From the end of World War II the area now known as Malaysia underwent an almost 20-year period of dramatic change. Susan McEwen uses the post-war stamps to illustrate the history of the region from the end of the Japanese occupation to the formation of Malaysia 50 years ago.

Malaysia was formed on 16 September 1963, but of course it didn’t spring from nothing—there were fore-runner States and stamp issuing authorities. This article looks at the run up to the formation of Malaysia, but how far back should we look? It could be argued that we should go back to the first stamps issued in the Malay Peninsula in 1867, but to keep to manageable proportions, I’ll only look back to 1945, and it is only a brief introduction to set the scene and to point the reader to other sources.

When the Japanese occupation ended in September 1945 the British Military Administration started. This was only ever intended to be a short term transitional arrangement. Stamps were issued from October 1945 with the pre-war Straits Settlements design overprinted ‘BMA MALAYA’ (Fig 1). The proposed post-war organisation for Malaya and Singapore was the Malayan Union consisting of all the States. Singapore was to be a Crown Colony as the Straits Settlements had been, but Malacca and Penang, which had been part of the Straits Settlements, would join the Malayan Union.

This simple, logical structure may have seemed a good idea to the planners in London during the war, replacing the complex pre-war organisation where the area known as Malaya was under six different administrations: 1. Straits Settlements—a British Colony consisting of Singapore, Malacca and Penang. 2. The Federated Malay States, a federation of four states (Pahang, Perak, Negri Sembilan and Selangor) run by a British Resident-General in the British sphere of influence and protected as such. 3-6. The individual States of Johore, Kedah, Kelantan and Trengganu. These were self-governing states but each had a British Advisor, and were classified as protected. Although we tend to group these together as the Unfederated States they were independent of each other.

The Japanese had enforced a degree of integration into a single administration never previously seen in Malaya, but they had done it by military force. The British proposed a similar level of integration, by non-military means, but without understanding Malaya.

There were strong objections from the Malay Sultans to the Malayan Union, their powers would be severely reduced and citizenship qualifications would be simplified in a manner felt to favour non-Malays. The Sultans procrastinated, objected and lobbied effectively.

The Malayan Union existed administratively from 1 April 1946 to 31 January 1948, but no stamps were issued in its name and the British Military Administration stamps remained in use. The 1946 Peace and Victory stamps were printed for the Malayan Union and for Singapore but were never issued (Fig 2).

The Malayan Federation

The Malayan Federation was formed on 1 February 1948 as a British Protectorate—a Federation being a very different political entity from a Union. The constitution enabled the Sultans to retain their powers, especially over matters of religion and Malay customs, and was more acceptable to Malay nationalists. Singapore remained a Crown Colony outside the Federation. The Malayan Federation became an independent member of the British Commonwealth on 31 August 1957 (Fig 3).

Starting in 1949, each State issued a set of stamps with values from 1c. to $5. They had a unified design, the frame and palm trees being the same as the pre-war Straits stamps, the word ‘MALAYA’ at the top confirming that although the issues were for each State they were valid across Malaya. The colours were unified too, all the 1c. were black, all the 2c. orange and so on. Each Sultan featured on his own stamps. Penang and Malacca featured King George VI, and later Queen Elizabeth II. Negri Sembilan, being a federation of small states in its own right, had the State Coat of Arms (Fig 4).
Pictorial definitives
In 1957–60 a pictorial definitive set was issued for each state, again a unified design and colours. The pictures show aspects of different States too, making this a most attractive issue. Johore joined this issue belatedly. Sultan Sir Ibrahim of Johore had been a prime mover in the objections to the Malayan Union, he wasn’t totally happy about the Malayan Federation—he had protected Johore’s independence reluctantly since becoming Sultan in 1895, and drew the line at the proposed stamps. Sultan Sir Ismail acceded in late 1959, on the death of his father, and Johore’s new definitive stamps issued in 1960 depict him (Fig 5).

The formation of Malaysia
The objective of an Independent Malaya, including Singapore, remained—the Malayan Federation was seen by some as a step towards that destiny. Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore, and Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister of the Malayan Federation, worked for the creation of the new Country of Malaysia comprising the States of the Malayan Federation plus Singapore and Sarawak and Sabah—formerly North Borneo. Brunei was approached but chose not to join, their oil-money funded their solo state. The first stamps issued by Malaysia show a map of the new country (Fig 6).

Singapore left Malaysia on 9 August 1965, to become an Independent Republic and will celebrate 50 years in 2015—but that, as they say, is another story.