

With a little help from the British



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MERDEKA marked the end of British rule in Malaya, which dated from 1786 when the British East India Company's Captain Francis Light occupied the island of Penang.

Merdeka also brought to a close 171 years of British rule, interrupted only by the three-and-a-half years of Japanese occupation.

Malaya's independence from the British empire was negotiated amicably between the British government and Malaya's nationalist leaders, and the transition of power occurred smoothly. Both sides realised that the new nation needed a little help especially in defence and economic aid to stand on its own, and Britain had a responsibility to provide that support.

For Britain, the celebration of Malaysia's 50th Merdeka anniversary is more than a nostalgic commemoration of a historic event in bilateral relations. It is also an opportunity to shape how the relationship will develop over the next 50 years.

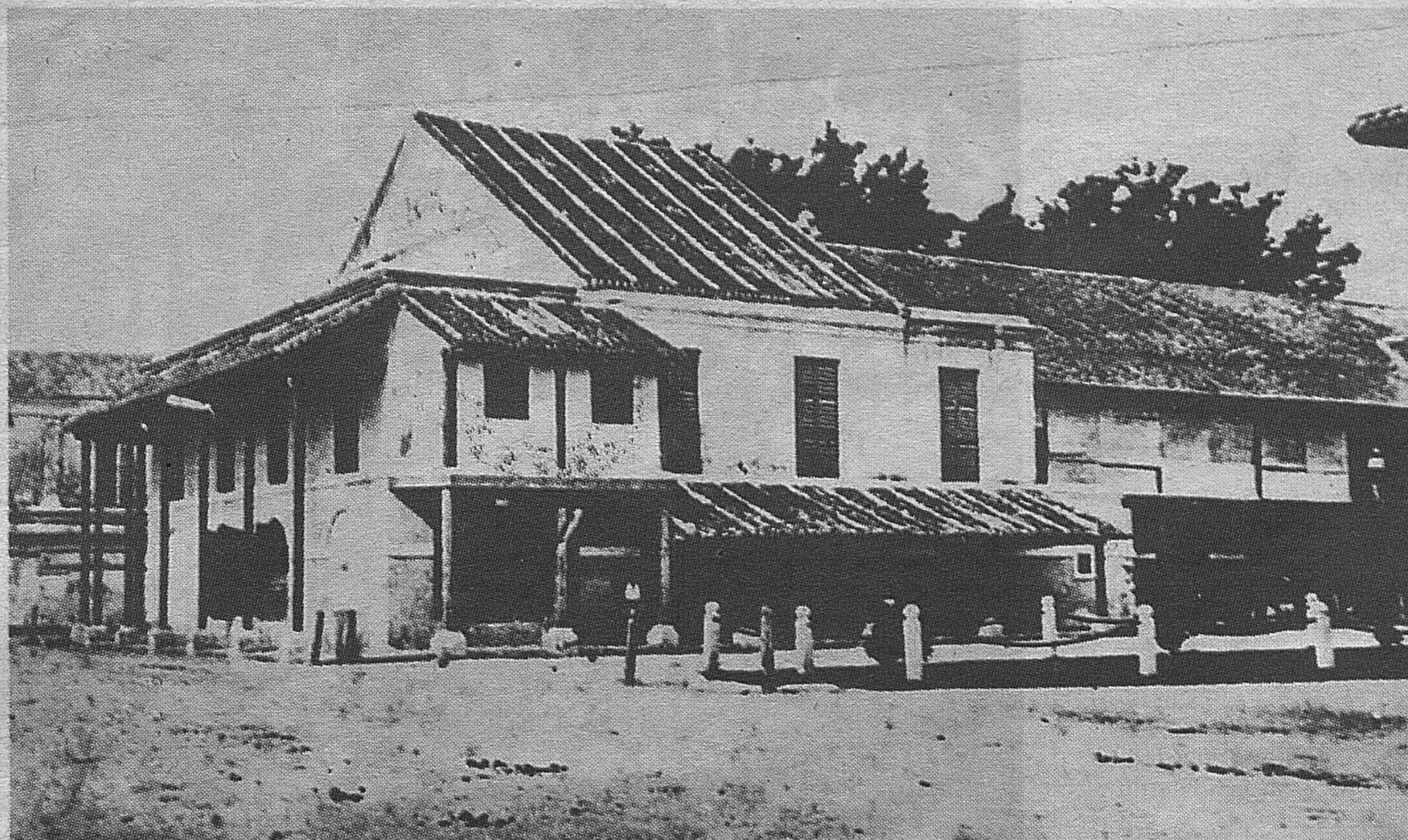
Looking back

“Malaya was not the first former colony to become independent. The first colonies were India and Pakistan in the late 1940s. So by 1957, we had a certain amount of experience in handing over responsibility to new nations which were formerly members of the British empire,” said British High Commissioner to Malaysia Boyd McCleary (*pix below*).

In an interview at his office, McCleary noted that even though Malaya gained independence only in 1957, the recognition of the need to transfer power started before that.

“The empire was coming to an end and we were trying to effectively transfer responsibility to those that were becoming independent. The British administration throughout the empire started preparing the people of those countries for independence.”

During the colonial administration, the British practised a divide-and-rule policy, which left a deep-rooted effect in Malaya's plural society. However, as they prepared to transfer power to a local government, there were efforts taken to ensure the different communities could live and work together as a self-governing nation, and to include provi-



East India Company (EIC) headquarters in Penang, circa 1900. To set up its trading post on Penang, the EIC leased Penang and later Butterworth from the Sultan of Kedah in 1971 for \$10,000.

sions in the constitution to safeguard the interests of all communities.

Tunku Abdul Rahman acknowledged that the British left behind a strong administrative system. He said in his speech on Aug 31, 1957: “This is the greatest moment in the life of the Malayan people. A new star has risen in the eastern sky – a star of freedom.” He went on to say, “With freedom there is much for all to do, and the legacy of a good administration forged and tempered to perfection by British administrators must not be allowed to suffer in efficiency and integrity.”

McCleary said Tunku's comment was a clear recognition of Britain's strong legacy. “If you look at the way the Malaysians were prepared for the administrative role they were going to have to play, through institutions like the Malay College [in Kuala Kangsar], I think it's clear that we were very conscious of the need to hand something over which was working, to people who were in a position to take on that role, and needed therefore preparation, support, training, advice, assistance, and all those things we were prepared to give.”

All that was happening during the period when



Sept 5, 1957: It was a royal send-off for the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester and their son, Prince William. At the Kuala Lumpur Airport to see the royal entourage off were the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and his Consort; the Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and his wife and, the British High Commissioner to Malaya, Sir Donald MacGillivray. The Duke represented the Queen at the Proclamation of Independence ceremony on Aug 31, 1957.

Malayan, British and other Commonwealth soldiers were battling the Communist insurgency. “I think it's good to recall that British and other Commonwealth soldiers were fighting shoulder to shoulder with Malayan soldiers at that time against the insurgency. That's an important part of the memory of Merdeka,” he said.

Since independence, Malaya has been part of the Commonwealth and later entered into the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement with the UK. Under this pact, Britain guaranteed the defence of Malaya, later Malaysia. British and other Commonwealth soldiers played an important role in the nation's security during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) and the Indonesian Confrontation (1962-66).

After the British defence pact ended, it was replaced with the Five-Power Defence Arrangement in 1971, whereby Malaysia, Singapore, Britain, Australia and New Zealand agreed to work together in defence, and to consult in the event of an attack on Malaysia or Singapore. The

collaboration still exists, and the five powers hold annual naval and air exercises.

Building blocks

“We are clearly seen as having left behind a legacy that is positive. We did put real effort and commitment into training the legacy administrators,” McCleary said, referring to those who were identified and handpicked to take over the country's administration.

“Our institutions are still respected,” he added, citing several institutions in Malaysia such as the legal and judicial system, and the police and armed forces which have maintained the structure the British left behind.

“That, I think, is a reflection of the respect and high regard in which the British traditions were held by Malaya and Malaysia,” he said.

“Of course the Malayan/Malaysian administration didn't just take what we left behind and left it exactly the same. There has been development to take into account the special

circumstances here, and that's absolutely right.

“We wouldn't expect to leave something that was to be left untouched. I think the way in which the Malaysian government has developed those institutions which we left behind is something of which it can be rightly very proud.”

Other than appointing the Reid Commission to frame the Malayan Independence Constitution, the British played a vital role in providing training for some of the core skills the new nation needed.

“About 70% to 80% of the barristers currently practising in Malaysia were trained in the UK. Eight out of the nine Lord Presidents/Chief Justices in the country since independence were barristers from England,” McCleary noted.

“A third of the cabinet ministers – including the first three prime ministers – were English-trained barristers.”

Other than lawyers, a large number of Malaysians, and later Malaysians, were trained in the UK in medicine, engineering and education. “There's a whole generation of teachers here who were trained in teachers' training colleges in the UK. These colleges were developed specifically for Malaya, like Brinsford Lodge and Kirby,” he said.

“Malaya didn't really have strong tertiary institutions then. It had Universiti Malaya, which was part of the university in Singapore. It was not sufficient to train the engineers and doctors that Malaya needed. So there was no option but to go overseas to train in the core skills, and the natural choice then was Britain because that was seen as the ‘mother’ country.”

Today, 50 years later, Malaysians are still heading to Britain for education, in new areas or post-graduate studies in information technology, gaming technology, animation, biotechnology and oil and gas. McCleary said the partnerships between British and Malaysian institutions today demonstrate a “continuing relationship” between the two countries.

“It's a much more balanced relationship than 50 years ago because you have developed into a more mature economy and democracy, and our institutions can now talk about building links that are of mutual benefit; it's no longer a one-way traffic but it's a two-way street between Britain and Malaysia.”

To celebrate the 50th Merdeka anniversary, the High Commission in Malaysia has organised a year-long “Malaysia & UK: Forward Together” campaign, which kicked off in January. Packed with events throughout the year, the campaign aims to build on mutual interests in areas such as education, science, innovation, arts and culture. “To reflect on the past but also look to the future and find ways to build new partnerships and relationships with young Malaysians, which reflect their needs, wishes, and offer a more equal partnership,” McCleary said.

“It would be a big mistake to just assume that things continue the way they were in the past. The areas of focus and issues that the campaign has lined up are designed to help pave the way for the relationship to develop over the next 50 years, to provide a platform for future collaboration and focus on areas that are important to Malaysia.”