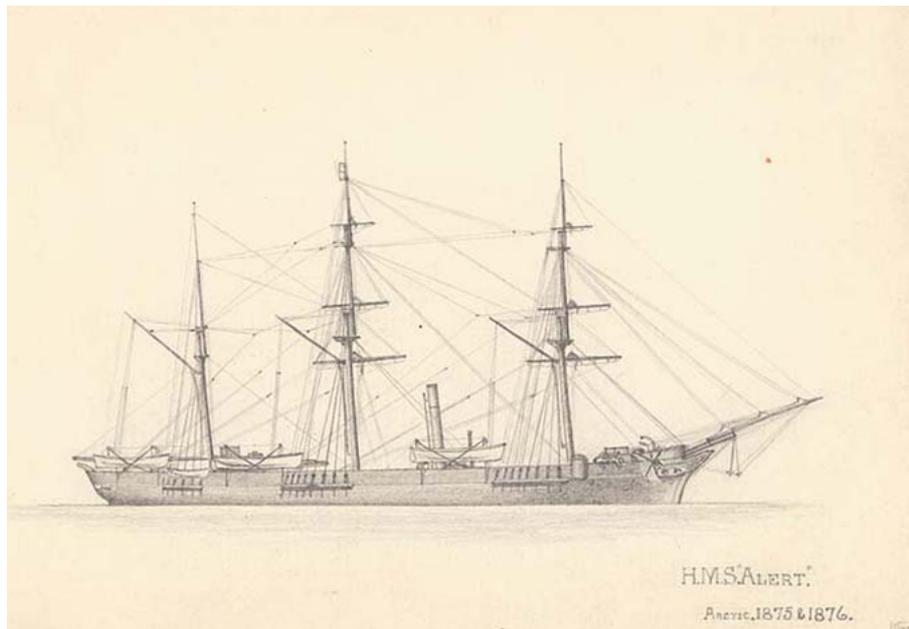


Collecting on a Detour: HMS Alert and Its Singapore Collections

Somewhere deep within the collections of the Natural History Museum in London, there is a collection of several narrow, long glass jars with aged brown labels stuck to them. Carefully handwritten in black ink is the taxonomic information on each specimen and the following text: "Singapore (beach). Collected by Dr. Coppinger, H.M.S. *Alert*."

Built in 1856, HMS *Alert* (1856) was a steam-assisted Royal Navy vessel (technically known as a "screw sloop"), best known for its involvement in Arctic exploration work in 1875 and 1876. But what was this ship doing in Singapore?



Drawing of H.M.S. *Alert* in the Arctic in 1875 and 1876 by Allan C. Green.
Source: State Library Victoria, Australia¹

Prelude

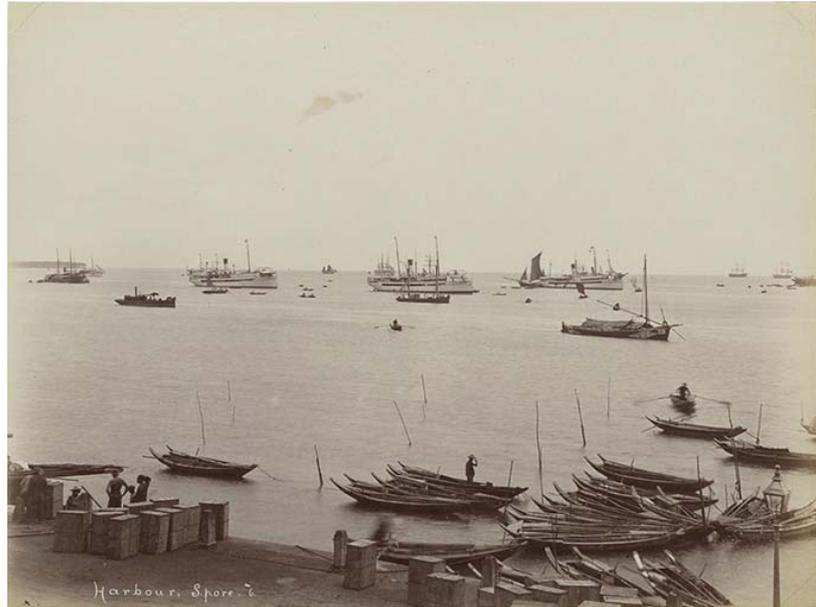
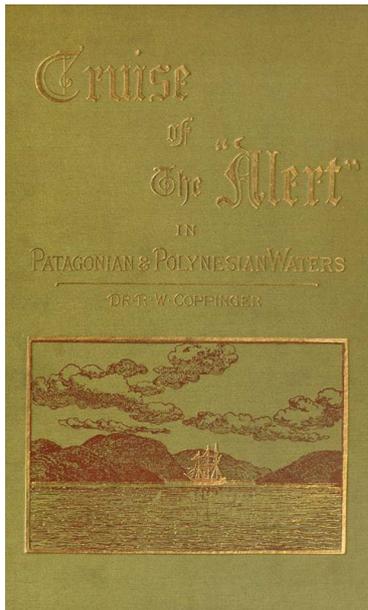
HMS *Alert*'s Cruise in the Indo-Pacific

In 1878, the *Alert* was tasked to conduct a survey in the South Pacific Ocean and portions of Australia's coast. The ship departed from Plymouth on 25 September that same year. After sailing through the Magellan Straits, Tahiti, Fiji, Australia, and past the

¹ <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/207398>

Torres Strait Islands, the *Alert* made its stopover in Singapore between 17 November 1881 and 5 February 1882.

A narrative² of this expedition was published by Richard William Coppinger (1847–1910), who was the ship's surgeon and its on-board naturalist.



(left) The cover of Richard William Coppinger's *Cruise of the 'Alert': Four Years in Patagonian, Polynesian, and Mascarene Waters (1878–82)*. Source: Internet Archive³

(right) Ships and rowboats in the port of Singapore (around 1870–1900), photographed by G. R. Lambert and Company. Source: Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands⁴

A Detour

HMS *Alert* in Singapore

Singapore was not initially part of the *Alert*'s itinerary. The detour to Singapore⁵ was ordered mid-voyage for refitting works to be conducted on the vessel. As Coppinger recounts⁶, the *Alert* was docked at the Tanjong Pagar dockyard for two months while the crew was free to roam around for leisure:

² <https://archive.org/details/cruiseofalertfo00copp/>

³ <https://archive.org/details/cruiseofalertfou00copp/mode/1up>

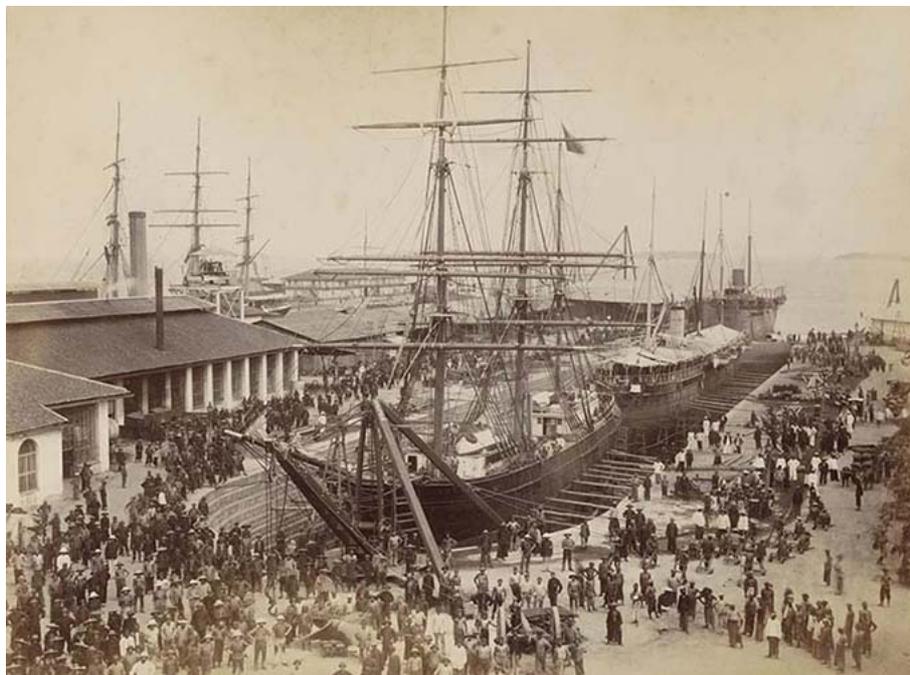
⁴ <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-F-F01197-AE>

⁵ <https://archive.org/details/cruiseofalertfo00copp/page/2/mode/1up>

⁶ <https://archive.org/details/cruiseofalertfo00copp/page/210/mode/1up>

We made a stay of two and a half months at the great commercial city of Singapore, and for the greater part of the time our ship lay at the Tanjong Pagar dockyard, where she underwent a thorough overhaul, while officers and men had abundant opportunities for relaxation and amusements.

Run by the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, the dockyard⁷ first opened in 1864 to provide better facilities for ship repairs. The opening of the Suez Canal five years later brought an increase in shipping traffic through Singapore, which enabled the company to conduct numerous expansions to its wharf facilities in the area. During the *Alert's* time, the port of Tanjong Pagar was probably incredibly bustling.



The drydock of the Tanjong Pagar Dockyard (ca.1890–1905) where HMS *Alert* would likely have undergone refitting in 1881 and 1882, photographed by G. R. Lambert and Company.

Source: Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands⁸

Postcard Picture Perfect

The Traveller's Palm

It is unfortunate that Coppinger only wrote briefly about the *Alert's* time in Singapore, and we are left to wonder how the crew of the *Alert* spent their time here. The only

⁷ <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/2aeba080-ec67-4a62-ba93-407840b26d10>

⁸ <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.266591>

Singapore image that we have from Coppinger's narrative is a woodcut illustration depicting a picturesque road lined with two majestic *Ravenala madagascariensis*, also known as the traveller's palm.

Interestingly, this picture is just one of the many other photographs and drawings of Singapore from the mid-nineteenth century, where the traveller's palm commonly features as a motif on postcards and outdoor portraiture. It has been speculated that the reason⁹ for this is the direct association of the plant's name with travellers – and this name is said to come from how the leaf sheaths collect rainwater at their base, becoming a source of drinking water for parched travellers.

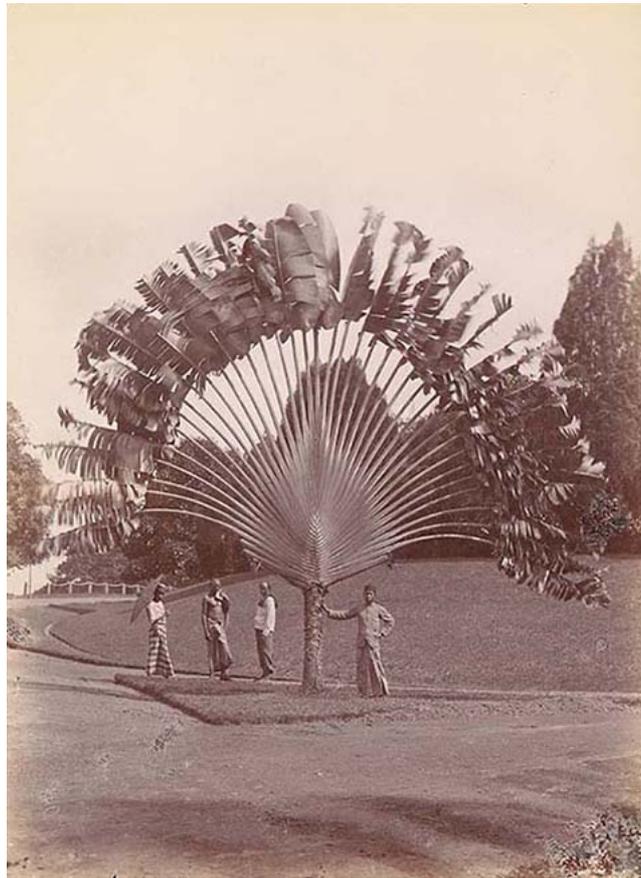


An engraving entitled "Travellers' Trees' in Gardens at Singapore" from Coppinger's *Cruise of the 'Alert'*.

Source: Internet Archive¹⁰

⁹ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/34712302>

¹⁰ <https://archive.org/details/cruiseofalrtfo00copp/page/n258/mode/1up>



Fan Palm, Singapore (1860s–1870s).

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York¹¹

Vacationing and Collecting

Beaches in Singapore

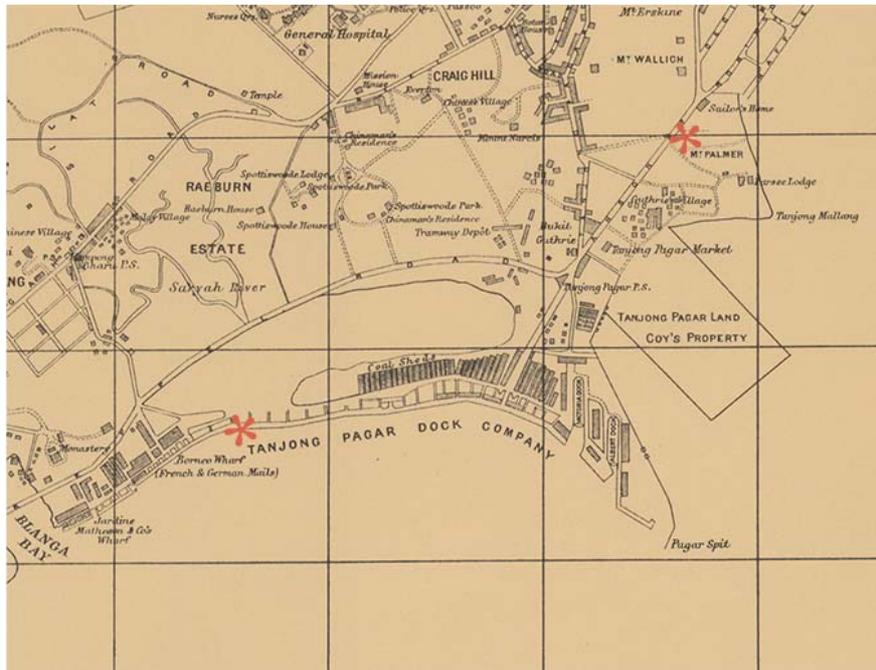
According to the labels of the *Alert*'s Singapore specimens, Coppinger (or other members of the *Alert*'s crew) collected some specimens from the “beach” or possibly beaches. While we cannot be sure of the exact location of this locality (or localities), it is possible to get a sense of the kind of beaches that Coppinger (and others) may have collected at.

Not far from Tanjong Pagar, before reclamation projects began in the Telok Ayer Basin, a coastal stretch existed along the foot of several hills such as Mount Palmer¹², Mount Wallich and Mount Erskine. These hills were eventually levelled to extend the shoreline

¹¹ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/264601>

¹² https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_736_2005-01-24.html

outwards, and by the end of the 1880s some had already disappeared. Mount Palmer, however, remained standing until 1905 – Coppinger and the *Alert's* crew could have visited the beach in front of this hill, both for leisure and for collecting.



A portion of a map of Singapore (from the early twentieth century) showing the Tanjong Pagar Dockyard and Mount Palmer. Source: Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies at Leiden, the Netherlands (KITLV)¹³

¹³ <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:813962>



The beach and bathers at the foot of Mount Palmer (around 1870–1910), photographed by G. R. Lambert and Company. Source: Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands¹⁴

Specimens Collected

Alert Crustaceans at the Natural History Museum, London

The Natural History Museum in London now holds the crustaceans collected during the *Alert*'s visit to Singapore. Amongst the specimens present that were collected on a beach or beaches in Singapore are four species of crabs labelled as: *Dotilla myctiroides*, *Micippa mascarenica*, *Macrophthalmus dilatatus* (since tentatively reidentified as *Macrophthalmus brevis*) and *Matuta planipes*. The fifth specimen, a species of mud shrimp now known as *Upogebia darwinii* does not have the same "beach" locality and is typically known from depths of about 20 to 30 metres.

The last of these, first described as *Gebiopsis darwinii*, is especially significant because it was one of the type specimens of the new name (the exemplar upon which scientific names rest) when it was first described in 1884¹⁵ by Edward John Miers (1851–1930)¹⁶, a curator of the crustacean collection at what is today the Natural History Museum in London.

¹⁴ <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-F-F01104-Z>

¹⁵ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/19102611>

¹⁶ <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/4125698>

We may not be able to know with certainty which beach (or beaches) in Singapore the *Alert* crustaceans were collected from, but these collections give us an idea of the marine biodiversity found in places like the beaches along the Telok Ayer basin – before land reclamation and other developments in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries changed these localities beyond recognition.



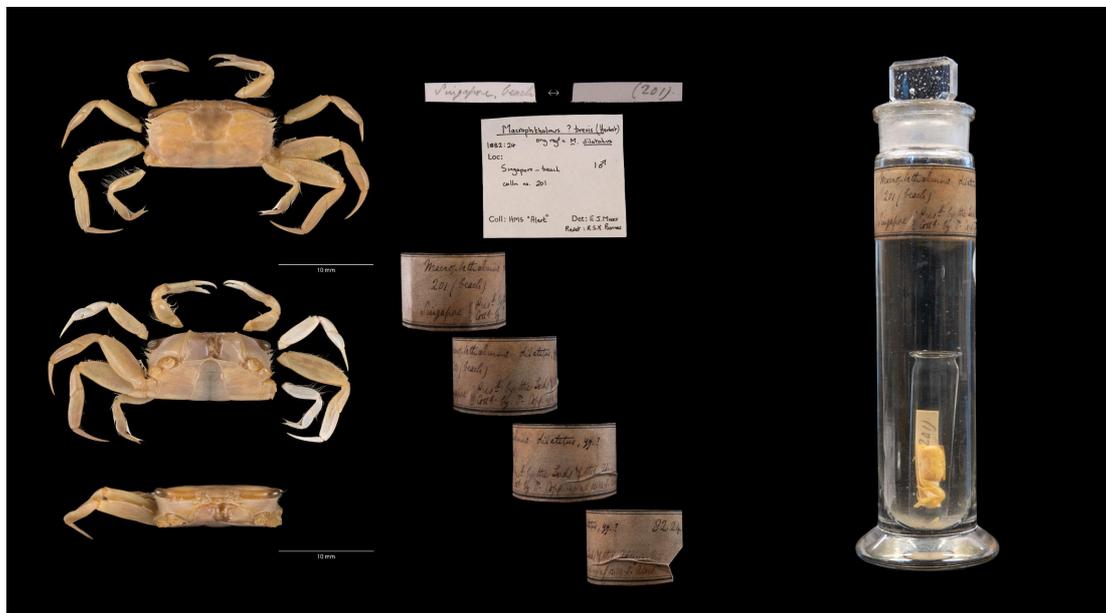
Dotilla myctiroides from Singapore, accession number NHMUK 1882.24.

Source: SIGNIFY Specimen¹⁷

¹⁷ SIGNIFY species page



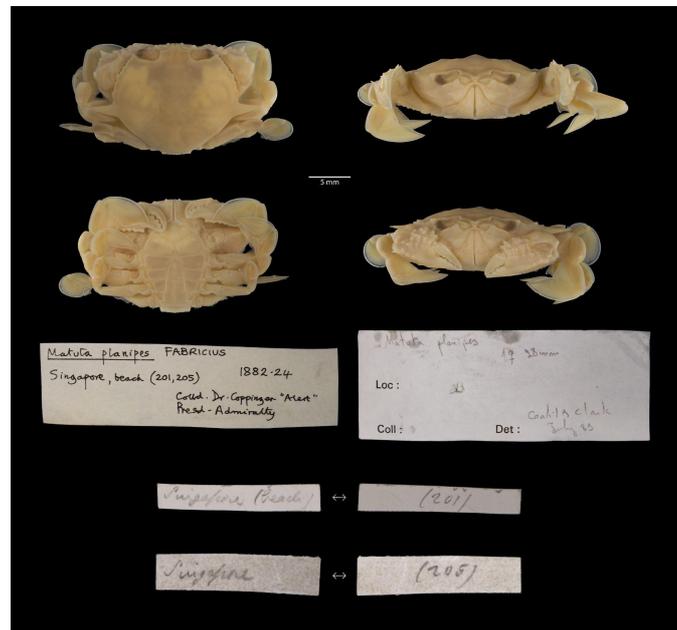
Micippa mascarenica from Singapore, accession number NHMUK 1883.6.
Source: SIGNIFY Specimen¹⁸



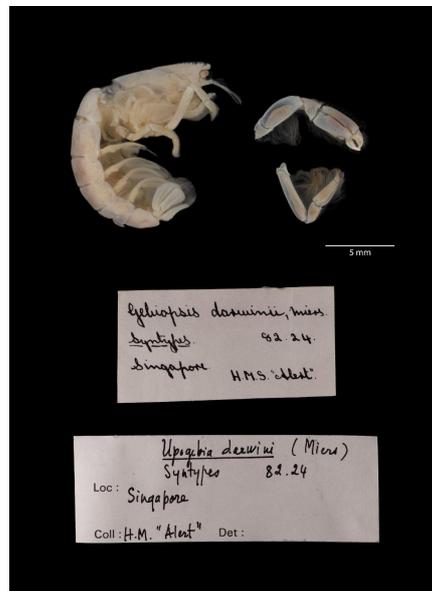
Macrophthalmus dilatatus (reidentified as *Macrophthalmus brevis*) from Singapore, accession number NHMUK 1882.24. Source: SIGNIFY Specimen¹⁹

¹⁸ SIGNIFY species page.

¹⁹ SIGNIFY species page.



Matuta planipes from Singapore, accession number NHMUK 1882.24.
Source: SIGNIFY Specimen²⁰



Upogebia darwinii from Singapore, accession number NHMUK 1882.24
Source: SIGNIFY Specimen²¹

Research and text by Kathy Poh

²⁰ SIGNIFY species page.

²¹ SIGNIFY species page.