

THOMAS COOK AND TOURIST TRAVEL



QUEENSTOWN
8° 17' W



Songsheet for 'The Excursion Train' (Elton Collection: Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust).



Photograph of Thomas Cook, the Napoleon of Excursions (Thomas Cook Archives).

With the coming of the railways, paddle steamers and improvements to road surfaces, and the changes to employment law that introduced public holidays, the potential for people to travel for pleasure increased. Popular destinations included the English Lakes, the seaside, spa towns, Hampton Court, Canterbury, Westminster Abbey and other historic sites, and special events such as the 1851 Great Exhibition, which also attracted considerable overseas interest and led to a series of international trade fairs and exhibitions.



Russian and Fine Art displays at the Great Exhibition (Elton Collection: Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust).

Among those who promoted these tourist attractions – now more accessible thanks to reliable public transport at prices to suit most pockets – was Henry Cole who produced illustrated guides for day trips, travelling charts to accompany journeys, and articles for the *Athenaeum* and *Railway Chronicle* on the new experiences open to the sightseer.

Of greater impact was the work of Thomas Cook, a printer, lay preacher and temperance campaigner from Market Harborough. His initial interest in tourism was to provide a diversion for workers who might otherwise turn to drink. His first excursion trip was from Leicester to Loughborough on 5 July 1841, a 22-mile return journey by chartered train that attracted over 500 people paying a shilling each. Their departure from Leicester was accompanied by brass bands and watched by thousands of spectators. Further crowds gathered on the railway bridges they passed under and to welcome them to Loughborough for a temperance rally in Southfields Park.

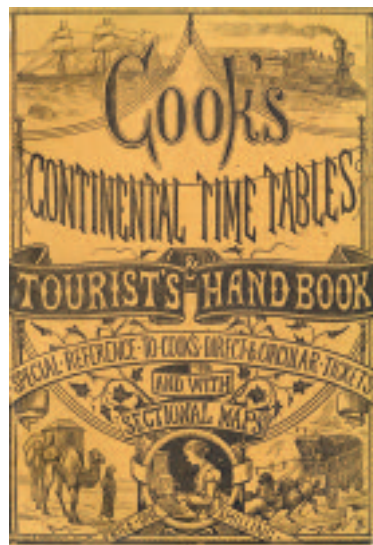
Shortly afterwards, Cook moved to Leicester where he set up as a bookseller, among other sidelines. He continued organising excursions as part of his commitment to the temperance movement but in the summer of 1845 led his first professional project, a trip to Liverpool with optional extensions to Caernarvon castle and Snowdon. Cook made all the necessary arrangements with the relevant railway companies, receiving a commission of around five per cent on the ticket price; published a handbook that included an itinerary, descriptions of places of interest and travellers' tips; and accompanied his 350-strong party throughout their journey.

With this success, his thoughts now turned further afield to north of the border. He led his first tour of Scotland in the summer of 1846 and would go on to accompany thousands of tourists there over the next 16 years. He later wrote that his Scottish experience 'almost imperceptibly, transformed me from a cheap Excursion conductor to a Tourist Organiser and Manager'. The tours were particularly popular with women who could travel unaccompanied safe in the knowledge that they had in Cook a travelling chaperone of impeccable moral standing.

In 1862 the Scottish railway companies, who had always had mixed feelings about the economic benefit of tourist travel, refused to let Cook issue any more train tickets for his excursions and tours. After a period of despondency when he felt sure his precarious business would fold, he looked to the Continent, now opening up with improved transport links and communications. He had been running occasional overseas trips since the 1850s that had given him invaluable experience in managing all the numerous inconveniences that might deter the independent traveller. In 1863 he secured a favourable deal with France's Western Railway that gave him cheap access to the newly established Newhaven-Dieppe route to Paris. From there he could extend the package with tours to Switzerland and northern Italy.

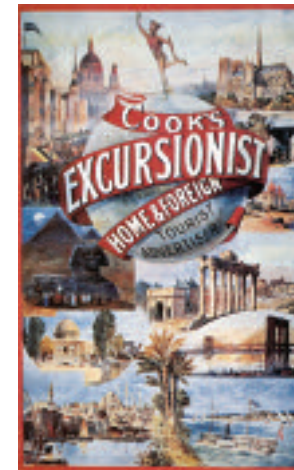


Cook's Scottish handbook (Thomas Cook Archives).



Cook's Continental timetables and handbook, the European traveller's bible (Thomas Cook Archives).

Although purists scoffed at the way tourists were rushed from one 'must see' site to another with little pause for contemplation, and were dismayed that local hotels and restaurants began pandering to British tastes rather than asserting their distinctive style, many of those who joined the tours did so with a spirit of adventure, seeing places they would never have risked going to without Cook's guiding hand. Cook continued to put philanthropy before profit, operating on tiny margins and, to the despair of his more entrepreneurial son, John, allowing Baptists and teetotalers to sometimes travel at cost.



Cook's Excursionist, a practical handbook and publicity tool (Thomas Cook Archives).

Poster produced for the South Eastern & Chatham Railway to promote rail links with round the world travel tickets offered by the tour operator Thomas Cook & Son. (National Railway Museum – Pictorial Collection/Science and Society Picture Library).

It was John who conducted the company's first package tour of North America in 1866 while his father was taking an inaugural trip to Rome. Three years later, Cook took his first party to Egypt and the Holy Land, telling the *Leicester Journal* that it was 'the greatest event of my tourist life'. By 1872, a year after John was made a full partner in the company, Cook described Egypt and Palestine as 'the two greatest features in our present programme' as the Middle East had quickly established itself as a winter holiday resort, providing the company with year-round work in what had previously been a seasonal business.

That same year, Cook made a trial run of his most ambitious project, a round the world tour. He left Liverpool with his small party of pioneer travellers on 26 September 1872 and, travelling westward, went on to New York, Niagara, Detroit, Chicago, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Yokohama, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Ceylon, India and the Middle East,

arriving home 222 days later. Verne is alleged to have seen a promotional leaflet for Cook's trip and the idea that it was now possible to go around the world in relative ease fired his imagination. His biographer, Marguerite Allotte de la Fuÿe, wrote:

[The leaflet] pointed out that, thanks to the speed of new methods of transport, and the linking up of international time-tables, a complete voyage around the globe had now become no more than a holiday excursion, a mere jaunt taking no more than three months at the most. The trains and buses and steamers of Cook's and other tours began to whirl faster and faster in his head, describing an uninterrupted circle round the globe.

Thomas Cook retired from the travel business in 1879 and died in 1892.

Selection of promotional posters (Thomas Cook Archives).

