

Thomas Cook Timetables— Covering the World

Brendan Fox

Most people in the railway industry would consider the production of a public timetable to be a necessary drain on the marketing budget in order to promote an operator's services, with such books often being sold below cost price. While it is not unheard of for a publisher to run a timetable business for profit, Thomas Cook's unique position is that it has been doing so since 1873, and with a product that covers not just one country, but the whole of Europe. Indeed, since the advent of a second volume in 1981, it covers the whole world.

In the early days of the railways it was left to private enterprise to meet the need for timetables. The famous *Bradshaw's Guide* was first produced in 1839, covering railway services in the UK, and 8 years later the same publisher introduced *Bradshaw's Continental Railway Guide*. Other well-known publishers included Librairie Chaix, who produced the official timetables for France. Meanwhile Thomas Cook, a cabinet maker and former Baptist preacher, had realized the potential of the railways for specially chartered excursions, and his July 1841 trip conveying temperance supporters from Leicester to a meeting in Loughborough has gone down in the annals of history.

Other trips followed, and in 1845 Thomas Cook organized his first commercial venture with a trip from Leicester to Liverpool, followed in 1851 by a series of excursions to the Great Exhibition in London. In 1855, he escorted his first tourists to the Continent, and was soon running regular trips to Paris, the Alps, Egypt and North America. In 1872, he embarked on a tour of the world, and a conducted world tour soon became a regular part of the programme, with many tickets also being sold to independent travellers.

Birth of Timetable

By this time, the *Continental Bradshaw*, which attempted to show every railway line, had become rather unwieldy with over 1000 pages, plus a 400-page hotel directory. A young Thomas Cook employee named John Bredall suggested that the company produce a condensed continental timetable that travellers could carry with them. John Mason Cook, son of the founder, liked the idea and the first issue of *Cook's Continental Time Tables* appeared in March 1873, with John Bredall as part-time Editor (he later also became Company

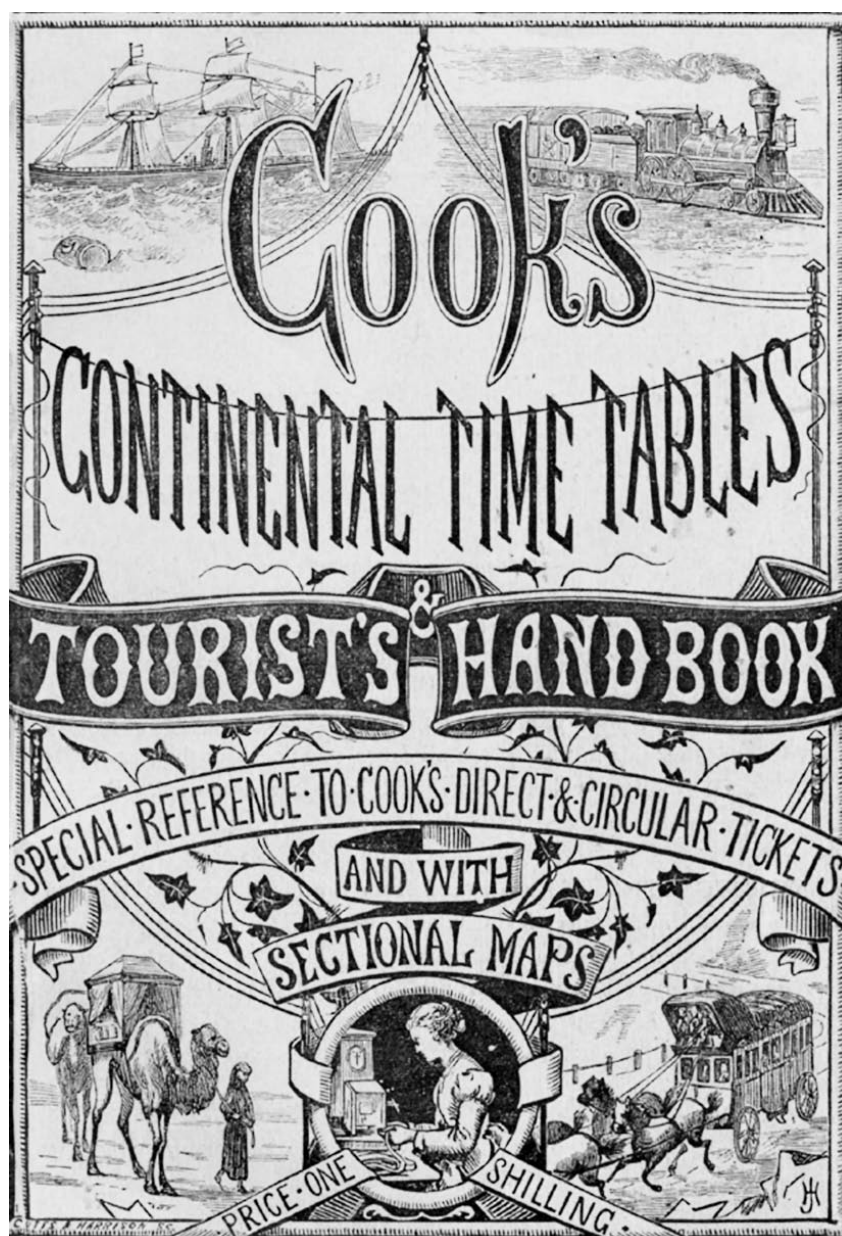
Secretary). The first edition was circulated free-of-charge to attract business and advertising, and regular publication commenced in June 1873 with four editions each year, priced at one shilling. From January 1883, it became monthly and has continued on this basis ever since, apart from a break during WWII. The principle of carefully selecting the routes and stations shown to produce a volume that is portable and good value for money, has remained to this day.

A new Editor, C. H. Davies, was appointed in 1914 and the timetable continued during the 1914–18 war mainly as a shipping guide with a warning note that the train services shown for Belgium, Germany, Austria, Russia, the Balkans, and Turkey were those in force prior to the war. The continental railways were beginning to adopt the 24-hour clock (starting with Italy in 1898) and the British army adopted it from 1 October 1918. It was decided to use this system in the *Cook's Continental Time-Table*, and it became the first British timetable to do so, appearing in its new form from December 1919 with a new cover. By now the price was two shillings and sixpence, and *Time Tables* had become *Time-Table* (the hyphen was dropped from 1956).

In the 1930s, there was keen competition with the *Continental Bradshaw*, which had now adopted a slimmer form, and the Cook's timetable was published at a small loss. By the last prewar edition of August 1939, *Cook's Continental Time-Table* contained some 520 pages, with 11 devoted to international air services, such as the Imperial Airways' flying boat services from Southampton Water to Sydney and Durban, the former taking 10 days with nine intermediate stops where passengers stayed overnight in hotels. Over 130 pages were devoted to worldwide shipping timetables, and there were 48 pages of general travel information, even including a list of golf courses on the continent. During WWII, many Thomas Cook staff served with the Royal Engineers Movement Control at home and abroad, some compiling timetables for military trains.

Postwar Expansion

After WWII, the timetable started up again relatively quickly, with staff issues from July 1946 and public editions from November that year. Mr H. V. Francis was appointed full-time



Cook's *Continental Time Tables* published in 1873

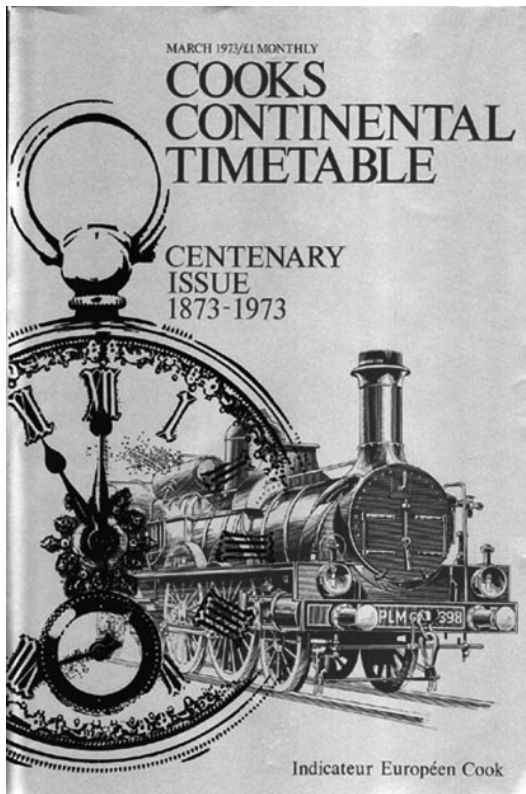
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Editor and several innovations were introduced. For example, table numbers were used instead of page numbers, and the international timetable symbols introduced in 1930 were adopted. Henry Blacklock & Co., publishers of the *Bradshaw* guides, decided not to restart the *Continental Bradshaw*, opening the way for Thomas Cook to grow sales. Nevertheless, senior Thomas Cook management were hesitant, considering the information to be so valuable for their own staff that they did not want other travel agents to have it. Of course, there was nothing to stop other agents sending someone round to Cooks to buy a copy!

Fortunately, W. D. C. Cormack, the Publicity Manager responsible for the timetable operation at that time, secured a change of attitude, and a successful campaign to sell annual subscriptions as well as single copies commenced. A good

proportion of the timetables are still sold on subscription, although sales of rail tickets is now increasingly in the hands of specialist agents. Monthly publication also made it possible to introduce a feature rarely found in timetables, namely advance publication of forthcoming timetable changes. From 1958, this took the form of Summer and Winter supplements in relevant editions, with duplicate versions of international tables, a system that continues today. Sales continued to increase, boosted in 1960 when British Railways ceased to produce its *Continental Handbook*, replacing it with smaller booklets.

In 1952, John H. Price was appointed Editor, serving in this role until 1985, then as Managing Editor until his retirement in 1988. He quickly established himself as an expert in all rail transport, writing several books on rail and tram subjects and



Centenary edition

(Author)

also being a founder member of the Crich Tramway Museum in Derbyshire. He died in 1998 and the library at Crich is named after him.

Some pages had been devoted to domestic services in Great Britain, but these were removed as an economy measure when the timetable was redesigned in 1954. The *Bradshaw Guide* for Britain had ceased publication in 1961, and before long, British Rail had merged its regional books into the bulky *All-System Timetable*. Since visitors to Britain were no longer well catered for, it was decided to include British Rail tables in the *Continental Timetable* once again. After many months of work, the British timings were condensed into 64 pages that were added from January 1970, resulting in a 9% increase in sales after 1 year. A further boost was provided in March 1973 by the publication of a centenary edition with a specially designed silver cover.

Overseas Coverage

At this time, the *Continental Timetable* only included European rail services, although its shipping coverage extended much further. In 1973, Thomas Cook was appointed general sales agent for the USA's recently formed Amtrak, and from the following year Amtrak paid to have its services included in the Thomas Cook timetable, followed 2 years later by Canadian National. A quarter of Thomas Cook's clients were now travelling beyond Europe,

and readers were soon asking for other countries such as Australia, India, and Japan to be included. Therefore, the title was changed to *International Timetable* from 1977 and an additional 80 pages of overseas timings were added. That summer, a print order of 20,000 for a single monthly edition was exceeded for the first time.

There was much more non-European material that could be added, and in January 1981, a separate *Overseas Timetable* was introduced, published every 2 months. The Editor was Peter Tremlett, succeeded on his retirement in 2000 by Peter Bass. The new volume also had the benefit of reducing the size and cost of the *Continental Timetable*, which reverted to its previous title, although the opportunity was not taken to use the more meaningful title of *European Timetable* until January 1988, finally changing to *European Rail Timetable* in 2005.

Printing Technology

Of course, a publication with such a long history has seen huge changes in the way it has been produced. Thomas Cook himself had printing experience and in the early days the Company produced its own publicity material, and even a monthly journal. When the timetable started in 1873, it was printed in the basement of Thomas Cook's new Fleet Street office not moving to an outside printer until 1896.

Having worked on the timetable since 1982, and as Editor since 1985, I have been privileged to experience many different types of printing technology, much of it at Albert Gait Ltd of Grimsby, who printed the timetable for most of the period from 1954 to 2004. Printing directly from metal type had ceased in 1971, because the type was liable to wear. It was replaced by the offset litho method, whereby the metal type was used to make 'reproduction pulls' that were photographed to produce printing plates. When I joined the team, metal type was still in use for much of the timetable, using Monotype 'hot metal' keyboards and casters. Each character was cast as a separate piece of metal, allowing minor corrections to be made by hand without recasting entire lines of type, a methodology well suited to timetables at that time.

However, the move to computer-assisted filmsetting had started in 1978, which meant using mainframe computers at the printers, and metal type was last used in the August 1986 edition. At Thomas Cook, page corrections continued to be made with red pen and correction fluid, albeit on enlarged pages. In-house desktop publishing came in from 1989, using Advent 3b2 software. This gave timetable compilers almost complete control over their page layout. Modern computer-to-plate technology, cutting out the film stage, started to benefit the timetables from 2002, and a change of printers to William Clowes of Beccles in early 2005 saw the

timetables move onto web presses. These use continuous rolls of paper rather than the cut sheets used previously, helping keep printing costs down.

Obtaining Information

The early railways were quite willing to supply private publishers with the information they needed, as it saved them the bother of producing their own books, and provided publicity for their services. Nevertheless, in some cases, publishers had to employ messengers to copy timings from poster boards at the stations. The special relationships fostered between Thomas Cook and the railways from the early days right up to the present time have meant that obtaining information has not generally been a problem, with railways understanding the benefits that publication in our timetables brings them.

The large number of international borders in Europe has meant that the railways have had to be very organized in planning international timetables in advance, largely through the UIC Timetable Conferences. Information from these conferences is invaluable for our advance timetable supplements. Most European railways also produce draft versions of their timetables, meaning that in most cases we have the information in time to publish it before the actual timetable change. This is not always the case, but with monthly publication we are able to get the rest of the information in print not long afterwards, together with any changes that the railways have made between their draft and final timetables. We are also able to keep up to date with the many mid-term changes and, more often than not, planned changes caused by engineering work. Constantly changing ferry timetables also help to justify publishing the *European Rail Timetable* every month.

Modern communications have helped enormously in obtaining timetable information. No longer do we have to wait several days for packets to arrive in the post (or in the case of one western-European draft timetable, several weeks while it found its way to our office in Peterborough from St Petersburg where it had been incorrectly sent after someone had forgotten to write UK on the packet). At the same time, technology is allowing railways to make timetable changes more frequently and at shorter notice, making our job more difficult and keeping us on our toes.

Things are a little different for the *Overseas Timetable*. Amtrak and a few other operators are able to provide us with information in advance of the changes, but in many cases we don't have this luxury. Fortunately, a network of enthusiastic contacts, not necessarily working for the operators, helps to keep us up to date, and of course the Internet is a great resource to supplement this information. Due to sparse rail networks in some regions, the *Overseas Timetable* has a

much greater proportion of bus timetables, making it a guide to surface transport whatever the mode, and researching obscure bus and truck services in remote regions has its own challenges.

Users of Timetables

An interesting aspect of the timetables is the very diverse user base. The travel business accounts for about one third of copies, many on subscription, but a substantial number are sold to independent travellers, who are travelling for very many reasons, whether it be leisure, business, or visiting friends and family. The timetables are also firm favourites with railway enthusiasts and 'armchair' travellers, and some businesses also buy them as a source of reference. Libraries are another important segment.

Needless to say, the timetables are also very popular with rail pass holders. The introduction of the Eurail pass from 1959 was an important development, and over 3 million passes have now been sold. Initially, the ticket was sold in North America, giving the holder unlimited first class travel in Western Europe (except Great Britain) for 1, 2 or 3 months. Thanks to this, Thomas Cook began selling large numbers of timetables in the USA and Canada. Later, the pass was made available to all non-Europeans (except residents of North Africa) and this helped give us strong overseas markets, particularly in Japan. Pass holders typically visit several countries and need a timetable with each country shown in a standardized form.

The introduction of the InterRail pass in 1972 for residents of Europe found the timetable a further new market. Initially for people aged up to 21, the age limit was increased to 23 in 1976 and to 26 in 1979. Finally, the age limit was abolished from 1998 with the introduction of the more expensive over-26 pass. The timetable remains popular with pass holders and is often referred to as the 'InterRailer's Bible.'

Naturally, the timetable department receives quite a bit of correspondence. These days it is generally by email, although long hand-written letters do still arrive from time to time. There is a small band of regular correspondents who send news items and corrections, including one person who has been checking all the distances shown in the tables. In the past, sometimes the only way we could get certain information (from Albania for example) would be if someone sent us a photograph of the station departure board. Often people want extra railway lines or stations including, and sometimes it is possible to oblige, although more often than not it would mean taking something out to make room. It is certainly gratifying when the occasional letter or email arrives saying how useful the timetable is and imploring us to keep up the good work.

Japanese and German Editions

The popularity of the *European Timetable* in Japan led to a royalty agreement with the Diamond Student Travel Association (now GIO Club) whereby they would print their own edition of the timetable for the Japanese market, commencing in January 1985. Initially, there were two editions per year termed Spring and Summer, based on our January and June issues. Later, it increased to four editions per year, and the arrangement still continues, although recently reduced once again to two issues per year (Summer and Winter/Spring). Relevant parts of the timetable, such as the text at the start of each country, are translated into Japanese, but the timetable pages remain substantially unaltered. Some Japanese people buy the timetable just to read, even if they have no intention of travelling to Europe!

Until 2000, German Railways (DB AG) had their own *Auslandskursbuch*, with different sections being compiled by their various regional timetable offices. They were having difficulty obtaining information and keeping it up to date, and they wanted to reduce costs. Following discussions with ourselves, they decided to replace it with a special edition of the *European Rail Timetable* that they named *Kursbuch Europa*. Unlike the Japanese edition, this is produced by Thomas Cook and is printed alongside the regular edition in the UK. Most of the book is identical to the monthly edition apart from a short introduction in German and a special cover. However, from Summer 2009, DB AG has decided to discontinue the *Kursbuch Europa* and buy the normal edition of the *European Rail Timetable* instead.

Other organizations, such as IATA, also call upon our expertise from time to time, for example, writing course materials or help with setting exam questions. In fact, we produce a special booklet for IATA/UFTAA consisting of a 128-page timetable extract with pages from both the European and Overseas volumes. This is used by students in conjunction with their course material.

For Book Trade

While specialist travel book shops are happy to take the monthly edition of the *European Rail Timetable*, normal book shops are reluctant because of its short shelf life. To overcome this problem, a special edition called the *Independent Traveller's Edition* or ITE was introduced in the early 1990s with the book trade in mind. This has a glossy cover and an additional 32 pages of travel information, and currently appears twice each year in Summer and Winter editions (there were four per year for a few years). Apart from the additional pages, the content is identical to the June and December editions, respectively. Therefore, the ITE allows the timetable to reach a market segment that may otherwise be

unaware of it. To bring the reader right up to date, a voucher inside gives a substantial discount on purchase of a later edition of the monthly timetable.

The success of this edition led to a similar *Independent Traveller's Edition* of the *Overseas Timetable* in Summer and Winter versions, based on the May–June and November–December editions of the bi-monthly timetable.

Features for Subscribers

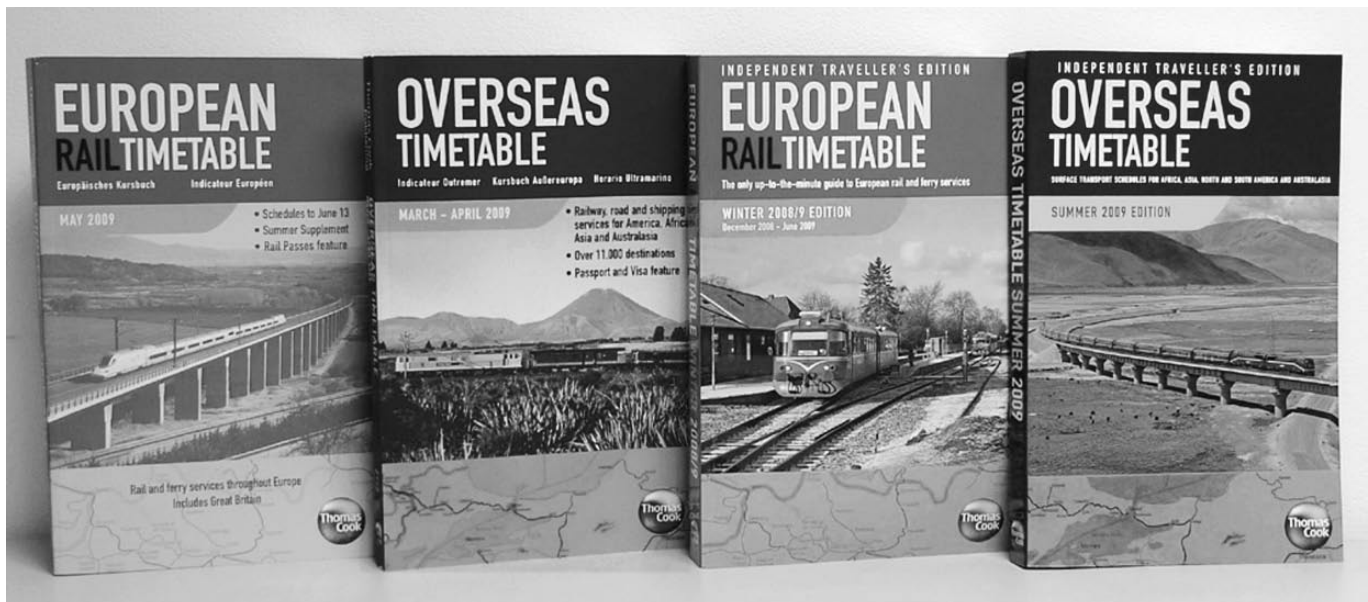
An innovation from 1999 has been the introduction of regular features on aspects of rail travel to encourage subscriptions. These appear in alternate editions and take the place of the timetables for car-carrying trains, which are reduced to a single-page summary. The six features are updated each year and have proved to be popular, judging by feedback.

The Sample Fares feature in the January edition attempts to compare levels of fares from country to country and has sparked interest both in the media and from politicians. The Rail Passes feature is naturally popular and is also included in the extra pages found in the ITEs. Other features cover Cruise Trains and Rail Holidays, Tourist Railways, High-Speed Trains, and Night Trains. The Night Trains feature, incidentally, had its origins in a separate publication called *European Night Trains*, that Thomas Cook produced for a while after UIC stopped producing its own *TEN Guide*, TEN standing for Trans Euro Nuit.

The *Overseas Timetable* also started a regime of regular features in each edition, containing a huge amount of additional information. Four of these cover different areas of the world, namely North America, Japan, South East Asia, and Australasia, and include such things as operator profiles, carriage plans, travel tips, and details of rail and bus passes. The other two features cover Health and Safety, and Passports and Visas, both with useful country-by-country information for travellers. The two ITEs of the *Overseas Timetable* contain all six features, making them useful references.

The Timetable Team

The editorial team that compiles the European and Overseas Timetables is based at Thomas Cook's UK headquarters in Peterborough, some 125 km north of London, situated appropriately alongside the East Coast Main Line from London to Edinburgh. Six people, including myself, are involved in compiling and editing the timetables, while a separate commercial team deals with sales and marketing. Another editorial team deals with the large range of guidebooks, a side of the publishing business that has expanded hugely over the last 10 years. All this is part of a large Publishing Department producing all the holiday brochures for Thomas Cook's Holidays Division.



Current Thomas Cook timetables

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Staff turnover on the timetable team has been very low, reflecting the interest that the six of us have in railways and transport. In fact, between us we have nearly 84 years working on the timetables.

For a time, we tried introducing a premium rate 'hot line' to answer timetable enquiries, but it proved too much of a distraction from our compiling work, which requires a lot of concentration. Since we don't issue tickets, we were unable to answer fares queries, and when the number of calls started to decline we decided that telephone enquiries are best directed to agents who can convert enquiries into ticket sales.

Rail Maps

Apart from the timetables, the team turns its hand to other projects from time to time, such as updating the rail content in our *Europe by Rail* guidebook. There are also two maps published every 2 years. One is the *Rail Map of Europe*, which has been in regular production since 1978, resurrecting a product from earlier decades, and is now in its 17th edition. The other, more-recent map is the *Rail Map of Britain and Ireland*, which has reached its 6th edition. Both are large fold-out maps aimed at the independent traveller and rail agents, but the latest edition of the Europe map is also available as flat sheets for use as a wall map.

Challenges Ahead

Of course, electronic timetable information has been around for many years on CD, the Internet, mobile phones, and in other forms. This has inevitably affected our sales. The vast

investment by the railways in electronic media has made it difficult for us to compete in this area and so far we have concentrated on what we know best—the printed timetable.

Some railway companies have stopped producing their own comprehensive timetable books, for example Spain, France, and now Germany, making it more difficult for travellers to obtain printed information, particularly for long-distance and international services. Many people like a timetable book that they can take with them on their travels and consult wherever they are, and we are happy we can continue to meet this need.

The continuous evolution of railway networks throughout the world makes the job of producing the Thomas Cook timetables a fascinating one. With numerous interesting developments on the horizon, including new open-access operators on international services in Europe, there will be many challenges ahead. ■

**Brendan Fox**

Mr Fox has been an editor of *Thomas Cook European Timetable* since 1982. Prior to his current position, he was employed by the Operational Research Department of the former National Bus Company.