol.

He joined the British Rubber Producers' Research Association — now the Natural Rubber Producers

Association — as a physical chemist and rose to become the association's director of research in 1954.

Eight years later, he accepted the invitation from Kuala Lumpur to become Controller of Rubber Re-

The last of the colonials, L.C. Bateman will be remembered for his efforts in introducing the grading of rubber sheets, writes THERESA MANAVALAN

search and chairman of the Malaysian Rubber Fund Board.

His mandate was to re-orient the R&D on natural rubber and modernise it.

In an interview with *Malaysian Business* in May 1974, he said: "This was because the rubber industry was no longer a simple one. Two factors had to be considered — pressure from synthetics and social developments in this country which meant rubber had to fall in line with the future or lose out."

Bateman was born on March 12, 1915 and educated at Bishopshill School, Uxbridge, and at University College, London, where he gained a First class Honours degree in Chemistry in 1935.

He earned a PhD and won the Ramsay Memorial Prize for best student of the year.

He went on to write more than 70 scientific papers on natural rubber dealing mainly with oxidation and sulphuration reactions.

When he accepted the position in Malaysia, he was already recognised as a world authority on the physical and chemical properties of natural rubber and related substances.

He received two honorary Doctor of Science degrees — from the University of Malaya and the University of Aston, Birmingham. With the two doctorates he earned through research, he was a "doctor" four times over.

At retirement, he was the only person between Calcutta and Canberra with the scientific accolade of the Fellowship of the Royal Society.

He was conferred the Darjah Panglima Setia Mohkota (PSM) by the Yang diPertuan Agung, in recognition of his services to the industry. He received this award just before he left Malaysia on retirement.

He retired in March 1974, after 12 years as Controller of Rubber Research.

In 1975, Bateman was appointed secretary-general of the International Rubber Study Group, a position he held for eight years. He then retired fully in Welwyn Garden City.

He suffered a stroke about three years ago. The subsequent immobility upset Bateman who was a cricketer and golfer.

He leaves two sons.

■ theresam@nst.com.my