

A "Southern Electric Enthusiast" on Japanese Trains

James Farmer

Tsugi wa Kyoto ekimae, Kyoto eki, Kyoto Kontakuto Renzu mae desu.... ran the cassette announcement on a Kyoto tram in May 1971. I was struck by the fact that a contact lens shop was referred to—even I with my very meager Japanese could understand that. But I was also amazed that there was an announcement at all. I was not even in a train, just a local city tram. At that time in the UK, such announcements on board trains were almost unheard of—even on an InterCity train from London to Edinburgh (633 km), it was common to hear nothing, and on Southern Electric (suburban electric trains emanating from South London and formerly operated by the Southern Railway), there was definitely nothing to guide the hapless passenger once on board!

I was in Japan as a 17-year old about to enter Trinity College to study Japanese for 3 years for my BA degree. It was the first time I had travelled so far alone, but I quickly felt at home in Japan and began to make some progress in the language. And Japanese trains were a delight right from the very beginning! Like most foreigners, the shinkansen was my first rail experience in Japan and I was predictably impressed. But then I arrived in Kyoto. Not only the standard tourist sites to enjoy, such as Kinkakuji, but also trams, some of them quite old, and my favourite by far, the Keifuku Dentetsu, running from Kitano Hakubaicho and Shijo Omiya to



■ C55 47 at Horonobe Station in 1972

(Author)

Arashiyama. Much of the Keifuku rolling stock was single cars, turned out in a dirty green and cream livery. Most dated from the 1920s or earlier. At that time, they collected the current by means of a trolley pole and I can still picture the sight of the conductor pulling on the rope at passing loops and terminals! When not busy with the trolley pole, the conductor would sell tickets up and down the car, punching holes in them to denote station of origin and destination. I was full of admiration for the way they managed to do this—with unfailing accuracy, too—while the car rocked and jolted its way through Kyoto's western suburbs. Many of the same cars are still in service even now, although the trolley poles have long since given way to pantographs. The Keifuku's other Kyoto line ran from Demachi Yanagi in the north-east to Yase Yuen and Kurama and was longer and more akin to a US interurban, although the cars were just as old and also used trolley poles. I was always sorry that the line never ran through to Fukui, where the other Keifuku system still runs today—it would have been a wonderful trip through the mountains!

It was on my second visit to Japan, in the summer of 1972, that I first had the privilege of meeting Professor Shigeru Koike, an expert on English literature—and Japanese railways! I am eternally grateful to him for all the time he spared. He explained to me the JNR (as it then was) rolling-stock types and numbering systems, as well as locomotive types. He generously gave me large numbers of fascinating books with superb photographs. And every year since then, he has sent me a Japanese railway calendar, which is a delight to receive. He also showed me how to use

the excellent monthly JNR timetable and—perhaps most exciting of all—pointed out the remaining regular steam workings, leading me to visit Hokkaido for about 3 weeks.

But before that, there was plenty to see in the Tokyo area. Not only the subway, but a whole network of fascinating private lines—Odakyu, Tobu, Seibu and many others. I also discovered the Hachiko line of JNR, from Hachioji via Haijima to Takasaki, which operated charming elderly diesel multiple units in a red and cream livery. It was possible to make a delightful round trip on JNR and private trackage by changing from the Hachiko line to private lines at stations like Higashi Hanno and Yorii.

Once in Hokkaido, I sampled the private steam-hauled colliery line to Oyubari Tazan, which used wonderful old passenger coaches and a venerable fleet of locomotives. I also worked for two weeks on a local farm close to Lake Mashu. Each day I saw and heard the steam trains with their C57 and C58 locomotives passing through



■ Keifuku Line near Kyoto

(Author)



■ Osaka-Sakai (Hankai) One Man Interurban service in 1989

(Author)

the valley on their way from Abashiri to Kushiro. The locomotive whistles echoing through the valley and sounding like the Wild West! But the highspot of the Hokkaido visit was the 11.00 am stopping train on the Soya main line from Asahikawa to Wakkanai, train number 321. This was a specific suggestion of Professor Koike—and how right he was! On the day I travelled, it was operated by the immaculate C55 47 with a short rake of aged brown passenger coaches. It reminded me of what people in the United Kingdom would have called a "parliamentary train" in the 19th century. Such trains were instigated by Act of Parliament in response to a serious dearth of services for local passengers on a great many railway lines. Their fare levels were strictly limited and they were required to operate on every line at least once every day in each direction, stopping at all stations. Not surprisingly, they were very slow, as was this train to Wakkanai—the journey of 260 km took over 8 hours! But what a journey it was. I met many local people, some of whom, I think, had rarely seen a foreigner before and I well remember photographing two charming small children on the station platform at Pippu. Sadly, such trips can no longer be made by steam and the Hokkaido railway network has been virtually decimated since my visit, with many local lines now closed including the line from Wakkanai down the east coast of Hokkaido, with the pleasant short branch from Okoppe to Omu.

I duly completed my Japanese course and graduated from Cambridge in June 1974.

My connections with Japan continued to some extent until 1979, but it was not until October 1988 that I began to work full time on export promotion from Britain to Japan in the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the UK equivalent of MITI. Of course, this gave me the chance to visit Japan again and I made my third visit in October—November 1989. When my business was completed, I set off to visit friends from Kyoto now living in Matsuyama, Shikoku. Of course this was a perfect opportunity to see the impressive new Seto Ohashi bridge. Once in Shikoku, the winding line had a delightfully local feel and in Matsuyama awaited the Iyo railway, operating not only Matsuyama urban trams—several bought secondhand from Kyoto when that system closed down—but also suburban services. It was uncanny to see again the same trams on which I had actually travelled in 1971 and 1972 in a different city! The very smart Iyo livery of orange and cream perfectly matched the persimmons growing on the trees everywhere.

However, it was not until my latest visit to Japan, in August 1992, that I finally travelled to Kyushu. Of course, I was im-

pressed by the new Tsubame service between Hakata and Kagoshima. But, as always, my favourites were the local services. Even the special steam train, the Aso Boy, was a little disappointing after train number 321 in August 1972, exactly 20 years earlier! I preferred my journey from Kumamoto to Kagoshima via the subsidiary route through the mountains, which at one point describes a complete circle crossing over itself in order to traverse a mountain area. I travelled in a single car diesel unit in the Kyushu livery of white with blue line. The train was pleasantly old—of the same type that I remembered from the Hachiko line in the early 1970s. Fine weather and a delicious local lunchbox added to my enjoyment.

In Kumamoto, I had discovered another private electric railway, the Kumamoto Dentetsu—the Kumaden, or "bear electric" for short! This reminded me of the Keifuku in feel and its red and blue electric cars were nicely worn. Nowadays, it operates on a "one man" basis, but I wonder if it too, had the skilled ticket-punching conductors in years gone by.

Perhaps one of the greatest joys for me on Japan's railways is that, despite the awesome technological achievements of trains like the shinkansen, and the Seikan tunnel, the local private lines continue to provide the same useful service as they have done for decades, in many cases with the same marvellous old cars (often electrically overhauled). A final delight when I first discovered it in 1989, was the Osaka to Sakai interurban. Many of the cars are as old as those of the Keifuku and a treat to ride in—long may they and others like them survive. ■



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