

The Sultana of Johore—the Story Behind the Stamp

Susan McEwen looks at the fascinating background to an unusual stamp

In May 1935 the Malay state of Johore issued an attractive violet and slate 8c. stamp, SG 1129, to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Treaty Relations with Great Britain, recess printed in sheets of 50, Watermark Multiple Script CA. Its arrival was heralded in *The Times* in January 1935 with a paragraph from *The Times' Philatelic Correspondent*—happy days when Philately had such coverage, with its own correspondent! The stamp shows the Sultan of Johore, Sultan Sir Ibrahim and his wife the Sultana Helen (Fig 1 shows the proof of the head plate for this issue and Fig 2 shows the stamp with both their signatures on the margin). 8c. was the surface letter rate from Johore to UK and the Empire, but no 8c. definitive had been produced since 1912 so there was a need for this rate. The usage of this stamp was mainly on surface rate letters to the United Kingdom. There was no 8c. rate within Malaya at that time.

This stamp is known imperforate to the right hand margin (Fig 3) and it was reported that only one sheet was released with this variety, so only ten stamps could exist like this. There is also an unconfirmed report that five of them were destroyed in World War II.

This stamp was a first for Johore, their first stamp printed by Waterlow and their first depicting anyone other than the current Sultan. De La Rue had traditionally printed the stamps for the Malay states. The King George V Silver Jubilee stamps for the Empire, also issued in 1935, formed such a large printing contract that the work was divided between De La Rue, Bradbury Wilkinson and Waterlow. This 50th Anniversary stamp being a single stamp for a single state was a much smaller task.

The story behind this stamp includes a romance and a journey from a terrace in smoky Victorian Glasgow to the Palace in tropical Johore.

Humble beginnings

Sultan Ibrahim had married the former Mrs Helen Bartholomew Wilson in London in October 1930. She had been born on 21 December 1889 at 10 Belgrave St, Glasgow. She was the fourth of five children born to John Bartholomew and his wife Catherine. Belgrave Street has been renamed, it is now Beltane Street and much of it has been redeveloped, but Fig 4 shows the remaining part of Beltane Street with its Victorian dwellings. By the 1891 census the Bartholomew family had moved to Partick—which was a separate town then and indeed until 1912, when it became part of Glasgow. They lived in Gardner Street (Fig 5 shows the building) it was newly built then and consisted of eight flats, each of three rooms, with a communal stairwell and washing facilities in the back yard. The census tells us that John Bartholomew was a saw-maker, a skilled craftsman who would have found plenty of work in the fast expanding manufacturing and shipbuilding businesses in the area.

By the 1901 census the Bartholomew family had moved again, this time to Cambslang and upmarket as they had a house with 'seven rooms with windows' as the census form expresses it. The fifth child, also named John, had arrived by then.

Dr William Wilson

In 1912 William Brockie Wilson qualified as a Doctor at Glasgow University. It is a fair assumption that he met Helen Bartholomew whilst at Glasgow. His first registration as a Doctor is at Johore in 1913. His father was also a Doctor in Johore, so William's first appointment was with the family medical practice. Helen joined him and they were married at the Presbyterian Church, Singapore, in March 1914, both were 24 years old. Johore is immediately north of Singapore and although the causeway which now links the two was not built until 1924, it was a short ferry ride across the Straits of Johore. Their daughter was born, in Johore, in November 1915. It is during these years that the Wilsons would have met the Sultan

and his family; they were part of the small European Social scene in Johore Bahru which was then, as now, the main town of Johore State. In 1916 Dr William Wilson is listed as Assistant Principal Medical Officer in Johore. However that is also when he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. Lt William B Wilson was attached to the 1st Battalion, the Devon Regiment which served in France, he was later a Captain and he was awarded the Military Cross in 1918. It was presented to him at Buckingham Palace in December 1918.

Some time between 1922 and early 1925 the Wilson family moved to England from Malaya, Dr William Brockie Wilson was in medical practice in York. In September 1925 Helen filed for divorce, the Decree Nisi was granted in January 1926 and the Final Decree was in August 1926. On the divorce documents Helen Wilson is shown as living in London. Dr Wilson was living in York, where he re-married immediately after the finalisation of the divorce.

Sultan Ibrahim

Sultan Ibrahim had been born in September 1873, he became Sultan in 1895 on the death of his father Sultan Abou Baker. Johore was developing quickly in Ibrahim's early years as Sultan, the railway and new roads were built. The Sultan successfully resisted attempts to incorporate Johore into the new Federated Malay States and his relationship with Sir Frank Swettenham of FMS fame was somewhat strained by that resistance. Rubber planting expanded, the Sultan was recognised as a good administrator and was the Honorary President of the Johore Planters' Association. Johore thrived and the Sultan was a very wealthy man.



Fig 2 The issued stamp signed in the margin by the Sultan and Sultana



Fig 3 Imperf in right-hand margin

Fig 1 Head plate proof



By the late 1920s he was taking long trips to Europe for his health, leaving his first son Ismail (born in 1894 and later Sultan Sir Ismail) in charge. The Sultan spent most of 1929 and 1930 out of Johore. The reports are not specific about where and when Sultan Ibrahim re-met the divorced Mrs Wilson, but they married in London on 15 October 1930 at a Register Office at Prince's Row. It was a remarkably low-key wedding, the witnesses were; Mrs Gawler, Mr Harry Lumsden (a partner in a Glasgow Law firm and Helen's brother in law, husband of her sister Agnes), Mr Mardy Jones, MP for Pontypridd, and Captain B Y S Abdullah the Sultan's secretary. Colonel Kent—a 'Tiger hunting pal' was also present. It was followed by a private reception with half a dozen guests at Grosvenor House. The Bride wore a dark red costume with fur collar (Fig 6 shows Grosvenor House as it was in the 1930s) In the afternoon the bride and groom went to Woking for a religious ceremony at the Mosque. He was 57, she was 40, it was her second wedding and his fifth.

Coronation

After an extended honeymoon tour of Europe they returned to Johore over a year later, arriving on 17 November 1931. Johore Bahru had been decorated with ornamental arches and flags, large crowds turned out to greet them. Helen's Coronation as Sultana at the Istana Besar (Palace), Johore Bahru, was the very next day and thereafter she was styled Her Highness Sultana Helen Ibrahim. It was by all accounts a very grand and lengthy event.

The *Straits Times* of Singapore reported the Coronation at length, saying the Sultana looked radiant and the Sultan looked better than he had done in years having lost a considerable amount of weight. The ceremony was described as long and exhausting and the report mentioned that the Sultan gave a very long speech in Malay. The *Straits Times* was always respectful to all the Malay Rulers, for them to describe the speech as 'very long' implies to me that it was excessively long! Fig 7 shows a scene at the Coronation with Sultana Helen look-

Fig 4 (below) Beltane (formerly

Belgrave) Street, Glasgow

Fig 5 (right) The Gardner Street home of the Bartholomew family



Fig 6 Grosvenor House in the 1930s

ing, frankly, bored, as do several others in the background. Sultan Ibrahim appears to be making a debating point, so this may have been the long speech. The ceremony ended with the Johore Military Forces playing the Johore National Anthem, followed by a 17-gun salute. Fig 8 shows the part of the Palace at Johore as it was in the 1930s. The steps lead to the magnificent Throne Room where the Coronation was held.

For the next few years the Sultan and Sultana divided their time between Johore and Europe. In 1934 they travelled around the world, visiting Japan, China, the USA and Europe.

Sultan Ibrahim was very wealthy and in May 1935 he made a gift of £500,000 to the Imperial Government for defence to commemorate King George V's Silver Jubilee. Also in 1935 Sultana Helen visited London and attended social functions, including a Royal Ball given by HM The King and Queen Mary. Helen's daughter by Dr Wilson, now aged 19½ years, attended that with her and it could be taken as the daughter's debut to London Society. Sultan Ibrahim had remained in Johore, although he did meet his Sultana

in June at Ceylon on her return journey. In the 1935 Birthday Honours list he was given an Honorary GBE making him Sultan Sir Ibrahim from here on, and in September there were great celebrations in Johore for Ibrahim's 40-year reign. 1937 was a busy social year in London, the Court Circular lists Receptions, Dinners, Lunches and Royal garden parties attended by the Sultan and Sultana. At the Coronation of King George VI in May 1937, the Sultana was resplendent with diamonds and sapphires from the Johore State jewels, a gown of gold *cloque lamé* and a train of gold *lamé* and gold velvet. An oil painting of Sultana Helen in these robes still hangs in the Banqueting hall at the Johore Istana—which is now the Museum. The Sultan's picture is to the left and the Sultana's is to the right of the central dias.

Divorce

Sultan Sir Ibrahim and the Sultana returned to Johore in November 1937. Helen's 48th Birthday was on 21 December 1937. On 31 December the Sultan divorced Sultana Helen. It was a Johore Muslim divorce, the husband says 'I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee' in front of witnesses. No reason need be stated, the wife can not contest it and does not even have to be present. Helen returned to England on board the P & O SS *Ranpura* with her niece, the daughter of her eldest sister. A formal announcement was made at the end of

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Fig 7 A scene from the Coronation of Sultana Helen

Fig 8 A 1930s view of part of the Palace at Johore; the steps lead to the Throne Room



March 1938, confirming the divorce, no reason was given. The Sultan's 'Marriage Divorce Enactment' to complete the formalities was presented to the Johore State Council in the first week of April 1938.

Afterwards

Helen, now styled the Lady Helen Ibrahim, lived in London till the late 1960s, then in Southern England with her daughter and family. She lived quietly and comfortably, did not write her autobiography, did not feature in the newspapers, and did not remarry. Described as 'a keen golfer and a demon bridge player', she travelled socially and often wintered in warmer climates, she died in 1977 in her 88th year.

Her daughter married an Army Officer in 1940 and had three children.

Dr William Brockie Wilson, remarried in 1926 and died at York in 1932, aged 42.

Sultan Ibrahim remarried at Caxton Hall, London, in 1940, aged 67, his new Sultana was Miss Marcella Mendl a Romanian who was 25. Miss Mendl had been staying with her Mother at Grosvenor House, the Sultan's usual residence when in London. The *Evening Standard* reported that they had met only eight days before the wedding, when he bought a Red Cross flag from her in the street. If this report is true, and the other papers did not mention the eight days comment, then even by War-time standards that was a whirlwind romance.

Sultan Sir Ibrahim and Sultana Marcella returned to Johore at the end of 1941, just before the Japanese Occupation. The Sultan's rhetorical questions 'are my people in danger? and shall I leave them in the lurch?' being his explanation for his return. They remained in Johore through the 3½ years of the Occupation. Throughout his life the Sultan resisted all efforts to incorporate Johore into any form of Federation. Eventually he acceded to the Malayan Federation, in 1948, but declined to travel to Kuala Lumpur for the signing, complaining of gout. After that he returned to his habit of spending much

time in Europe. His 60th anniversary as Sultan was celebrated in September 1955, he died in London in May 1959, Sultana Marcella at his bed-side. Sultan Sir Ibrahim was aged 85 and was buried in Johore with the full ceremony that befitted a Sultan.

From *The Times Book of Obituaries*: 'It was clear that towards the end of his life he preferred the past when Johore was an Un-federated State and relied on the British Advisor as political advisor, rather than the approaching independence. This and his health meant he did not offer himself for candidate for Head of State in Malaya in 1957—though as most senior ruler he would have been the first to be considered.'

Sultan Sir Ibrahim's eldest son Ismail, who had been Regent so often during Sultan Sir Ibrahim's travels became the new Sultan.

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The Malaya Study Group was formed in 1959 for the mutual benefit of all members sharing a common interest in Malayan Stamps, Philately and Postal History. Meetings are held in London, Glasgow, Worthing and Leicester. The Journal *The Malayan Philatelist* is published four times per year. For more information contact the Membership Secretary: Mr David Tett, PO Box 34, Wheathampstead, Herts AL4 8JY.