

Malaya celebrates King George VI's coronation

By [Alan Teh Leam Seng](#) - September 25, 2022 @ 8:00am



Tunku Abdul Rahman represented Negri Sembilan at the 1937 London coronation celebrations. Two decades later, he became Malaya's first head of state. - Pix courtesy of writer

A visit to a stamp club meeting gives the writer an opportunity to find out how Malaya marked George

Persatuan Stem Pulau Pinang's usual meeting place at the Penang Digital Library is a hive of activity as soon as members arrive in droves.

Following Queen Elizabeth II's death and her son, King Charles III's ascension to the British throne, the Penang Philatelic Society members are exchanging philatelic memorabilia to serve as keepsakes as the second Elizabethan era draws to a close.

STAMP RUSH

Having just celebrated its 40th anniversary, the oldest surviving stamp club in the state draws strength from members who come from all walks of life to support its many undertakings.

As stamps and postal history of various varieties come into view, a prominent collector suddenly brings activity to a standstill by producing a substantial collection related to King George VI.

Highlighting the fact that the monarch was Queen Elizabeth II's father and the last male British ruler whose coronation was celebrated with much pomp and gaiety in Malaya, he draws attention to several items bearing stamps issued to commemorate that momentous event on May 12, 1937.

Proceeding to paint a vivid picture of chaotic situations at post offices throughout Malaya on that historic day, he reveals that collectors and dealers rushed through the doors when they opened at 8am and embarked on a nationwide stamp-sticking marathon.

Although valid for use until the end of December 1937, the newly released stamps, issued in 4 cent, 8 cent and 12 cent denominations, had to be stuck on envelopes on that day of issue for them to receive the special Coronation Day postmark.

Even during those times, philately was big business and the postal administrators welcomed it with open arms. In anticipation of larger than usual demand, they deployed additional clerks to cope with the heightened counter rush before standing back to watch the money pour in.

Similar preparations were in place not long after news of George VI becoming king was announced following his brother, King Edward VIII's abdication on Dec 11, 1936. Under advisement from British prime minister Stanley Baldwin, King Edward gave up the throne to marry Wallis Simpson, who was divorced from her first husband and divorcing her second husband. He could not remain king while married to a woman with two living ex-husbands.



Stunning arches lit up George Town streets at night. - Pix courtesy of writer
MALAYA CELEBRATES

Despite hiccups during preparations, the big day arrived and a celebratory mood enveloped Malaya. In Kuala Lumpur, Coronation Day festivities started with a parade at the padang involving schoolchildren, cadets and boy scouts, with the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force Selangor Battalion band in attendance.

Then, just before the Kuala Lumpur Flying Club planes took to the skies, crowds cheered in delight as the Imperial Airways (later British Overseas Airways Corporation) mail plane *Atlanta*, which was en route to Singapore, suddenly flew down and circled low over the padang before resuming its journey.

This unrehearsed part of the aerial display was followed in quick succession by two Puss Moth and Miles Hawk planes, which dipped low in salute before entertaining all present with a series of thrilling loops, stall turns, spins and slow rolls.

A thanksgiving service at nearby St Mary's Church continued the programme soon after crowds dispersed from the padang at 10am. Well attended by civil service and volunteer force members together with senior government officials, the ceremony saw a record gathering, where part of the congregation had to be accommodated in the porch. The service, held in manner commended by the archbishops of Canterbury and York, ended with the singing of the first and third verses of the national anthem.

Later that afternoon, the radio, a luxury few people could afford at that time, heralded the most vital part of the celebrations by relaying coronation proceedings in London by the British Broadcasting Corporation.



rare Penang train letter cover featuring the King George V and King George VI coronation stamps. - Pix courtesy of writer

Outside, Kuala Lumpur municipal buildings and across Jalan Raja on the padang, Malaysians from all walks of life listened intently to vivid descriptions coming through specially installed loudspeakers. Further away, others eavesdropped outside radio stores as well as private offices and homes that were fortunate enough to have working sets.

LONDON CALLING

For many who were hearing their first long-distance shortwave broadcast, the catchphrase "London calling" was awe inspiring. Many stood while the rest lay on the grass listening as commentators described springtime London's colourful pageantry over the air.

At the same time, many were thrilled at the thought that the fanfare of trumpets were played at that very instant in the faraway capital of the British Empire. Thanks to the new giant Droit- wich transmitters at Worcestershire, it was easy for them to imagine having box seats to the grandest coronation the world had ever seen while basking under the warm tropical Kuala Lumpur sun.

Listeners showed renewed vigour when the radio announced that the sultans of Johor, Terengganu and Pahang, together with the Negri Sembilan Yang di-Pertuan Besar, as guests to the London coronation, had placed wreaths at the Whitehall cenotaph just days earlier as a mark of respect for the gallant dead.

At that moment, many proudly recalled an earlier *Straits Times* (today *New Straits Times*) coronation honours report, where the Johor tunku mahkota (later Sultan Ismail) and the Perak raja muda (later Sultan Abdul Aziz) were awarded

knighthoods. The recognition was additionally meaningful as it marked the first time that heirs to Malayan thrones were knighted.

Richly deserving the honours, the Perak raja muda was widely known as a man of earnest purpose and wide experience while the Johor crown prince was most remembered for serving with great ability during his stints as regent. The colonial government and senior civil service members had every confidence that they would be worthy rulers when the time came.

Obviously, saving the best for last, the notable collector, who by now has captivated the imagination of everyone present, proudly produces a near complete collection of well-taken photographs depicting richly decorated arches in Penang. Erected at key George Town streets, the structures shed light on coronation celebrations outside Kuala Lumpur.

PENANG PARADES

Festivities in Penang got off to an unexpectedly early start when the Indian Recreation Club, one of the oldest of its kind on the island, set the ball rolling by hosting a reception on May 8, 1937. The Elysee Hotel tea party served as a fitting precursor to the coronation of King George VI four days later.

Dawn on Coronation Day broke in George Town with the lighting of firecrackers followed by a well-rehearsed parade at the polo ground a few hours later. That morning also saw thanksgiving services at St George's Anglican Church and food distribution for the poor at designated places throughout town.

The much-awaited Chingay procession commenced after the Penang Club banquet lunch for prominent community leaders. Lasting until evening, the multi-faceted parade drew massive crowds. The large number of out-of-towners gave hoteliers ample reason to cheer. The businesses, even the less fancy establishments, struck while the iron was hot by charging a premium on rates.



NEW STRAITS TIMES

Penang streets were packed with crowds watching the parade to mark the coronation of King George VI in 1937. - Pix courtesy of writer
Apart from marvelling at gaily decorated vehicles and a gilded replica of the State Coach complete with inanimate white horses and postilions, bystanders watched in amazement as agile banner holders performed gravity defying feats with unusually large flags.

As darkness fell, George Town was transformed into a fairyland of streets and buildings studded with colourful lights and bright lanterns. Revellers were treated to fireworks displays at the race course, a sea pageant of illuminated launches, barges and sampans, as well as bonfires on Penang Hill and Mount Erskine.

Malay ronggeng performances, Indian stage shows and Chinese operas were also highlights of the day.

Finally, searchlight displays at the Esplanade brought the historic day to a fitting close. On the way home, many paused to marvel at the commemorative arches featuring varying designs.

Financed by communities that make up George Town's diverse social fabric, they were brilliantly illuminated and decorated with flags, buntings and streamers. Most impressive was the 10m-high structure in Beach Street facing the Queen Victoria Memorial Clock Tower. Lit by hundreds of bulbs, the marble finish turned it into a shining beacon as lights on nearby premises go off for the night.

COMMUNITY CELEBRATIONS

Not to be outdone, other parts of Malaya also organised celebrations. In Johor, celebrations were held a day earlier to enable the people to view the festivities in Singapore on Coronation Day.

Apart from well-attended thanksgiving prayers at mosques and temples, Sikh gurdwaras in Johor Baru were packed to capacity as specially organised religious assemblies recited psalms and verses honouring the new king. The show-stealer was the lavishly decorated Indian Muslim community-funded arch in Jalan Duke.

Ipoh marked Coronation Week with a public holiday in celebration of the Perak sultan's birthday. Programmes included floodlighting of public buildings, aboriginal dances, night flying displays and a coronation ball.

Reports from motorists, however, indicated that decorations in Ipoh were largely outdone by a remarkable number of stunning arches in practically every town and village throughout Perak, with Taiping taking the lead.

Celebrations took on a whole new meaning when Kelantan's Sultan Ismail commemorated King George VI's coronation by allocating a site for an aerodrome in Kota Baru together with sufficient funds for its development and maintenance. The generous gesture was well-received by the colonial government as it enhanced air communication in Malaya.

As celebrations came to a close, the public were taken aback by news reports of mishaps and fatalities that had taken place all over the country. A firework display in Ulu Selangor ended in a horrific manner when a pyrotechnic canister exploded prematurely and its steel casing flew into the air and landed on a spectator, killing him instantly. Seven bystanders were injured by shrapnel and were treated at Klang Hospital.

In Penang, a bus transporting members of the Grand Nooran Opera ran off the road and crashed into a telegraph post while on the way to a performance. Although it resulted in the death of a popular chorus girl, the other passengers escaped unscathed. While mourning the loss of a beloved compatriot, the remaining bangsawan troupe members fulfilled their engagement at Wembley Park that night. The show had to go on.

On a lighter note, Kuala Lumpur Indian merchants had to abandon plans to feature elephants in their coronation procession as the pachyderms from Gerik could not arrive in time. Their conundrum stemmed from fact that it would take more than a month for the lumbering giants, walking a distance of no more than 13km a day, to reach Kuala Lumpur from upper Perak. As Coronation Day drew closer, they settled for horses.

While Malaya also witnessed lavish celebrations during Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953, Merdeka in 1957 broke the colonial grip on Malaya and gave its people the great opportunity to chart their future as citizens of a new and free nation.