

Crouching tiger, hidden dragon

Career railwayman, former Atoc chairman and Virgin Rail Group director **Ivor Warburton** has had a lifelong fascination with China, which has culminated in a top railway job in the world's most populous country. With fluent Mandarin Chinese, Warburton happily came out of retirement to become general manager of the Tangula luxury train project in the People's Republic. Here, he explains what he has been doing

I write from Shanghai and look back on how various threads of life and career have combined to bring me here. Could the same be in store for you in your future?

REVOLUTION IN CHINA

The year 1949 saw the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the expulsion of Western missionaries. I remember vividly a retired Methodist missionary who visited our church to preach and always illustrated his children's address with a Chinese character and tales of his experiences.

When I was a little older his message was not of the need to send missionaries to China but of the need for the rest of the world to understand the Sleeping Dragon, for one day it would awake.

UNIVERSITY AND AFTER

I went to university to study mathematics but realised it gave me no pleasure. I changed to Chinese in autumn 1966. History records the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in China that year and the continuing complete isolation of the country from the rest of the world when I graduated.

A career choice with the BR Management Training scheme seemed a good option. It was part of the golden era of recruitment post-Beeching.

The nationalised railway delivered astonishing results and

steady change towards a modern business-led railway against a vague instruction from a series of governments on the services to be provided.

I benefited from a year at Warwick Business School and returned to apply textbook marketing to the passenger business and, in a job as international tourist manager, to travel the world working with tourist authorities and international air carriers and hotel groups.

CHINA AGAIN

I even managed to sneak a side trip from business in Hong Kong into China for a few days in 1981. Ten years later, after experience in senior positions in marketing, industrial relations and general management, it was time for an extended holiday on a backpacking tour of China, mainly by rail, and a return to the re-arrangement of BR for privatisation.

This seemed to produce increasing reward for diminishing responsibility!

One year I was president of the Railway Study Association and also participated in their convention in the United States of America, where I met Michael Weinman of PTSI, a fellow of the association and contributor to this magazine. An unsuccessful management buy-out bid for InterCity West Coast, with a business plan which the tax-payer may subsequently have found to be

better long-term value, was followed by two years as a director of Virgin Rail Group.

The title of director business development and industry affairs gave me a good chance to meet all sorts of visitors from overseas with ideas which they thought would benefit from application of the Virgin brand and to both visit and receive delegations from the Ministry of Railways in China (MOR) for lectures on the benefits and perils of re-organisation and privatisation.

My text was translated into Chinese and a picture greeting the minister in front of a Virgin train at Euston was used thereafter on the booklets for later groups!

RETIREMENT OR SABBATICAL?

I have always counselled my staff to ensure that as they approach retirement, they must already have a hobby or interest. It is no good waiting until the day, for the choice is too great and you do not then know where to start. Following my own advice I had started to refresh my Chinese by attending evening classes for a part-time degree just a short distance from the office in London.

Retirement in 1999 allowed full-time study and then I spent a semester as a student at the Beijing Second Foreign Language University. Where was this leading? I did not know and did not continue the study. There were too many other places in the world and so many other things to do.

A few years of providing *pro bono* advice to various fledgling railway schemes and possible overseas rail projects led to two seasons as a hands-on tour manager for Great Rail Journeys.

Then a call came from PTSI to

join a small team on a one-week consultancy in Shanghai in December 2005. The crazy idea mentioned a few years earlier for a luxury tour train in China had received outline approval from the MOR but the promoters had no railway knowledge at all.

Perceptive readers may see where the previous paragraphs are leading, but I did not! At the end of the week, the CEO saw an available manager with extensive rail experience in operations, passenger marketing and general management, with knowledge of China and Chinese (I speak, read and write), with experience of the international tourist market and products and with recent knowledge of tour groups and their needs.

His offer to go and join the project as general manager was still a surprise. However, the prospect of sitting in the UK seeing the project launch successfully and thinking: 'I could have been part of that!' meant that the retirement was over. It had become simply a seven year sabbatical and I was now going to give three years to this project.

HALF-WAY THROUGH

There was one particularly useful piece of material for my introduction here. Remember that booklet with the picture shaking hands with the former minister at Euston? A chance shot helped establish immediate credibility. On the other hand I have made one spectacular error.

I failed to bring to the task my extensive experience of dealing with and within a large bureaucracy and my limited experience of the truly risk-averse nature of private enterprise. The original timescale for the task of planning, building

DIARY OF EVENTS

SCOTTISH AND IRISH AREA

11 September: Talk by Duncan Sooman, territory engineer (civils) Network Rail Scotland – The 2030 Railway: A Scotland Perspective. Network Rail Boardroom, Buchanan House, Glasgow, 17:15 for 17:30 start. For information on Scottish Area events please contact Chris Owen on 01506 854537 or email: scottish@railwayoperators.org

SOUTH EAST AREA

10 September: Change of venue – this event will now take place on the 10th Floor of London Underground's headquarters at 55 Broadway, St James Park, SW1. Andy Barr, London Underground, will be speaking about major asset recovery following a serious incident. We look forward to welcoming both Overground and Underground colleagues to

this event. As usual doors open at 18:00 for 18:30 start.

1 November: Fire and Steam – Christian Wolmar lecture and book signing at the Royal Geographical Society, London, introduced by Pete Waterman OBE. Leading commentator on transport, Christian Wolmar will take us on an exciting journey through the social history of Britain's railways. Tickets are £15. To purchase tickets, please visit our website or contact Railway Children on 01270 757596 or email us.

Monday 12 November: High Speed 1 – speakers TBA. All South East Area meetings take place at the Union Jack Club, Sandell Street, opposite Waterloo East Station. Doors open at 18:00 for an 18:30 start. For information on the South East Area contact: southeast@railwayoperators.org

SOUTH WEST AREA

For information on all South West events and matters, contact Lawrie Hall on 01453 822150 or email southwest@railwayoperators.org

NORTH EAST AREA

15 September: AGM and visit to North York Moors Railway. There will be a talk by Philip Benham, general manager, on the extension on the NYMR's Operators Licence and the safety case for service to Whitby.

This will be followed by a trip on the NYMR to view operation of the railway first hand. Transport will be provided from York to and from Pickering. Families welcome. The event lasts all day

6 November Visit to see refurbishment of GNER's HSTs. The trip, during the daytime, is to Wabtec in Doncaster to see

GNER's Mallard HST sets.

For information on all North East Area events please contact Chris Prior on 07801 905204 or email: northeast@railwayoperators.org

NORTH WEST AREA

For all North West Area events please contact: northwest@railwayoperators.org

MIDLANDS AREA

For all Midlands events contact Julia Stanyard 0121 345 3833 or email: midlands@railwayoperators.org

YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

6 September: Informal Networking at the Euston Flyer, between Kings Cross St Pancras and Euston.

For all events contact us at: comms@iroyoungprofessionals.org.uk

and introducing Tangula luxury trains onto the rails of China envisaged six months to finalisation of financing, 12 months of construction and introduction into operation by now.

The reality was nine months to finalise the joint venture with our railway partner and a further seven months to organise a source of equity finance to complement the debt portion secured on the asset of the trains.

I should have foreseen this and advised that timescales were too optimistic. However, June 2007 was a true landmark as construction of the 49 luxury vehicles has just started. Each train will be of 15 vehicles (six luxury suite vehicles, kitchen dining car, scenic car, kitchen dining car). There are no bunk beds, and all passengers have private en suite facilities and shower with just four suites in each coach.

All 96 can be accommodated for meals at the same time and there are four itineraries.

But to write more would take

valuable space and duplicate the information on www.tangula.com.cn where you have a chance to enter a competition.

CONCLUSION

So what are you doing now? I suggest you answer for both your life and your work. Take a few

moments to reflect on what you have done and what you are doing and how it might be adding to your skill set and preparing you for some satisfying future challenge.

It may be the unexpected experience that turns out to be most relevant and produces for you the most satisfying job you could have. Certainly the apparently

mundane task of train scheduling and showing periods of daylight by season on a train graph has been vital to getting the Tangula project this far.

Remember the world is larger than your job of today – there are opportunities everywhere and you may inadvertently be preparing for them. Good luck!

MEMBERS' NEWS

The following employers operate a corporate membership scheme, by paying a one-off annual fee that covers all their employees' affiliate or associate membership subscriptions:

Network Rail ● Eurostar UK Ltd ● First ScotRail ● First Great Western ● One ● Railnews ● Iarnród Éireann (Irish Rail) ● EWS Railway ● Northern Ireland Railways ● Central Trains ● First Transpennine Express ● First Capital Connect ● Atoc ● Southern ● London Underground Ltd ● Docklands Light Railway ● Transport for London ● South West Trains ● Sheffield Supertram ● Arriva Trains Wales ● Parsons Brinckerhoff ● Southeastern Railway ● Virgin Trains ● London Lines ● Silverlink Trains ● c2c Rail ● Gatwick Express ● RWA Rail ● Midland Mainline.

Those with full membership will continue to pay their subscription personally, irrespective of whether they can subsequently claim it back. Please note that, as the IRO's subscriptions are tax-deductible, a receipt will be issued for all payments – whether by cheque, standing order or internet payment.

If your company would like to explore the benefits of corporate membership of the institution, please contact us. We welcome applications from all industry companies, suppliers and associations – please contact Chris Daughton on 01444 248931 or admin@railwayoperators.org