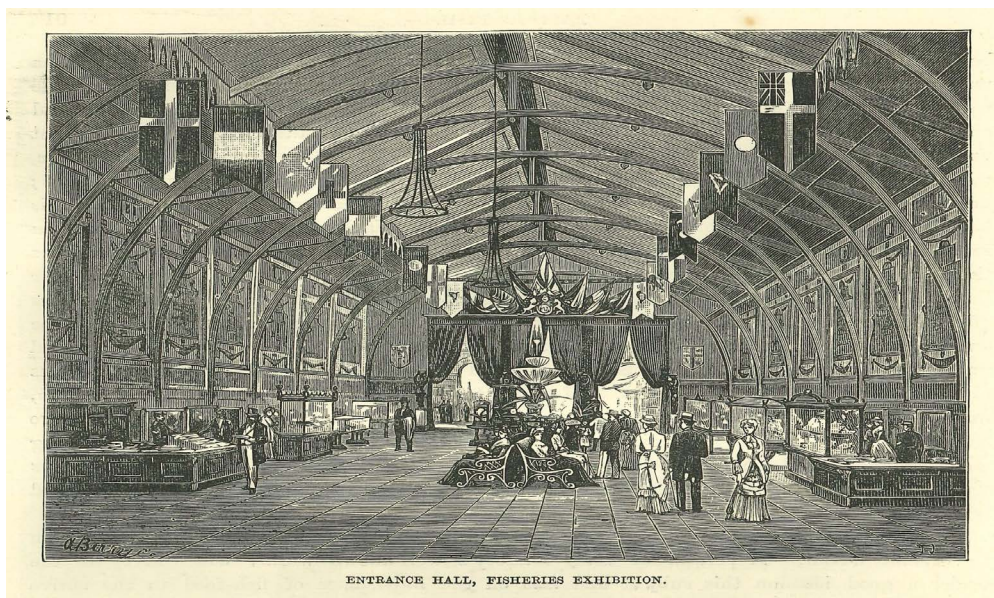


Singapore at the 1883 International Fisheries Exhibition in London

In the midst of tens of thousands of exhibits, a nineteenth-century visitor perusing the International Fisheries Exhibition would have caught a glimpse of some rather unusual objects such as the shell of a giant clam and the skeleton of an Irrawaddy dolphin. They might have been entranced for a minute, or distracted in the next second by another charismatic display – this extravagant exhibition was, after all, intended to be show-stopping at the turn of every corner.

Glancing at the exhibits and their accompanying captions, would the visitor have noticed that these artefacts were from Singapore? Would anyone have thought that a Crown Colony of the time could have held its own ground at such a grand exhibition, even winning prizes from the Exhibition's Jury?

The International Fisheries Exhibition of 1883 was a landmark show of its time that showcased developments in global fisheries industries¹. With displays of technology, economic products and natural history specimens, the Exhibition drew over two million visitors over six months between 1 May and 31 October 1883².



"Entrance Hall at the Fisheries Exhibition" from Frederick Whympers's *Fisheries of the World*.
Source: National University of Singapore Libraries³

¹ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/28512714>

² <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/31129293>

³ <https://linc.nus.edu.sg/search-S16?/cSH331+Why+1884>

Taking in the Venue

The Gardens at South Kensington

A Londoner from the late nineteenth-century would likely have been acquainted with the International Fisheries Exhibition's venue – the Royal Horticultural Gardens in South Kensington. This was a twenty-acre space maintained by the Royal Horticultural Society⁴ from 1861 until around 1886.

This location was just behind the site of the famous International Exhibition of 1862. When the International Fisheries Exhibition came around, the grounds of the 1862 exhibition had just become the home of the British Museum (Natural History), which is today known as the Natural History Museum in London⁵.



"The Horticultural Gardens, South Kensington" (1861) by William Leighton Leitch.

Source: Royal Collection Trust⁶

⁴ <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol38/pp124-132>

⁵ <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/about-us/a-history-of-the-museum-grounds-and-wildlife-garden.html>

⁶ <https://www.rct.uk/collection/920252/the-horticultural-gardens-south-kensington>

The Entrance

Sightseeing at the Exhibition

To host the Fisheries Exhibition, the Royal Horticultural Gardens were modified with temporary wooden structures. These buildings housed various exhibition courts, with specimens from Singapore being found in the Great Britain Court, as well as the Straits Settlements Court.

How would one locate the Straits Settlements Court? A visitor entering from the south entrances would have to head north towards the Promenade, then turn towards the East arcade – which the Straits Settlements shared with New South Wales, Tasmania, Japan, India and China. On their long way in, the visitor could be certain to encounter a myriad of other fine attractions.

Stop 1

The Magnificent Aquarium

One of the most stunning attractions was the Aquarium, an assemblage of more than forty tanks with 65,000 gallons of water supplied from Brighton⁷. Public aquariums were still nascent in this era, and so we can only imagine how much of a technological marvel this Aquarium must have been for its viewers. Frederick Whympers (1838–1901), a British artist and explorer, wrote at length about this attraction. In particular, he observed⁸ an amusing contrast between the graceful fish and the clumsy visitors:

The aquarium is deservedly one of the most popular divisions of the Fisheries Exhibition, and has pretty often been inconveniently crowded. On a popular day the clumsiness – the writer hardly knows a better word—of a large number of visitors stands out in bold relief to the graceful motions of the fish, before the tanks of which the former struggle, straggle and push.

⁷ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/21968686>

⁸ <https://linc.nus.edu.sg/search-S16?/cSH331+Why+1884>



“The Aquarium at the Fisheries Exhibition” from Frederick Whympers’ *Fisheries of the World*.
Source: National University of Singapore Libraries⁹

Stop 2

The Great Oyster of Singapore

The Courts of Great Britain were expansive, featuring over 1,000 exhibitors and more than 50,000 exhibits¹⁰. Finding anything specific would have been like looking for a needle in a haystack. The Singapore-curious visitor, however, would hopefully have been lucky enough to set their eyes on this: an elegant pair of shells of a giant clam (*Tridacna gigas*) from Singapore.

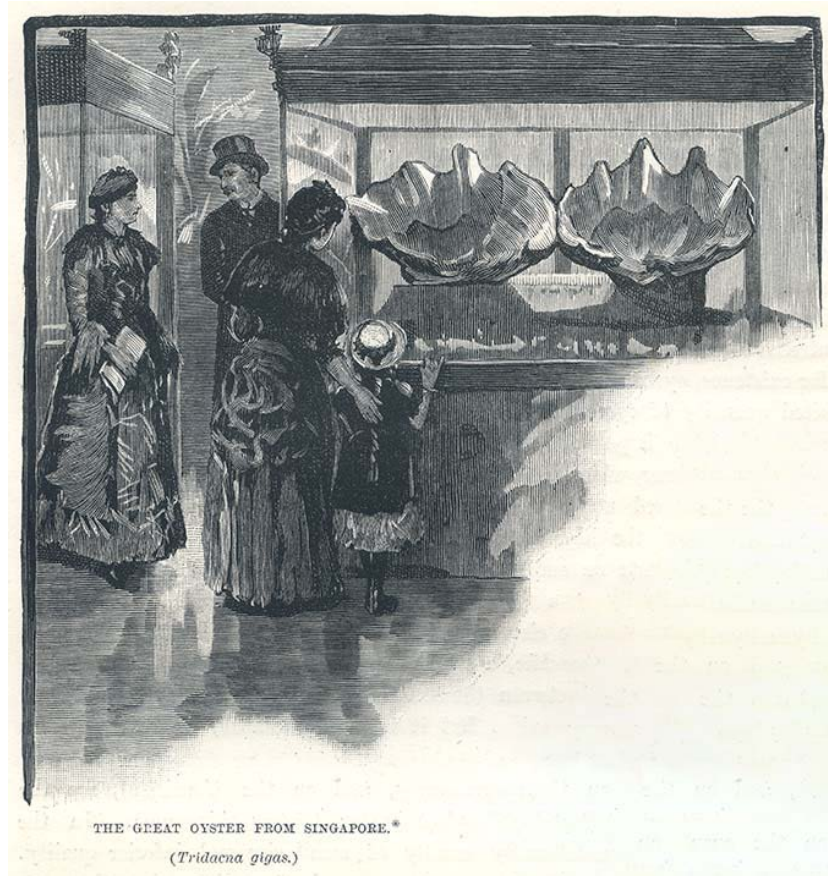
Owned by Rule’s Oyster Warehouse (now Rules Restaurant and the oldest restaurant in London¹¹), this Giant Clam measured about 100 centimetres by 66 centimetres, and

⁹ <https://linc.nus.edu.sg/search-S16?/cSH331+Why+1884>

¹⁰ <https://linc.nus.edu.sg/search-S16?/cSH331+Why+1884>

¹¹ <https://rules.co.uk/>

weighed about 197 kilograms. It was believed to be the finest known specimen of its time; and even earned a Diploma Award at the Exhibition¹².



“The Great Oyster from Singapore” from Frederick Whympers’s *Fisheries of the World*.
Source: National University of Singapore Libraries¹³

The Destination

The Straits Settlements Exhibit

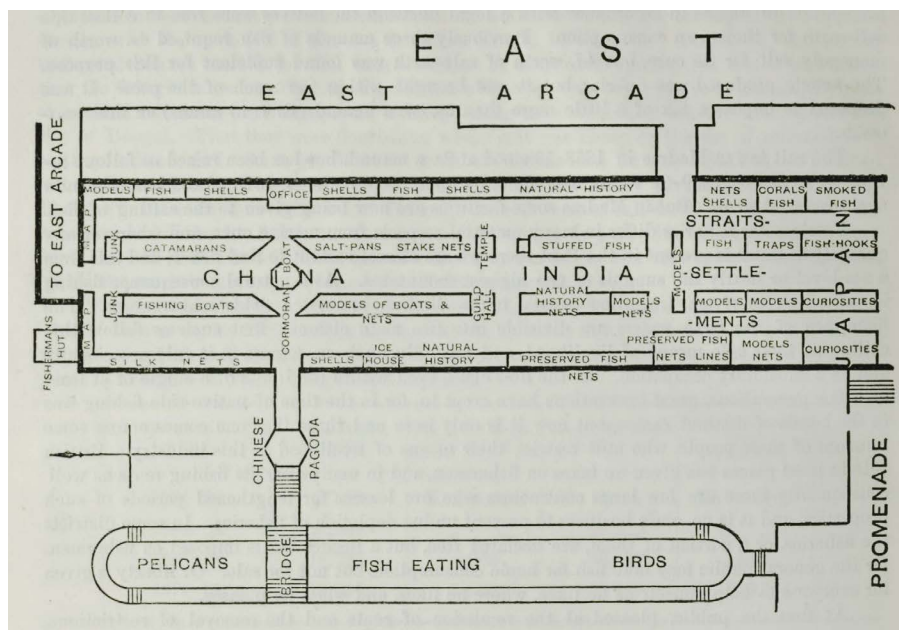
Nestled in between the Indian and Japanese Courts was the Court of the Straits Settlements. This court represented the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang and Malacca), as well as the Malay States of Johore, Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Sungei Ujong.

¹² <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/21968699>

¹³ <https://linc.nus.edu.sg/search-S16?/cSH331+Why+1884>

Despite being a modestly-sized space, it was packed to the brim with at least 251 named exhibits¹⁴, including fishing implements, marine life specimens and boat models. Natural history specimens were contributed by the Raffles Museum in Singapore as well as William Alexander Pickering.

If a visitor were to remember one object from the Straits Settlements, it would likely have been that of an Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) from Singapore. Apart from being the only specimen from the Straits Settlements Court that was mentioned in contemporary reports on the International Fisheries Exhibition, it also won a Bronze Award from the Fisheries Exhibition Jury¹⁵. As the Italian anthropologist and zoologist Enrico Hillyer Giglioli wrote¹⁶, “special notice ought to be taken of the rare *Orcaella brevirostris* from Singapore, in the Straits Settlements exhibit”.



Plan of the Straits Settlements Exhibition from the *Official Catalogue of the International Fisheries Exhibition*. Source: Biodiversity Heritage Library¹⁷

¹⁴ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/21968788>

¹⁵ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/21969064>

¹⁶ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/28490655>

¹⁷ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/21968739>

The Afterlife of the Exhibition

Extant Singapore Specimens at the Natural History Museum, London

After the closure of the International Fisheries Exhibition, several Singapore specimens were transferred into the collections of the Natural History Museum in London¹⁸. This happened through the efforts of Francis Day (1829–1889), a former Inspector-General of Fisheries in India and Burma, and Edward John Miers (1851–1930), the curator of crustacean collections at the British Museum (Natural History) (today the Natural History Museum in London).

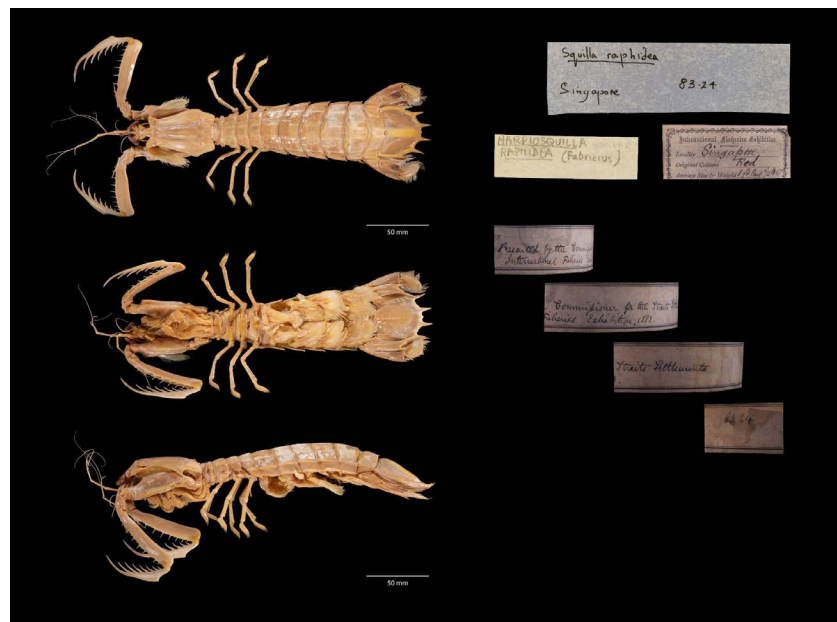
Given that archival images of Singapore at the International Fisheries Exhibition are scarce, this surviving physical collection of specimens as well as the engraving of the “The Great Oyster from Singapore” are invaluable because they allow us to gain further insight into the specimens that represented Singapore at the exhibition. This is especially apparent when we find that the *Official Catalogue* of the exhibition provides only the most general introduction to categories of natural history objects on display (“Specimens of Fish, Corals, Shells, etc.”¹⁹). The material at the Natural History Museum in London allows for a better idea of what these exhibited specimens may have been, and which species were considered to be of economic importance or interest at the time. The inclusion of the three crustaceans which are caught for human consumption is self-evident: a flower crab (*Portunus pelagicus*), a mantis shrimp (*Harpiosquilla raphidea*) and a spotted box crab (*Calappa philargius*). More curiously, what were an Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) specimen, as well as half a dozen young estuarine crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) specimens doing at the Exhibition? What more will the afterlives of these specimens tell us?

¹⁸ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/4125686>

¹⁹ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/21968788>



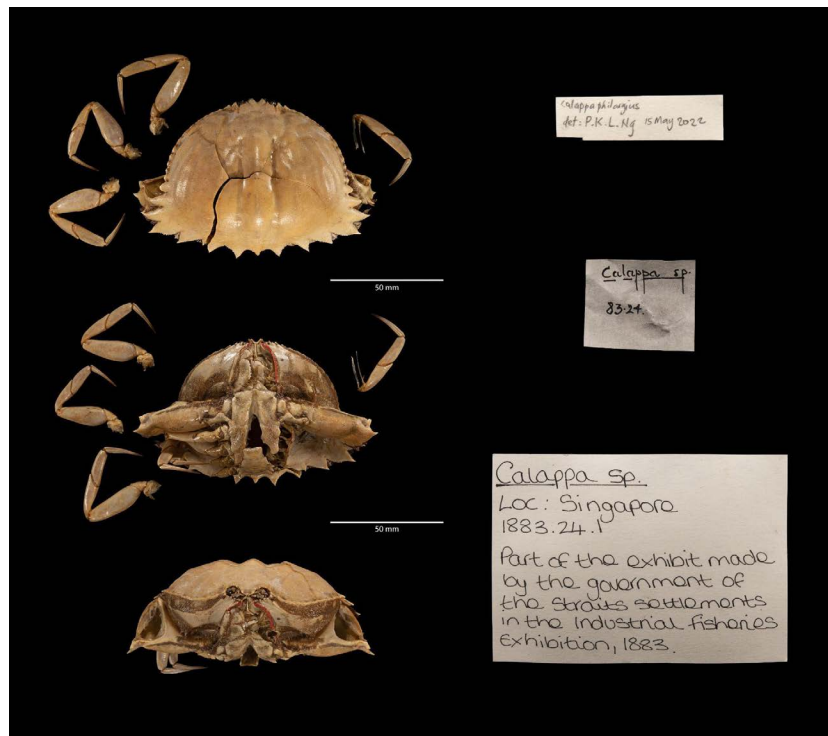
Flower Crab (*Portunus pelagicus*) specimen from Singapore.
Source: SIGNIFY Specimen²⁰



Mantis shrimp (*Harpiosquilla raphidea*) from Singapore.
Source: SIGNIFY Specimen²¹

²⁰ SIGNIFY species page

²¹ SIGNIFY species page



Spotted Box Crab (*Calappa philargius*) specimen from Singapore.
Source: SIGNIFY Specimen²²



Crocodylus porosus from Singapore.
Source: SIGNIFY Specimen²³

Research and text by Kathy Poh

²² SIGNIFY species page.

²³ SIGNIFY species page.