

# A Potted History

For 30 years, The British Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong has put business and Sino-British relationships at the forefront of its agenda. That mission, and its successful developments, is both an on-going challenge and privilege. – By Gina Miller



In 1987, a decade before the handover, 18 local British businessmen, best known as the “British Bulldogs”, organised The British Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong as a representative body for British Trade companies. With their eyes warily on the future – and with concerns over what the handover would bring, each man lightened his own pockets by HK\$100,000 to get the Chamber up and running. Among them were members of the National Westminster Bank, British-American Tobacco, Cable & Wireless, Inchcape, Shell, and GEC, along with others.

“Why bother to establish a British Chamber of Commerce, when the British Trade Commission in Hong Kong appears to be carrying out a perfectly adequate role?” asked Roger Lacey, the Vice-Chairman of the Chamber, in 1987 and Chairman in 1988/89.

Knowing that with the handover, the British Trade Commission would cease to operate, the creation of the Chamber was a pre-emptive move to ensure that

Britain’s business relationships in Hong Kong – and with China – remained strong.

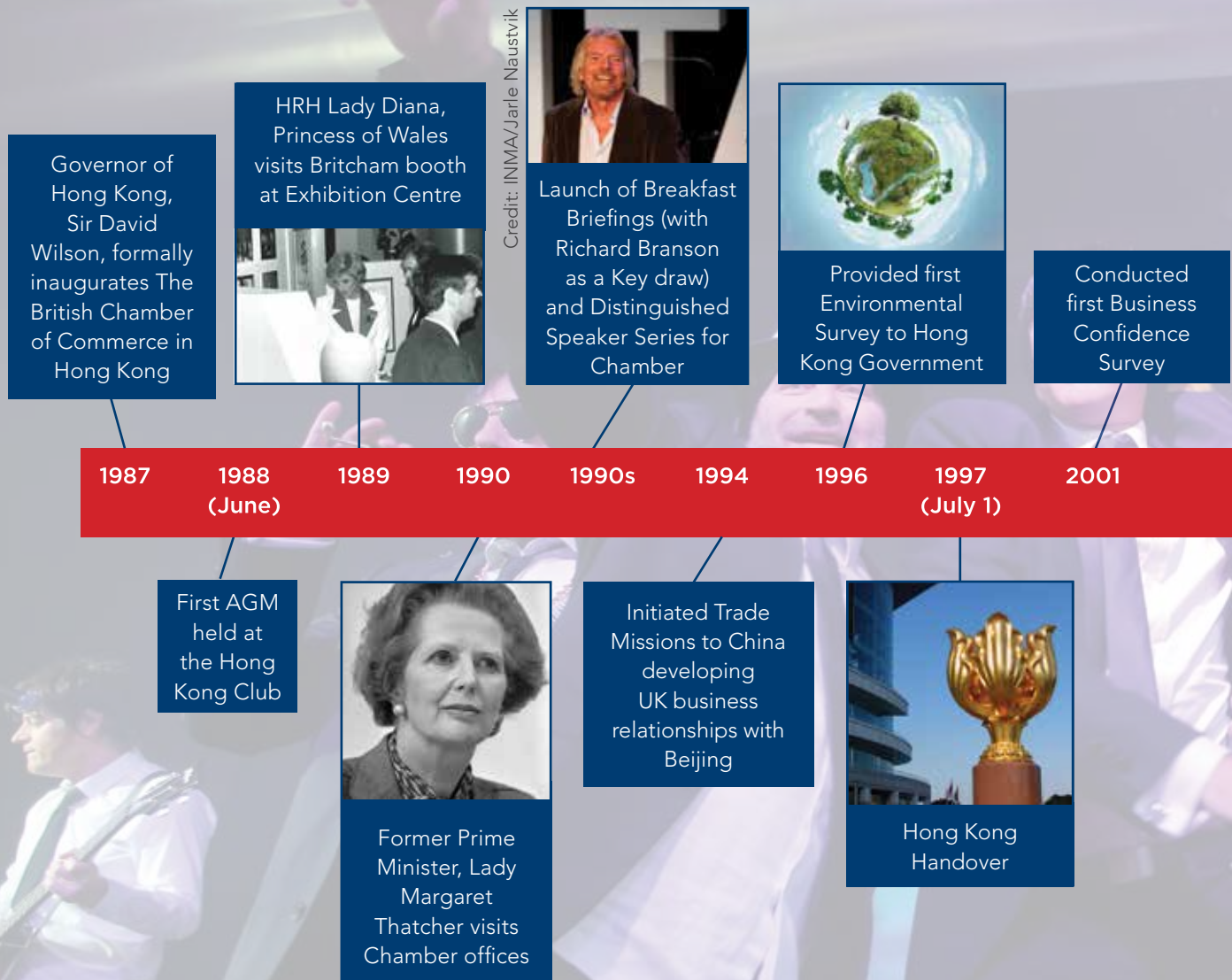
“About 10% of British sales to China are routed through Hong Kong and although many British companies are represented in China, this is quite an expensive process and as a result, many more have their offices in Hong Kong and travel regularly into the PRC. Anybody who has done business with China will know that it is a complicated place and doing business with the Chinese people is not easy” said Lacey in 1988.

On 19 May 1987, Sir David Wilson, the Governor of Hong Kong, formally inaugurated The British Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, and in October, His Royal Highness, The Duke of Gloucester, officially opened its offices.

Since that time, the Chamber has grown from 175 members to over 1,000, including major multinational companies and a substantial number of SMEs; and a







spectrum of British, Hong Kong, international and Chinese companies.

### The 1980s and 90s

The Chamber's early years were fraught with concerns over what Britain's role would be in the years to follow. How would the transfer of sovereignty affect the political and economic status of China's most economically developed city, and what would it mean for British interests?

By the mid nineties, the Chamber had found its pace, and under the direction of Executive Director Brigadier Christopher Hammerbeck, CB CBE, negotiations with Beijing were capably fought and strong relationships forged. Those years influenced

the Chamber's course for years to follow, with the aim to continue a strong working relationship with the governments in Beijing, Hong Kong and the UK.

Business has always been the beating heart of the Chamber, however, and Britcham's influence on the business sector – and as a model for other chambers in Hong Kong – is hard to beat. Britcham offered Breakfast Briefings and Distinguished Speaker Series from the 1990s; it initiated Trade Missions to China developing UK business relationships with Beijing in 1994; Britcham was the first to address school placements and availability; environmental concerns; and Hong Kong's ageing demographic concerns with the Hong Kong Government.



The Chamber also launched Hong Kong's first angel investor scheme (Business Angel Programme), and in recent years, launched its SME Marketplace as a dearly needed resource for Hong Kong SMEs.

For the past 30 years, the Chamber has held its Annual General Meetings at the Hong Kong Club, and since its committees were formed, it has responded to every Government White Paper with a submission of member's views and business concerns.

In recent years, Britcham has joined hands across the aisles to offer presentations and events with The American and Australian Chambers of Commerce, all the while maintaining its excellent

relationships with China through government offices as well as associations such as the China-Britain Business Council.

As ever, the Chamber avoids taking a political position at home and abroad; instead, supporting business relationships between the UK, Hong Kong, China and Asia in general.

In an age of demagogues, the Chamber's consistent stance and messaging has offered a calm haven while international trade and relations navigate some rocky shoals. We trust this good sense, and constant drive for the betterment of Hong Kong's business community, will be a guiding light for more decades to come. **B**