

The Japanese Railway Society

Richard Tremaine

My many professional visits to Japan between 1977 and 1989 were due to my employment in the opto-electronics industry. I have since maintained my Japanese interests through the Japanese Railway Society (JRS) and by railway inspired tourist visits, meeting up with many old and new friends.

On my first visit to Japan, I arrived at Tokyo International Airport (Haneda) on 3 May 1977, during Japan's 'Golden Week' holidays. I was met by my new Japanese colleagues with whom I had been working in Cambridge for several weeks prior to my journey to Japan. We travelled by taxi to the impressive New Otani Hotel in central Tokyo. I was keen to do some sightseeing before my first official meeting the following morning. However, it appeared that rain-all-day national holidays were a part of Japanese life much to like in the UK. Little sightseeing was possible, apart from the journey to the hotel. Having been a rail enthusiast all my life, the first glimpse of the Tokyo Monorail near Haneda immediately grabbed my interest but it was another 10 days before I made any physical contact with Japanese railways. Next day, I took a taxi to our customer near Fussa City, where I stayed for some 5 weeks. The nearby Yokota USAF base was a somewhat less Japanese environment than I had expected, but I discovered that the exciting night-life was fairly typical of everywhere in Japan!

By my second weekend, my Japanese colleagues had got to know me quite well and decided that since I was interested in steam railways, my first railway experience should be to the nearby Ome Railway Park. The Park had (and still has) a good collection of early, mainly steam, British and more recent Japanese locos, displayed on an open hilltop but the location causes many visitors to ask, Why here? Sited 1 km from Ome Station on the Ome branch line of the Chuo Line on top of a steep hill, the answer is lost in the fog of local

politics—another parallel with the UK! Over the following weeks the myriad of railway lines around Tokyo, with their contrasting route colour schemes slowly turned from total confusion into some basic understanding. It occurred to me that the colour-coded London Underground route map may have been the origin of Tokyo's colour-coded mapping system. Unfortunately, unlike Japan, our Underground stock has never been painted according to its route colour, so it is still confusing London's international visitors and natives too. Thankfully, I also found most station names to be displayed in both Japanese and English.

Subsequent second and third working visits to Japan took me to Osaka and Takasaki, where I was to observe the construction of the Joetsu Shinkansen through the city centre. Further visits gave me the opportunity to see more steam operations at the impressive Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum near Kyoto and the excellent rural electric Oigawa Railway, with its almost daily steam-hauled tourist trains. More recent visits have taken me past the line's steam terminus at Senzu to the standard gauge (3'6") upper sections, which seem like narrow gauge due to the reduced clearance gauge. A 1990s diversion caused by submersion of part of the route as a result of a new dam, offers a very dramatic 2-km deviation on a modern overhead electric Abt rack-and-pinion section before returning to the 'narrow-gauge image' at the Oigawa end of the line. Like most of rural Japan, the mountainous landscape presents both beautiful scenery and major engineering challenges.

In 1982–83, I finally had the opportunity to live with my family in the Shibuya district of Tokyo and I got to know many of Tokyo's railway routes better than in my London hometown. I discovered Tokyo's sole surviving Arakawa Tramway (known locally as a *chinchin densha* due to the bell's 'ching ching'). I can just remember London's last trams in the early 1950s. Trams have a

special fascination and a wonderful 'green' value today so it seems strange that Japan continues to cut back on its 22 remaining systems while Britain is spending many millions of pounds sterling building new tramways as a solution to the traffic jams caused by too many cars and trucks. While living in Japan, I also found an opportunity to develop my sons' model railway interests over the Christmas period—Japanese N-gauge models were excellent quality and competitively priced (due to a strong sterling at that time).

The Japan '91 Festival held throughout the UK in 1991 saw the founding of the JRS. Knowing that a friend and member of the festival's organizing committee had common enthusiasm for Japanese railway modelling, we exhibited a large Japanese model railway for 10 days at the London Transport Museum sponsored by the Keio Electric Railway (which had recently established a London office). Leaflets proposing the formation of an enthusiast society were given to visitors and the response was sufficient to start a small group that has since grown to over 200 international members. We produce *Bullet-In*, a quarterly magazine with articles about all railways in Japan, including trams, narrow gauge, steam, diesel and electric, monorail, shinkansen, maglev, railway modelling and railway tourism. We have also taken 250 railway enthusiasts on trips to the many fascinating railway sites in Japan. Our Japanese members maintain a website at www.japaneserailwaysociety.org.

A celebration of the 125 years since the British involvement in the financing, design, construction and inauguration of the first railway in Japan was arranged for October 1997. A group of 21 British enthusiasts was entertained at the Transportation Museum in Tokyo by some 50 staff and other railway historians and professionals. A large number of British railway engineers were employed in building the early Japanese railway

system; Edmond Morel (1841–71), engineer-in-chief for the first Shimbashi–Sakuragicho (Yokohama) line died just before its opening in 1872 and is buried in Yokohama Foreigners’ Cemetery along with his Japanese wife of only a few months. In planning our 1997 celebrations, we discovered that Richard Francis (1845–1913) and Francis Henry Trevithick (1850–1931)—grandsons of Richard Trevithick (1771–1833) who built the world’s first steam engine running on iron rails—had played major roles in Japanese railways during the first 20 years. Both men had married Japanese women and the family line was reported to have survived, under a Japanese surname. Enquiries soon lead to a meeting with the family’s senior member, Frank Trevithick Okuno who is now a friend and patron of our society. Further sites visited by tour groups include the Hakone Tozan tour on the *Romance Car* of the Odakyu Electric Railway to Odawara, then on to Hakone and the base of Mt. Fuji via switchback railway, cable car (over smoking sulphur springs) and cruise boat on Ashinoko to return to Tokyo by bus to Odawara and optional shinkansen. There is also the delightful day trip from Tokyo on the Tokaido main line to Ofuna and then by the suspended Shonan Monorail to Enoshima connecting with the Enoden Railway’s tramway running along the shore of Sagami Bay to Kamakura (a beautiful ancient capital of temples and shrines that looks its best at cherry-blossom time), with the return to Tokyo on the Yokosuka Line.

For steam enthusiasts there is also a two-stop trip on the Joetsu Shinkansen to Kumagaya from where the delightful *Paleo Express* steam train runs on the Chichibu Line on most weekends from spring to autumn. For many enthusiasts it has the additional attraction of much local freight activity relating to production of Chichibu cement. Other



Locomotives at a depot near Shizuoka with Mt Fuji for a background (2002)

(H. Naito)

Tokyo day trips include regular steam operations on the third-sector Mooka Line, and the occasional Takasaki–Minakami steam express with the Tokyo (Ueno) main line heritage electric loco connection. Lastly, the Poppo Town Museum at Yokogawa on the truncated Shin’etsu main line has a collection of mainly electric heritage locomotives, some of which can be booked for driving experience. Interestingly, there is also a 1990s British steam operation on 2’ gauge. Going south to Hiroshima visitors can ride the extensive Hiroshima Tramway stretching over 19 km, which extends out to Miyajima a further 16 km. Visit the moving Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park at ‘ground zero’ of the Hiroshima atomic bombing and the Miyajima torii. Further West but still on Honshu main island, one can step directly off the San’yo Shinkansen at Ogori onto the steam operation running from the earlier station underneath the shinkansen tracks. Further South, after travelling via San’yo Shinkansen through the Kammon

undersea tunnel and on to Kumamoto (not yet connected to the shinkansen) the *Aso Boy* steam operation takes travellers to Mt. Aso, one of the world’s largest caldera volcanic craters (80-km circumference)

Much further north, on Hokkaido island, the beauty of the winter Sapporo *Yuki Matsuri* (snow festival) is enhanced by the huge Otaru Transportation Museum with some 50 locomotives and other rolling stock.

Wherever the foreign railway enthusiast visits in Japan, they can be sure of a hospitable welcome by the many Japanese fans of railways. A good demonstration of the friendly railway relations between Britain and Japan was recently demonstrated by JR West’s donation of a fully-restored 1964 design, 1972 built Series-0 shinkansen driving car to the National Railway Museum at York. This kind gesture has generated a great number of new visitors to the museum who can now share some of our experiences of Japanese railways. ■



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