

HSBC Archives



The HSBC Lions

Lions have appeared on the English coat-of-arms ever since the arrival of William the Conqueror in 1066, and the Peking Lion holds a great significance in Chinese tradition. It isn't surprising therefore, that two lion sculptures can be found guarding many of the HSBC offices around the world today.



Stephen and Stitt

Stephen and Stitt

HSBC's association with the sculptured lions goes back to 1921 when the Chief Manager, Alexander Stephen, decided a pair of lions symbolising protection and security would look impressive outside the new Shanghai branch which was being built at the time. In a letter to his daughters he wrote:

"I wonder what you thought of Venice and if you noticed the stone lion outside the Arsenal gate. It made a great impression on me ... a sculptor in London is sending two lions of his own design. They look very well and will keep watch in Shanghai for many centuries to come, I hope".

The Shanghai lions were cast in bronze in England from models prepared by Henry Poole, and were shipped out

to China for the opening of the new building in 1923. It was not long before they were nicknamed "Stephen" and "Stitt", after Alexander Stephen and Gordon Stitt.

Stitt had taken over from Stephen in Shanghai in 1921 and would remain in charge there until his retirement in 1926. Stephen is the growling lion, although the chief manager was known as a very kind and even-tempered man!

Hong Kong office

Mr Stephen was not to know that the lions would become such important symbols of growth and prosperity of Hong Kong and HSBC.

The Shanghai lions proved so popular that when a later Chief Manager, Sir Vandeleur Grayburn, commissioned the new Hong Kong headquarters building in the mid-1930s, he decided to mount bronze lions on either side of the grand entrance in Des Vouex Road. The lions were cast in Shanghai, the work taking just over two years, and every stage of it was personally supervised by Mr Wagstaff, who cast the lions in segments, then joined the parts together.

The castings were finished on time, and both lions were in place for the opening of the new headquarters in October 1935. They have guarded the entrance to the bank ever since except for two notable periods of absence.



Stephen guarding the entrance to the Hong Kong office, 1971

Turbulent Times

The first was during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong when the lions were removed and consigned to Japan as scrap metal. The bank was unaware of their whereabouts until they were spotted in a Japanese naval dock by a sharp-eyed American sailor. He had never been to Hong Kong but had noticed the two lions outside the Shanghai office of the bank in a previous posting. He got word to HSBC of the fate of the lions, and the bank set about the task of organising their rescue.

Bringing the lions home to Hong Kong was not an easy task - they were eventually shipped back under an order from General MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the occupying forces in Japan. They were restored to their original position outside the bank in October 1946 with Stephen the roaring lion sitting on the left and Stitt the quiet lion on the right. Both lions had sustained 'injuries' from shrapnel damage, which they still bear today, but their return was greeted with great interest.

The South China Morning Post reported on 18 October that:

"In the dead of last night the two bronze lions ... crept back to their pedestals and this morning looked as comfortable and unconcerned as if they had never moved".

With the return of the lions to the bank, prosperity soon began to return to the city - reinforcing the belief that the lions not only protect HSBC but Hong Kong itself.

The Hong Kong lions were removed again in 1981 and placed in Statue Square for four years while they waited for a new and much larger headquarters to be built. On 1 June 1985, under the watchful eye of a *fung shui* expert, the lions were lifted simultaneously by two cranes to avoid giving one precedence over the other, carried to the new building and lowered into position. A week later the HSBC Chairman held an official ceremony to welcome the lions home.

A Lucky Charm

One of the most endearing features of the HSBC lions is the belief by many that they hold powers of good fortune.

An article from the August 1936 edition of Asia Magazine underlines this point:

"Amongst the Chinese population there is nothing about the Bank's magnificent building ... that excites greater interest than the pair of bronze lions flanking the entrance. The paws of these beasts have been worn smooth in a decade by the stroking of innumerable optimists who credit them with the power to confer wealth".



Customer rubbing paw of the lion for good luck, 1929

Today

When HSBC's new global headquarters were opened in Canary Wharf, London it was imperative that Stephen and Stitt were included in the design. The lions at 8 Canada Square are exact replicas of their brothers in Hong Kong, and have eight lucky coins buried in the base as tradition dictates - the number 8 being symbolic of good fortune in Chinese tradition.

Today the pair's paws can also be rubbed for good luck in HSBC offices around the world; from Chicago and Toronto to Vancouver and Mexico City.



The lions outside HSBC's head office in London, 2005

Contact us:

E-mail: history@hsbc.com

Web: www.hsbc.com/history