

UNDERGROUND CHALLENGE 1963

by Chris Niekirk

Geoff Marshall, every station in a day, *Underground News* No.666, would recognise the challenge in 1963. It was to weave a web, as it were, looping the outer loose ends of the system, then zooming inwards to duck and dive in the centre to reorientate without U-turns or duplication of stations. Lines as such are irrelevant. Here, local knowledge 'on the ground' and operationally is essential.

No Heathrow nor Jubilee nor Victoria lines existed, though I believe work had already curtailed the timetable on the (Great) Northern & City, shortly to close and still featuring Metropolitan 'diamond' signage. But still open were Watford Junction, Aldwych, Ongar and the Metropolitan's East London Line, leaving only the District intact, apart from South Acton which had already closed.

The interplay of ticket availability with station opening restrictions made timing critical, both of the date and on the day. The then Twin Rover (bus and Underground) rover tickets were restricted Mondays to Fridays after 09.30, not beyond Rickmansworth and then only in August – the terrible trio of Aldwych, Shoreditch and Olympia were only peak hours or exhibition service.

So, in 1963, inspired by a press report of a bowler-hatted city gent's success at 16 hours 37 minutes, wined and dined by five office girls in contemporary clothing, my initial attempt in March using bus links began at 04.20 from Hounslow West, and very soon diverted to a U-turn at West Kensington (District) because of a ballast train losing irrecoverable time. This was compounded later by shunting into Queen's Park sheds on the Bakerloo Line. Finally, after 20 hours, the "public transport" record as it transpired, I just missed the one last train.

Numerous bus/sprint links being unpredictable, the second attempt enlisted six fellow students with mopeds or motorcycles, controlled centrally via phone boxes, based on my timetables with plans 'B' and 'C' against delays or contingencies. This went surprisingly well, even when bikes had to race trains occasionally, typically 18 links to 38 trains totalling nearly 50 miles. I still sprinted where appropriate, as from Euston Square to Warren Street. At 16 hours exactly we had the record, unaware that a rival team would shortly do better and not until August would we do better still.

Hitherto, the Guinness record had not been the issue as such, but enquiries led us to discover the "London Underground Rovers", based of course in Margate, presided over by no less than 'our own' (Sir) John Betjeman. Long established, they had once excluded the Met. steam lines beyond Rickmansworth. They had evolved a somewhat bureaucratic definitions of 'visits' whereby, for example, eastbound Piccadilly trains miss Chiswick Park and Stamford Brook by passing between but not *along* the platforms. I believe they also frowned on a BR link such as New Cross to London Bridge though a bus would do. Debate became almost metaphysical!

Our fourth and final attempt in August avoided the 13-mile Ongar to Upminster link by camping at Ongar, to start at 06.14. The very officious Station Master was up and doing but not the dreaded scorpions! Timing at Upminster was 14 hours 58½ minutes, the then record. Happily, Norris McWhirter of Guinness Superlatives agreed, probably consulting the LUR, despite the one 'missing' Chiswick Park. At issue thereby 272/273 stations, but of course typically 23 passed twice and three thrice, mostly at intersections. Several stations are of course 'double', mostly on the H&C but also Ealing Broadway because of separate ownerships in LT's definition

Looking back to duodecimal days, the ticket was 10/-, nearly half a guinea, a phone call 4. d and the "Tube Cheater" station exit guide 6d. Back in 2012 we might have had an Olympic Games entry perhaps with folding bikes. *Underground News* No.534 reported an attempt with *two* bikes Changes in the system and procedures make comparisons invidious but references in *Underground News* No.465 and 505/6/7 to such competitors as a James Bond and a Robert Robinson quoted timings not unlike mine, 20 hours or so with public transport, and even 15 hours exactly Ongar to Upminster, obviously with assistance.