

UNDERTAKING THE TUBE CHALLENGE

by Geoff Marshall

A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Clubhouse
on Tuesday 14 March 2017

Geoff is a two times holder of Guinness World record for visiting all London Underground stations. To achieve the record, you must travel to all stations through which an Underground train can pass on that day in fastest time possible. You don't have to get out of the train at each station, just travelling through a station is fine. However, Guinness Superlative rules dictate the need for evidence which includes a log book with timings signed once per hour (this log must record the time of arrival and departure from each station, to the minute) along with photographic evidence of each station as you pass through with an accurate time stamp.

Only London and New York City are accepted by the Guinness Book of Records for a Tube/Metro Challenge. Geoff first heard of this challenge in 2000 and has now attempted it over 30 times.

Planning is an essential part of the process. Geoff treats the geographical map of the Underground as spokes on a wheel and always starts an attempt in the top left hand corner (Amersham or Uxbridge). He once tried starting at Morden but it was an unmitigated failure!

The first time that Geoff undertook the Challenge was in 2002 which was pre-Oyster and so paper tickets for Zones 1 – 9 travelcard had to be purchased. Geoff still advises doing this as it can be hard to explain to Oyster why you've been on the system longer than the 2 hours' journey maximum without touching out!

The challenge cannot be achieved by just riding from end to end on a line. You also have to run between some stations or use scheduled public transport – you can't be picked up in a car, use a taxi or hire a "Boris Bike". The longest run is Cockfosters to High Barnet. So, fitness is an important element, especially the ability to run up the stairs at Covent Garden in just over a minute! In his planning, Geoff noticed that the posters at the bottom of the stairs at Covent Garden, Hampstead and Russell Square all had that their staircase was the equivalent of a 15 storey building, even though the actual number of steps are 193, 320+ and 175 respectively.

Most attempts are made in late-Spring or early-Autumn as the weather is best for running and it is light into the evening. The Winter months can be spent at Covent Garden running up the stairs!

The first record that Geoff tried to beat was 275 stations in less than 19hours, 18minutes and 45seconds. He achieved this in May 2004, beating the record by 43 minutes and 2 seconds on his seventh attempt. By this time, he had spent 129 hours, 19 minutes and 14 seconds involved in the Tube Challenge.

In August 2005, Geoff organized and took part in the Tube Relief Charity Challenge for the victims of 7/7 and raised over £10k. He got people to come along, including Richie Firth from Absolute Radio).

Geoff has made use of Information Technology in his planning. The on-line forum "Tube Challenge.com" is a community of fellow challengers who share hints and tips. The Working Timetables for each line are a necessity and the "Way Out" map is very useful. Geoff also drew 3D diagrams of each station to show quickest routes to change trains. On-board Wi-fi has made communication with support teams much easier for food delivery, service updates, etc.

With the closure of the East London Line the 275 stations no longer applied and so the battle to achieve the new 270 stations in the fastest possible time began. On his 14th attempt, Geoff thought he'd done it when he achieved all 270 stations in 16 hours 39 minutes; but someone else had beaten the time to 16h 29m 57s (just over 14 minutes faster) a few days earlier.

Some further attempts followed and by February 2012, Geoff had spent 304 hours 52m 17sec (which is the equivalent of over 12 days) on the Challenge, and travelled 2,637 miles.

There are many reasons for unsuccessful attempts including injury, signal failure, train breakdown, missing the last train on a branch (Olympia and Heathrow T5 being especially difficult to achieve nowadays).

Another charity attempt in December 2012 was undertaken with Absolute Radio's Richie Firth (Christian O'Connell's sidekick) as well as Geoff leading a group of 20 in a "Walk the Tube" challenge.

In August 2013 on attempt number 25, Geoff achieved the 270 stations in 16hours 20minutes and 27seconds, setting a new record by 10minutes and 25seconds. This was published in the Guinness Book of Records for 2013 and the official certificate presented for the last time, as Guinness no longer includes this record in the book. This is the only reward. Apparently, British Transport Police have gold Oyster cards (well, yellow but they look gold) but TfL don't give them to record breakers.

Geoff's record has been beaten subsequently, including by Clive Burgess in 16hours, 14minutes and 10seconds at the age of 55! The current record is now 15 hours 45 minutes, mainly due to increased service frequencies and faster running times.

When the Northern Line extension opens in 2020 and the Croyley Met. link follows (if it's ever opened?!), this will add five new stations to the network – Geoff expects that 30+ people will be there on the first weekday to try again.

In the Summer of 2017, Geoff and his girlfriend are travelling through all 2,560 National Rail stations over three months and this can be followed on-line.

The meeting thanked Geoff in the usual manner for a very interesting talk, presented with great enthusiasm, and then a period of question and answers followed, which included:

Q. *Does everyone have to use the same route?*

A. Geoff replied that the Tube Labyrinth posters uses the same sequence as the record set in 2012 with the numbers printed in the bottom right-hand corner i.e. 1/270; 2/270, etc., so a lot of people now use this. Geoff's best tip is to have a route but don't stick to it rigidly. For instance, you can use the Overground in the Harrow area as it runs on the same rails as the Bakerloo Line and this may permit a better connection.

Q. *How did Geoff achieve his improved times?*

A. Through better route and time planning, experience and fitness. Never start at Morden – always Amersham or Uxbridge. You can catch buses from station to station and "bus apps" are a great help.

Q. *Will Crossrail be included in the Tube Challenge?*

A. It depends upon Guinness' opinion which won't be announced until the line is open. But it could be used to jump between stations as you are allowed any form of scheduled public transport.

Q. *Where do you find yourselves at height of rush hour?*

A. Geoff responded that you should never try to change trains at Green Park at 17.30! Exact carriage and fastest route knowledge helps a lot along with carriage hopping (getting out of one carriage and then into the next whilst at a station) to get from front to back or vice versa whilst on the journey.

Q. *Do Paddington and Hammersmith count as one or two stations?*

A. They count as two as do both Shepherd's Bush and Edgware Road. Olympia is now very awkward to get to with such a reduced service since 2009. However, sometimes a service interruption can be helpful such as if the District might be diverted to Olympia.

Geoff finished by talking about how the lack of toilet facilities can be a problem when undertaking the challenge (drinks bottles can come in very handy!). Although he did do an attempt alongside a member of staff who had a key to the staff toilet at Aldgate. Geoff did it in 30secs and still caught a connection!

Amanda Griffiths