

# An Exhibition Courier's View of Japan

Dieter W. Hopkin

My journey to Japan in July 1997 was as a curator of the National Railway Museum (NRM) in York, making arrangements for the delivery and display of an exhibition of British railway posters representing the best of railway advertising over 150 years, drawn from the collections I curate.

The Railway Poster in Britain exhibition was a joint venture developed to tour the Tokyo Station Gallery, Utsunomiya Museum of Art, and the Kobe Hankyu Museum from July to December 1997. Preparations had started over 1 year earlier when the idea for the exhibition was put forward by Mr Matsuda, Curator of Tokyo Station Gallery. The lengthy negotiations and preparations came to a climax on 3 July when the contractors wrapped and crated the 116 framed posters for their 9000-km journey to Tokyo. I followed 2 weeks later to supervise unpacking and hanging at Tokyo Station Gallery in Tokyo Central Station. The station is reputed to be modelled on that in Amsterdam and is one of the few old red-brick buildings surviving in Tokyo. The Gallery is operated by the East Japan Railways Culture Foundation (EJRCF).

As a first-time visitor, it was difficult to know how exactly to prepare for a visit to Japan which was to be mostly business, but which was also an opportunity to develop my own professional interest in museums, and railway and transport museums in particular. I had to try and pack as much as possible into my visit of just 11 days. Preliminary reading of guide-books was essential while another useful resource was the Internet where I searched various web sites relating to Japanese railways and railway museums and useful tourist information, which helped my orientation and gave me some idea of what to expect on arrival in Tokyo.

The first thing to hit me was the heat and humidity. I had been warned that July was not the most comfortable month to visit Japan and I soon felt the need for the air conditioning of the trains and hotels. My

first view of Tokyo was from the Narita Express train as it passed from the countryside into the spreading suburban areas which appeared to be arranged in a haphazard way. The planning regulations are apparently very different in Japan and the cityscape with its overhead power lines and jumbled buildings were all a very sharp contrast to historic York which I had just left. Clearly, Tokyo is a booming city. This impression was reinforced by the view of the Tokyo skyline from my 16th floor hotel room.

Most of the preparation for hanging the exhibition at the Tokyo Station Gallery was arranged by my new colleagues there, and I had some time to begin to get my bearings before and after the curatorial checking of the exhibits. I was staying in Ikebukuro and soon realized that the Yamanote Line is the key to getting around Tokyo. My first exploratory trip was only a single stop to Otsuka but this meant working out the operation of the automatic ticket vending machines, which despite their polite bowing character displays are at first a little daunting to the foreign traveller. One reason for travelling to Otsuka was to take a trip on the Toden Arakawa Line, Tokyo's only tram service. The tram journeyed through the

backyards of an older housing area and showed me something of ordinary life in Tokyo away from the high-rise blocks with a mixture of the traditional and low-tech and the very modern.

Having mastered the Yamanote Line, I began exploring, safe in the knowledge that if I missed my station, I could travel around the circle again and that there would be another train in 2-3 minutes at the most. On one day I was assisted by staff of the EJRCF but on others armed with my map and multi-journey ticket, I ventured out to visit some of Tokyo's well-known tourist sites: Ueno Park with its museums and temples, Harajuku to marvel at the Meiji Shrine and the contrasting street fashion of young people in the neighbouring district, and central Tokyo for a walk around the Imperial Palace area. A memorable surprise while walking in Tokyo streets and parks was the deafening noise of the cicadas, which were in almost every tree making their distinctive sound.

The sights of Tokyo must also include the department stores where the range of Japanese and imported goods for sale was a revelation. The tempting delights of the massive Tobu and Seibu stores were only a 5-minute walk from my base in



Tokyo street scene with Toden Arakawa Line tram approaching Otsuka Station

(Author)



*Dramatic entrance to Transportation Museum in Tokyo*

*(Author)*

Ikebukuro.

The formal opening of the exhibition at Tokyo Station Gallery was on the evening of 29 July and was conducted by Sir David Wright, British Ambassador, Mr Yamanouchi, President of the East Japan Railway Company, and Andrew Scott, Head of NRM (who had arrived the day before). The exhibition received very favourable comments from those at the opening including a number of Japanese collectors of British railway posters, who regularly bid at auctions in Britain to add to their collections.

Andrew Scott and I were determined to include as many museums and galleries in our visit as possible and had set up a series of meetings with organizations with similar interests to the NRM. This started with a visit to the Transportation Museum in Tokyo near Akihabara Station. This museum can claim an ancestry older than that of my own as its predecessor was established in 1921 and moved to its present location in 1936. Despite the restrictions of the former station site, the collections are extensive and feature the first steam locomotive in Japan, later locomotives and two imperial carriages amongst the exhibits. Some were British built and were a tangible reminder of the important early links between Britain and Japan, which were so significant in Japan's industrialization. The museum also has an impressive collection of models and interactives

including some very good train driving simulators. The entrance to the museum is dramatized by the front end of an early shinkansen and of a steam locomotive apparently sticking out of the building.

On the next day, we took the Tohoku Shinkansen to Utsunomiya to visit the new Utsunomiya Museum of Art, the second venue for the poster exhibition. This was an impressive piece of architecture sympathetically placed in a parkland setting similar to the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, Scotland. The galleries and stores were built to high standards and provided an excellent setting for the exhibition. We also took the opportunity to

drive out to historic Nikko. The landscape in this district is very different to Tokyo, with villages and farms, rice fields and mountains, and forests in the background. This was the image I had of Japan from my minimal knowledge of Japanese art. I had thought that these artworks were highly stylized, but they were more accurate representations than I had imagined. For the return journey, we took the Tobu Line, one of Japan's many private railways, which travelled at a more leisurely pace than the shinkansen. On the outward trip, Andrew left his camera on the train, but a visit to the lost property office at Tokyo Central Station the next day resulted in its return to our hotel by courier—one could only hope for this sort of service in Britain!

Another shinkansen trip the next day took us to Osaka and Kyoto as the guests of West Japan Railway Company (JR West). Unfortunately, low cloud obscured Mt. Fuji, but tea plantations, temples and other sights were viewed at high speed from the luxury of a Green-Car seat. After a journey of about 2.5 hours, we visited the Modern Transportation Museum in Osaka where we were impressed by the quality of the displays and interactives. Impor-



*Rebuilt Nijo station building serving as entrance to Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum*

*(Author)*

tant exhibits included four cars of shinkansen No. 1 from 1964, which operated the first Tokaido Shinkansen service, a British 2-4-0T of 1880, and one of the massive Class EF52 electric locomotives, the first electric locomotive type to be manufactured in Japan (1928).

After a whirlwind tour of the museum, we took the local train to Kyoto. On arrival, we entered the new multi-trillion yen Kyoto Station, one of the latest developments of JR West. The new station, which has drawn critical comment because of its dramatic modernity in Japan's old capital city, features a massive central concourse, major department stores, a hotel, air terminal link and cultural facilities. In contrast to this modernistic structure is the Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum, 10 minutes from Kyoto Station. This is a well-preserved round-house locomotive depot housing a collection of 17 steam locomotives. There are usually two locomotives in steam, which operate a short shuttle service for visitors. One gem, a Porter 2-6-0 of 1880 is a reminder that the Americans were also a major influence in Japan's early railway system. Most displays are housed in a traditional wooden railway station, which has been reconstructed on-site. The displays have recently been refurbished and are of high quality with some interpretive material in English, including an interactive CDROM on Japanese steam locomotive types.

Travelling around Tokyo and on brief journeys to the north and south of Japan, one can only be impressed by the cultural importance of railways to the nation and the sheer amount of railway equipment around. Many of the designs for passenger stock are innovative and exciting both to look at and to travel on. It is also interesting to note that the privatized parts of the former Japanese National Railways recognize their responsibility in caring for the railway heritage and have a role in the wider cultural life of the nation in supporting museums, galleries and other cul-



Steam locomotive No. 8630 dating from 1914 in steam at Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum

(Author)

tural events. Perhaps this is a useful example and precedent for the undertaking of this type of work by the newly-privatized railway companies in Britain.

I have concentrated on sights and museums, but another fascinating aspect which must not go unmentioned is the food. I had little knowledge of the Japanese love of food and the great variety of cuisine to be sampled. I decided to begin my epicurean trip on the JAL flight out and was pleased to find that my dexterity with chopsticks developed through irregular visits to Chinese restaurants in Britain did not fail me. The hospitality of my hosts lead to me eating French, Italian and Chinese meals as well as Japanese fare. This included *sushi*, *sashimi*, *soba*, *udon*, *sukiyaki*, *shabu-shabu*, and *tempura*. Not only was the food very interesting and tasty, but it was also a delight to the eye with excellent presentation and tableware. The laying of the table with lacquer ware,

ceramics and plain wooden implements was very attractive. This presentation quality even applied to the *bento* packed lunches, sold on trains and in stations.

Working with colleagues in Japan has been very interesting and the opportunity to travel to see a very different culture with such a rich interest in railways was very rewarding. None of this could have been possible without the hard work of my colleagues at the NRM and in Japan. It has also been helped by the wonderful hospitality showed to me by my Japanese hosts. This short visit has certainly whetted my appetite for a further trip to Japan to do some of the things that a tight schedule did not allow me—to visit more of its historic sites and museums, to view more of its landscape, to taste more exotic foods, and to delight in the warmth of Japanese hospitality. ■



### Dieter W. Hopkin

Dieter W. Hopkin is Head of Library and Archive Collections at the National Railway Museum in York, where he has worked since 1989. After graduating in History from the University of Leicester in 1981, he obtained a Master's degree in Museum Studies in 1988.