by David Haydock

From 2001 to 2007 Today’s Railways Europe was able to report on the fascinating story of how a group of mainly UK and American companies took a controlling interest in Estonian Railways (Eesti Raudtee) then shook it up, bringing in a batch of GE diesels previously used in the USA. Among the American companies was Railroad Development Corporation (RDC), a company set up by one Henry Posner III which has made a speciality of turning round ailing railways across the world. The globe-trotting Mr Posner then started to take an interest in the constant contraction of wagonload services in France. Quietly, Posner was investigating the possibilities of taking over some or all of French wagonload traffic and making it pay. The final result was the creation of a joint venture known as RegioRail which TR EU reported last month.

At the same time, Posner had decided to bring financial aid and management expertise to a project to launch private passenger trains in Germany. The result was the HKX service which was launched in summer 2012. We travelled to Germany to test ride the train in the company of Henry Posner III himself.

A ride on the Hamburg-Köln Express

HKX was launched on 23 July 2012. The original plan had been to introduce three return trips per day on the Hamburg–Köln route, in competition with DB’s hourly IC service. However, problems with rolling stock led to an interim offer of between one and three trains per direction per day.

HKX was an idea first promoted by a company called Locomore, based in Berlin, which was founded in 2007 and became a railway undertaking licensed to operate both freight and passenger trains in 2008. The company was founded by Derek Ladewig and Carsten Carstensen, who had formerly worked for Veolia Verkehr and had been instrumental in relaunching that company’s InterConnex passenger service. The pair needed capital in order to launch a private passenger service and this eventually came from RDC and Michael Schabas, who had, amongst many other things, set up GB Railways in Britain. HKX first announced its intention to operate from Hamburg to Köln on October 2009, but it took almost three years to launch the first trains.

Traction and rolling stock

When HKX was seeking rolling stock, the company was looking for coaches which were comfortable and which could operate in Germany and possibly elsewhere. In the end, HKX settled for Class 4010 EMUs which had recently been withdrawn by Austrian Railways (ÖBB). These 6-car units, of which 29 were built by SGP from 1965 to 1978, were composed of a Class 4010 power car, a Class 6010 driving trailer and Class 7010, 7110 and 7310 intermediate trailers. The units were described in Platform 5 Publishing’s Austrian Railways stock book as “very comfortable” and had pressure ventilation from the beginning, some of them later receiving full air conditioning.

HKX purchased a total of nine power cars and 43 trailers. The units chosen were mostly withdrawn in 2008–09 with a few out of service since 2006–07 and one since 2004.
It was quickly decided that the power cars would not be used as they were not too reliable and required a high level of maintenance. Modern electric locos would instead be leased for traction and the Class 4010s were scrapped, except for 4010 001 donated to a preservation group. HKX also scrapped the one restaurant car it bought.

A second decision was not to use the driving trailers (d.t.s) as such – this would have required extensive rewiring for compatibility with modern locos. Instead, the plan was to create six trains of six coaches, all but one with a driving trailer at each end. The reason for this is that only the d.t.s have conventional buffers and couplers – connections between cars are semi-permanent by solid bars. Maximum speed will be raised from 150 to 160 km/h as was the case for a small number of Class 4010 in the past. Trials were carried out at the Velim test circuit in the Czech Republic during 2012, and it was then found that modifications, including fitment of a new braking system, would be necessary to achieve this. Seating will remain basically as before (2+1 seating in open coaches and six seats per compartment in others), the main change being the addition of a wheelchair lift and door to one car together with space and toilet for the disabled. A 6-car set will have about 330 seats.

**Class 4010 coaches acquired by HKX**

Class 4010 driving trailers (11), 42 first class (2+1),
toilet, washroom: 6010 001, 004, 006, 013, 016, 018, 022, 023, 024, 025, 029.
Class 7010.1 trailers (10), 60 second class (2+1),
Class 7110.1 trailers (11), 66 second class
Class 7110.2 trailers (10), 60 second class
(10 compartments), 2 toilets: 7110 201, 206, 207, 208, 212, 213, 219, 222, 223, 224.

For the record, nine power cars also originally sent to SFW Delitzsch in May/June 2009 but not retained for use and subsequently scrapped:
4010 001, 004 (fire damaged), 006, 007, 008, 013, 016, 021 and 029.
Restaurant car 7310.001 was also scrapped.

Below: HKX driving trailer 6010 022 is seen being hauled by loco 124 601 at the Velim test circuit on the same date. Quintus Vosman
The company moved all of the coaches, and power cars, from Austria to SFW Delitzsch during May and June 2009. This was to be a “staging post” while a company was found to carry out refurbishment. HKX chose Polish company H Cegielski, but the company ran into trouble and work has been severely delayed. The planned launch in 2011 was put back several times.

With other preparations well advanced, HKX decided to launch a limited service in July 2012. For this the company managed to obtain a set of former TEE Rheingold air-conditioned coaches (see table) from Netinera which had used them on its Alex service from München. These coaches are all formerly first class, with side corridors and 6-seat compartments, all except one having been refurbished for Alex services. One coach is a composite, half of which has plastic-covered former second class seats. In fact, the train is single class, almost all passengers riding in former first class accommodation. Locos used are Taurus electrics ES 64 U2-026, 030 and 034, all hired from MRCE. In the case of the TEE stock, the train is top-and-tailed by two locos, both of them powered.

In order to cover extra trains over the weekend, HKX hires a second train, this time from Veolia subsidiary Nord-Ostsee-Bahn (NOB) which operates trains north from Hamburg with diesel traction. This stock is completely different, having been built recently by Bombardier, with wide entrance doors, an open seating arrangement (with around 300 seats compared with 250 on the TEE rake) and push-pull capability. The train thus only needs one locomotive and is used from Friday morning until Sunday evening. Veolia carries out heavy maintenance on the trains, but has to haul them with diesel traction to Husum, 150 km north of Hamburg, to do this.
Who is Henry Posner III and what is he doing in Europe?

The first Henry Posner was a Polish immigrant who arrived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the early 20th century. He made a fortune in the billboard and neon sign business, and finally plumped for the creation of a joint venture with Eurorail. The result may be the same. Fret SNCF is still shedding wagonload traffic, whilst its competitors are cutbacks in wagonload services in France, and the clear disinterest shown by SNCF, he seeing the continuous cuts in wagonload services in France, and the clear disinterest shown by SNCF, he even offered to take over the whole of the French network but was eventually rebuffed – it was a far too political move. However, he continued to study the French scene closely and finally plunged for the creation of a joint venture with Eurorail. The result may be the same. Fret SNCF is still shedding wagonload traffic, whilst its competitors are succeeding in winning some traffic back and are now working together and gradually building a “network” piecemeal.

In 2009 RDC joined two other partners in Germany to form Hamburg-Köln Express (HKX) with the aim of operating passenger trains on the eponymous route. RDC is the major shareholder (75%), and has invested €16 million in the project, but joined Locomore Rail, a company set up in 2007 to run passenger trains in Germany (17.5%) and Michael Schabas (7.5%). Schabas is a Canadian who came to London in 1988 and has since participated in several major rail projects. In 1995 he founded GB Railways and went on to run the Anglia Railways franchise (later absorbed), GB Railfreight (taken over by First Group then sold to Eurotunnel) and Hull Trains (also taken over by First).

Many details of Henry Posner’s experience in the USA taken from Fred W. Frailey’s article on Iowa Interstate in the June 2011 issue of US magazine Trains.

Having launched the service with success, and with the purchased stock nowhere near ready, HKX has decided to hire more stock as soon as possible, with the aim of operating the three daily train pairs originally planned. In principle, three train pairs a day can be operated with two trains, although not on the present timetable because of turnaround times at each end.

Staffing and prices

HKX decided at an early stage to leave the provision and maintenance of the train to a subcontractor, signing up Veolia to carry out the task. Veolia therefore provides the driver and the train captain, who is responsible for safety and technical details, while HKX deploys three stewards on each train, one of whom is also the team leader. HKX has recruited staff who must speak both German and English and has gone out of its way to seek diversity, of origins, age and sex, “to reflect the Germany of today.” The result is an interesting mix, stewards including one Brazilian (additional Portuguese) and a Kazakh (Russian). Few of the on-board stuff, or managers, has previous railway experience. CEO of HKX and head of RDC Deutschland is Eria Kreienkamp, who previously worked in various marketing and management positions with large non-railway companies.

The stewards are responsible for checking or selling tickets, then ensuring that the passengers are comfortable – and supplied with refreshments if they wish. This is seen as a “nice way to be pleasant to customers” which it certainly is. Most passengers take advantage of refreshments as prices are very reasonable, especially by standards on board trains and planes in general. All soft drinks, such as Coca-Cola and mineral water...
Today's Railways Europe early bookers. The highest fare is charged to cheapest fares, as usual, being available to reductions possible with Bahncards), the it operations management or marketing. Köln are usually alone in their function, be about 40 staff – those in the headquarters in Altogether, HKX is currently employing historic data on which to base its pricing. deal at present because the system has little available yield-management programme to sell it was necessary to book over a month forward trains were completely booked up. We found a Saturday, but that two of the Sunday return or €38 were available the day after booking, we tested the website we found that fares of €33 – fewer than 5% – actually pay on board. When it was necessary to book over a month forward from Hamburg. I actually prefer open stock Routing and frequency The company has chosen one of the busiest passenger routes in Germany in order to test its concept – Köln–Hamburg itself is very busy, but the addition of the big cities in the Ruhr makes the route very lucrative. HKX trains can only operate at 160 km/h and it is therefore a little delicate to slip them between existing DB services, as these mainly use 200 km/h stock. In order to get over this, and save about 20 minutes, HKX trains do not serve another potentially money-spinner – the city of Bremen. The company has considered a halt at Sagehorn, but track work in progress at present, and poor connections have led to this idea being shelved for now.

So far, so good HKX says that it is happy at the way the service has operated so far. Timekeeping has been good, there have been no major problems and passenger numbers have been buoyant. Passengers seem happy to have an alternative to DB – especially a cheaper one. HKX was helped along by blanket media coverage. After a series of contretemps in the past few years, DB is not the most popular company in Germany and the press were happy to flag up a competitor.

It seems that a proportion of passengers are also of the “anything but DB” type, but there also some who like the old-fashioned, but eminently comfortable, accommodation on the trains. On my 4-hour journey from Köln to Hamburg, the average age of passengers was relatively low and I counted 164 on the theoretically unpromising 12.01 Köln–Hamburg on a late October Tuesday. The 5-car train can carry 276 passengers, so a near 60% load factor. HKX said that a large proportion of passengers are new to rail and happy to flag up a competitor.

In order to judge the competition, I caught a DB InterCity train back to Köln from Hamburg. I actually prefer open stock to compartments most of the time, but the seats in the DB IC were like concrete and the coach produced a horrible rumble at higher speeds. In addition, the “conductor” seemed to be a time-served jobsworth who checked tickets without a single smile during the 4-hour journey. The “Herzlich Willkommen” uttered after each stop sounded like it was read direct from the service manual. The best part of the DB InterCity experience was the BordRestaurant – a real restaurant car with a reasonably-priced plate of pasta and sauce plus side salad, all washed down with draught beer.

What next? The priority for HKX at present is to obtain more stock in order to run the full planned service, then to replace this stock with the former ÖBB 4010s once refurbished and approved. In the longer term, the company has no plans to expand on this route beyond three train pairs a day – there is no intention to introduce a frequent service similar to that run by DB, but to offer an alternative. This level of service is similar to that offered by "low-cost" airlines on their busiest routes, but HKX managers are quick to quash the idea that the company is just a low cost operator. Although prices are certainly low at present, they will rise to take account of the market, and the company stresses the importance of service as well as price. Indeed, given the stock, they claim to be offering "first class comfort at second class prices".

In the longer term, HKX (using a different name) may seek out a second route on which to operate in Germany. The company has another potential trio of 6-car trains for this. However, the company has no plans to obtain 200 km/h traction and rolling stock which would be expensive. This severely reduces the scope of potential routes.

Thanks to Roland Beier for data on Class 4010 trains.