

Whitchurch Silk Mill's Six-Thousand Mile Connection

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Emily: Have you ever dreamed of exploring and discovering the world around you? How about retracing the steps of a famous historical figure? Hello and welcome to this week's episode of Hampshire HistBites. Well, we are speaking with Jon Pilkington, a Hampshire resident and explorer. Today we will be discussing John's adventures on the Old Silk Road and his journey from Whitchurch Silk Mill in Hampshire, all the way over to China.

Hello John. Thank you for speaking with us today. I was wondering whether you might be able to tell us a little bit about yourself.

John: Yes, of course. I am the luckiest person in the world because I make my living by going to faraway places and then coming back and telling stories about them.

I live in Winchester. I wasn't born here. I was actually born in Sheffield, so technically I'm a Yorkshire man. I came to Hampshire in 1976 because I got a job here.

I got a job with Hampshire County Council, and that was a great move actually, because my boss at the time, a man called Roger Brown, the County Planning Officer, believed in having people on the staff who weren't just local government officers. And he encouraged us to take unpaid leave if we had a good project and several of his staff did that during my time there.

My first trip was to South America. And in the end, during my 16 years working for the County Council, he managed to arrange no fewer than three sabbaticals for me. And each time I went off wrote a book about my travels and, those are still available on my website today. And on my 40th birthday, I decided to make a sideways move. So I handed in my notice and became a sort of full-time traveling explorer and started what I've been doing ever since. Here I am all these years later still doing it.

Emily: Now, I know that you've worked with Winchester Heritage Open Days and I know that you've done a talk about Roger Brown before.

John: Yes. I first became aware of Winchester Heritage Open Days just as a visitor and I loved it, I mean, right from the start. And in his retirement, Roger Brown devoted himself to building a model of Victorian Winchester and it was massive. It's sort of circular model and he paid great attention to detail that the houses in the model are exact, small scale replicas of what was in Winchester at the time.

So that model became the focus of his life. And so began the search for somewhere to put it on display and eventually the City Museum were doing a major refurbishment and they decided to devote the ground floor to Roger's model, because after all, it's the City Museum. It took a long time to install it. It came in about 25 separate pieces, I seem to remember, but

eventually it was up and running and because I'd known Roger and I knew a bit about the history of the model, I gave a talk for Heritage Open Days about that and went down very well. And they asked me to do the same again, the following year.

Emily: So we were going to talk in particular about a certain adventure that you went on today. We were going to talk about the travel from our very own Hampshire all the way over, across to China, across the Silk Road. Can you tell us the story? How did that happen?

John: Well, I've always been a fan of Marco Polo. In fact, I've got his book on my bookshelf, just here. A very dog-eared copy, I might say, because it came with me on my own journey following in his footsteps. And because I live not far away from Whitchurch, where people probably know there is a silk mill. I went to visit the silk mill before setting off and the manager there, called Bill Carr, said, Oh, you're going to sort of retrace the old caravans, are you? Well, he had a riddle for me to solve, because for years he'd known that Whitchurch got its raw silk from China, but he didn't know where it came from in China. In fact, it wasn't raw, it was ready spun. Whitchurch's people probably know it's a weaving mill. And so it received its silk ready spun from China. And that meant it had to be spun in a Chinese silk mill. And he gave me some clues and sent me off to find out where, Whitchurch silk comes from. And after a long journey and lots of adventures, I found that it came, at that time, from Suzhou Number One silk mill near the mouth of the Yangtze river, about 90 miles West of Shanghai.

Suzhou is very fortunate to place for it to come from because Marco Polo visited Suzhou and described it as the Venice of the East. And it's a good description because well, Marco came from Venice and Suzhou has canals just like Venice. So a very apt description and a very good place having started my journey. Well, I started in Whitchurch, but then I restarted in Venice in, tribute to Marco Polo, to finish it in Suzhou, and especially at Suzhou Number One Silk Mill. There's only one Suzhou, so it's a good name. I sort of talked my way in chatted with the lines and lines of women who were working these spinning machines. After a while, the management came out to see what, was going on. And I thought, oh no, I'm going to be arrested again. But they were very kind and I got a message that Bill Carr had written for me and I'd had translated into Chinese and so I sort of handed it over to the manager and he disappeared. After a while he came back with another message in Chinese and later, I got that translated and it said the staff of Suzhou number one, send greetings to their comrades at Whitchurch, and wish them every success in meeting their targets for the coming year. And of course was the height of communism in those days in China, So a very appropriate reply. And I took it back to Bill Carr and for many years it hung on the wall of the visitor center there, until eventually it got lost. So that was the excuse for my journey. It was a nice way that it turned out because having started my journey at which silk mill, eventually nine months later, I was able to finish the journey at the same place.

Emily: What a wonderful connection, being able to sort of, draw that line.

John: I'm so lucky because, you know, I love Hampshire and whenever I go away, I try and find some connection, but that one was handed to me on a plate really, and so that was one of the best trips.

Actually, it was one of the most difficult trips that I was incredibly frustrated not to be allowed to go through Iran and Afghanistan. Which were two countries central to Marco

Polo's journey and would have been central to mine except that they refused entry to me. And it had been annoying me for many years until eventually in 2011 I managed to go back again and fill in that missing bit through Iran and Afghanistan, which I'd had to fly over, much to my dismay, on the first trip. It was 26 years later that I completed the missing link and fetched up in the Chinese city of Kashgar and stood on the steps of the old British consulate there, in exactly the same place that, where I had stood 26 years earlier. So it took me all those years to complete the journey that I began in 1987. Can you believe it?

Emily: So how did your route sort of change? Cause if you've done parts of the route, what bits did you do each time? What did you do when you first started, on your first journey and then how did that compare to later?

John: Well, I had Marco Polo's book in my rucksack, as I've mentioned. And although he was sometimes a bit vague about the places that he visited because he was a storyteller as well, and sometimes it's thought he claimed he'd been to places where he hadn't. In fact one or two people think he never went to China in the first place, but I'm not one of those. But you can piece together the jigsaw and get a pretty good idea of the route that he took on his outward journey in 1272. Then he spent 16 years working for the Chinese Emperor as a sort of ambassador. And then finally came back again via a different, more northerly route.

So there are two routes that, you know, you could say are, you know authentic routes that Marco Polo took. I took the Southern route as far as the Iranian border, where I got stopped dead and had to fly around and then took up the route again on the other side, near the Chinese city of Kashgar and carried on. That was where I got arrested in China because Marco took the Southern route around the Takla Makan desert, so course I had to take the Southern route and it was on a road that was closed to foreigners, which is why I got arrested. So I've got Marco Polo to thank for that, but when I went back years later, I did complete that Southern route journey.

So it was not just filling in the Iranian and Afghan bits and that was it really. I can piece the bits together and say that everywhere that Marco Polo went, I went at one time or another. And of course I, you know, having spent many days crossing the Pamir mountains on foot I can empathise with his complaints about crossing the Pamir mountains on foot and how uncooperative his camels were, I can identify with all of that. And that's sort of partly why I like to travel the way I do, either walking, I love walking best of all, or using animals, like camels. Just sort of getting a feel for the places as he would have seen them and felt them because although the world is a very different place now, when you go to the remotest villages in the Pamir mountains, they haven't changed a jot, really, life goes on very much as it did then.

Emily: Do you feel like there's almost that sort of ability to understand it as he would have seen? Obviously, there are changes, but being able to see those remote areas, there's that comparison.

John: There are many changes, of course. And we know many things that he didn't know, like about air travel, and buses and trains, all things which were sort of so far in the future for Mark Polo. But then he knew things that we don't know or have lost about survival and he learnt the local languages of which there were many in Asia at the time that traveled there. So he was able to talk to local people and ask them questions about how they tilled the soil.

There was a substance unknown in Europe called asbestos, which was, and still is mined in Southern Xinjiang province. And he describes the remarkable properties of asbestos in his book, because he thought it was some kind of magic, which it is really, but of course, nobody knew about its cancerous qualities. So things that he knew that we don't know that we know that he didn't and, I'm lucky enough to have his book at my disposal, which I can very highly recommend to anyone. You don't have to read Italian, there are many translations available. It's one of the best travel adventure stories ever, I think.

I have to laugh because when he finally got back to Venice after 17 years away, with all these stories that he was telling, nobody believed him. They said, Oh, come on, Marco, you're making half of it up. And even on his death bed, he said, I haven't told you the half of it. So they said he was making things up. They called him 'Il Milione' in Venice, Mr. Million, because he always talked in terms of hundreds of thousands of this and that and they thought he was just exaggerating. So Mr. Million turned out to be more truthful than they realized.

Emily: Fantastic. I was going to say actually, as a point of historical context, can you maybe tell us a bit about the Silk Road in general, just so have a brief sort of introduction. I realise this may be in reverse.

John: Well, it wasn't just about silk, and silk wasn't even the most important products. There were many other things that were brought back from China including things like rhubarb, which was unknown in Europe at that time and ice cream, the Chinese discovered the ways of making and refrigerating ice cream, that turned out to be very popular. And there were noodles of course, which had been a basic food stuff in China for millennia, which came back with Marco Polo and the way of producing them he brought back, where it became, of course, Spaghetti. It's the same thing. So we owe lots of things to the Chinese and to Marco Polo and no doubt there are other things I haven't even thought of.

Emily: Why did you choose to start your journey along the Silk Road? Why did you choose to start it when you did?

John: Well, the story began a year earlier when, I don't know if people know, but the Chinese and the Pakistanis have always had a close trading relationship. This flourished after the partition of India and Pakistan started to develop its economic ties with China, but there was a great mountain barrier in the way called the Karakoram, which is a Western extension of the Himalayas. So for many years, the Chinese and Pakistanis together were engaged in building a road across those mountains.

It seemed an almost impossible project, but in 1986, I read a press release by the Pakistan tourist office that the Karakoram highway would be open that summer. So I immediately booked a flight to Islamabad and went on a kind of Ricky, an initial exploration to see if it might be possible to use this as a high point of a journey along the entire Silk Road.

And it was a high point of all my travels up to that time. It was only a sort of short because it was done in the spur of the moment and I only had just over a month of annual leave. So off I went, and the exploration was a very good preparation for the longer trip because I knew the sort of things that I would face when I went back the following year and did the whole thing. So that's why I did it when I did. I mean, it was a great moment. The 1st of May 1986, when the Karakoram highway opened to all comers and for the first time in 40 years, it became theoretically possible for Westerners like me to travel overland the whole way to China. I say

theoretically, because I wasn't allowed into Iran or Afghanistan, but for the first time in 40 years and that's quite something. It was around about the end of the second World War that China started to close up to foreigners and that culminated with the Great Chinese Communist revolution of 1949. It was a period of great disruption in China and generally speaking China was closed to the outside world and to go as a, an ordinary tourist, you know, I didn't have any special permit or anything. I just had my regular tourist visa and to travel by bus hitchhiking or later on by camel. I tried to avoid camels wherever possible. They're the most obnoxious animals or can be. A camel will not do anything you tell it to do until it decides it wants to do it for itself. And that can hold you up a bit. Marco Polo commented on that.

I don't want to be too rude about camels because, without them there would never have been a Silk Road because Ox's can't cross the desert and ponies, mules, donkeys, they can't cross the desert. The great deserts of central Asia are too wide too severe to be crossed by any animal except the camel. So of course human beings couldn't have crossed the desert without the camel until the motor car came along and then of course everything changed.

Emily: When you travel, you seem to sort of start off with sort of a rucksack and a tent and just head off and do it to explore.

And then as you come across things like the camels and other ways of travel, then use them when you get there. Would you recommend to others to travel that way?

John: Is that the way I like to travel? Sure is yes, absolutely.

A rucksack on my back and a tent, sleeping bag, a small cooking stove, enough food for a few days and off I go. And to be free to go this way or that way to change your plan, if there's a better alternative crops up. That is the way to do it for me. Of course, there are many sections of my journeys where you can't do that. I mean, you wouldn't want to do that if you're going on a long straight road you don't want to walk along the highway. You know, you take a bus. If you're going to places where there really is no pack animal trail or pack animal tradition. You have to go round; you have to probably take another bus or train and some of my best journeys have been by train. I came back from China after my Marco Polo trip on the Trans-Siberian express, it was a wonderful experience. I don't have any particular favorite means of transport. I think what you choose is just what's appropriate at the time and people do respond to lone traveler. People ask me, Oh, is terribly dangerous, what you do? And I suppose it can be, but I've never felt in any danger.

Emily: What would you say is sort of the most memorable moments of your trip across the Silk Road? Did you meet any particularly interesting people that have stuck in your mind?

John: I think the people I admire most are the Kyrgyz and the Wakhs of North East Afghanistan, because they eke out a living against almost impossible odds. And the Wahki stay in the same Valley and they live in small stone houses, but the Kyrgyz are semi-nomadic and every summer they go up to the high pastures with sheep, yaks, and camels and in winter, they come back down to the lowlands. And they live in their great big circular tents, that they call Yurts. And every season they dismantle their yurts and put them on the back over a couple of camels and start the long March to their next resting place. So these are nomads and I think the life of a nomad is probably the most difficult of all. Full of admiration for those people living often at altitudes of up to 4,000 meters, it's not easy.

Emily: that doesn't sound easy at all. Did you get the opportunity to meet, many people like that?

John: Yeah, I did. And that central part of the trip through Afghanistan, I was lucky enough, well, I say lucky enough, I was pretty well forced to have an interpreter and guide. Usually I travel on my own, but in Afghanistan you can't really do anything on your own. had to have, in this case two horses and two horsemen came along one with each horse, self-invited. And so there was four of us on this trip, the two horsemen, my interpreter, who described himself as a guide.

As an interpreter, he was absolutely invaluable because I don't speak Wahki or Kyrgyz, as a guide, he was pretty useless cause it turned out he hadn't been there before. So we were on our own as far as that was concerned, but those people especially the interpreter, enabled me to talk to the local people, and ask them questions. I would never have been able to ask on my own, such as how do you share your sheep? How much you say yak worth? And why do you put rancid yak butter in your tea? If you Google rancid yak butter, it's the staple of Tibetans as well as the mountain people of Afghanistan. it is an acquired taste I have to say, I grew to love it and it's very nutritious, of course. As people probably know a lot of tourists go to Tibet and most tourists when they have their first taste of rancid yak butter tea they want to throw up.

Emily: I was going to ask you, if you had to recommend a particular part of your route to whoever is listening, would there be a particular part you would suggest doing?

John: That's a difficult one because each country is so different.

Marco Polo of course started his journey through what we now call the Balkans, Yugoslavia in the days when I first went there. And I love that part of Europe. In fact, I love the whole of Eastern Europe. I've had many great experiences in Ukraine and in Romania, but if we stick to Marco Polo's route the best part is probably where you cross from Afghanistan to China. This is the Pamir mountains that I mentioned earlier, and the people that are so lovely and instructive in how to survive. You can learn a lot from them. For me, that really was a highlight of my journey.

Emily: What's next for you? Have you got any more plans coming up? Are you planning on going anywhere else? Have you got any hopes?

John: well, you've touched nerve there because the summer of 2020, I was supposed to be in Japan following some old pilgrimage trails through the Northern mountains, a route followed by a famous Japanese poet of the 16th century. I say famous, I mean, every Japanese knows the name of Matsuo Bashō, but that didn't happen, and it's not going to happen in 2021 either. I'm thinking of this as postponed rather than canceled and still keeping my fingers crossed that I'll be able go in 2022. So for the last two years, everything has been on hold for me as it has for all of us.

I'm luckier than the most, but that's where I'm hopefully going next. If all goes well.

Emily: Well, fingers crossed you're able to go there then.

John: Thank you. Yes. Fingers crossed for everybody.

Emily: What do you think your travels have taught you? If you have a resounding message from them? Is there anything in particular you want to tell our listeners?

John: It's that human beings are good.

Of course not all human beings and we all know well of course they always hit the headlines when they're not good, but 99% of human beings have nothing but goodness in them.

I give lots of talks at schools and I say this to the school children. Well, if there's sort of sixth formers they're often thinking about maybe going on some trip, either as part of a gap year or something else and I always say, go for it. Don't be put off by fear because fear of the unknown is the worst and most corrosive thing. The more you fear, the more you're likely to bring about the things that you're most afraid of. Now, I know that is different, sometimes for women because, we all know that women's experience of travel is different from that of men. And yet I know many women, friends who have traveled the world both with companions and solo and they all come back with the same story, have trust and faith in human nature and you will usually be alright.

Emily: I think that's an absolutely fantastic point and it's a really lovely sentiment to it.

And that brings us to the end of this week's episode. Be sure to tune in next week when John will be joining us again, to tell us more about his travels and adventures. Thank you for listening.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.