

LONDON UNDERGROUND'S EDWARDIAN TILE PATTERNS

by Doug Rose

(author of the book "Tiles of the Unexpected")

A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Club House
on Tuesday 10 November 2015

The meeting welcomed Doug Rose, not only author of the book "Tiles of the Unexpected" but also author of a series of publications depicting diagrammatic histories of the London Underground.

Doug began by pointing out that the presentation was about early forms of graphic communication and not tiling *per se*. The three railways which we are familiar with (the Bakerloo, Piccadilly and Hampstead) all opened in 1906-07, when a brave decision had been made about how the platforms were going to be decorated. London was thus the home of the most extensive tiling project then undertaken in Britain. The talk, therefore, would be about this subject.

He explained that a small group of people back in 1982 had discussed the tiling schemes with him, having spent the previous two or three years trying to record them – the colours on the stations and their patterns. It was realised that there were over 40 stations, each one having unique tiling scheme. Doug was very interested in the project, not really realising what he was letting himself in for. He began the talk by explaining that original stations, such as Baker Street (Metropolitan), where as much natural light as possible was used, was augmented by gas lighting. This worked well for sub-surface lines but would not work in deep level tube tunnel stations. A view of the northbound platform at King's Cross on the City & South London Railway showed what the lighting was like on a tube tunnel station platform. There was no natural light so the whole of the platform walls and the vault were covered in plain white tiles to make the best use of what lighting there was available, bearing in mind that electricity was then still very much in its infancy.

In the early-1900s there was a boom in underground railway construction. The Bakerloo had been partly built at various locations, rather than construction beginning at one end and progress to the other. It was financed by the London & Globe company with one Whitaker Wright in charge. At the same time, Charles Tyson Yerkes was making his fortune in America in the railway industry (reputedly by dubious means and making himself quite wealthy!).

We were told that Whitaker Wright was an out-and-out criminal. The London & Globe company had collapsed through financial mis-dealings and he fled to America. At the same time Yerkes had extracted as much money out of America as he could and came to the UK. Whitaker Wright was extradited when he landed in America and he was sent straight back to England where he was arrested and tried for his financial mis-dealings at the Law Courts, being sentenced to seven years imprisonment. However, on his way to the cells, he committed suicide, to the huge embarrassment of the court officials. It was the work of these two dubious characters to which we owe much to three of our early underground railways!

By 1907 all of the Yerkes tube lines had opened. Doug believed that the original plan for the station platforms was to have seen white tiles used throughout but as electricity was becoming a more viable option, this was to change the plan radically. Yerkes appointed an architect, Leslie W. Green RIBA (who was not a crook!) to design all of the stations. However, Doug thought that in the short time available, Green would not be able to deal with all the stations, but has found no evidence to back this up. Green is thus credited with it all and the feel of all the tube stations undoubtedly have his influence.

We first saw Leslie Green stations at surface level, all of them being built with flat roofs so that they could be developed above at a later date, which has subsequently happened at many. The huge elevations at Chalk Farm are pretty much intact to this day, having the longest run of the characteristic arches above the station. The impression of the design being deceptively simple was a false one – a close look at how the glazed red bricks (which were from the Leeds Fire Clay Company) interlocked with each other revealing it to be far from so. A view of the booking hall at Russell Square then followed and we saw an example of the Maxim arc lamp lighting, which was also used at station entrances and on platforms.

We then moved to platform level and it was explained to Doug in 1982 that something 'odd' had taken place at Trafalgar Square. In the photo of the southbound platform taken around opening of the line in 1906 we saw what was a typical Leslie Green platform design. However, on the northbound platform

it was plain white tiles all over, just like the City & South London and Central London stations. Thoughts were that it was the original intention to use plain white tiles on Yerkes stations but with the advances in electricity and increased lighting available, it was decided to have decorative tile schemes along the platforms, and painted plasterwork on the vault with tile rings (as seen looking along the platform) over the vault. Doug had concluded that the northbound platform was the first to be completed but the decision to change to tile patterns was taken soon after. It was, however, surprising that the passageways to and from the lifts at Trafalgar Square were 'reversed' in design – i.e. the northbound had Leslie Green coloured tiles whereas the southbound had plain white tiles.

The tiles measured 9"x3" and it is estimated that some 2-million were required for the Yerkes tube stations. Tile patterns were repeated along the platform wall which included, usually three times, the station name. Geographically, every platform was unique, all having cross passages in different places with platforms being off-set at many locations. The Bakerloo Line platforms were nominally 292ft long, whereas those of the Piccadilly and Hampstead were 350ft. Oxford Circus southbound, however, was different yet again in having no cross passageways – it had an uninterrupted wall and the access to the lifts was in the headwall at the south end of the platform.

It was soon realised that the project to record the tiling patterns was far more involved than had been envisaged. The spacing of the overhead rings were all different because of cross-passages and the need for name panels. It was the 'general rule' that tile rings over the vault were single, separating each pattern panel, but where there was an access point or station name panel, double rings were provided, which drew attention to both when looking along the platform.

One station thought to be an easy one to start with was Holloway Road, close to where Doug lived, but having established that the tiles were 9"x3" those down the middle of many of the pattern panels were not neither full nor half tiles, but 'bits' because the spacing of the rings, dictated by the cross-passage openings, meant that some panels didn't divide up into 9-inch sections. It was obvious the whole project as going to take time so Doug decided to visit all the surviving Leslie Green stations to understand what remained. Regent's Park turned about to be one of the least altered and had the bonus of fewer posters covering up the tiles, unlike most others. Closer inspection revealed who provided the tiles – W.B. Simpson & Sons (of London) was found at Regent's Park. G. Woolliscroft & Son Ltd. also provided tiles (both of them having their names on very occasional tiles – though by no means at all stations). Both companies were involved with tiling most of the stations but a third company, the Permanent Decorative Glass Company did a smaller number.

In documenting the tile patterns it was immediately obvious that no assumptions could be made, in filling out the missing sections, this being borne out at Oxford Street (now Tottenham Court Road). In the early-1980s, London Transport's station modernisation programme was under way and it was realised that a lot of the stations would soon be changing. Fortunately Doug was introduced to some sympathetic and friendly people on LT's Architects department, who kept him informed of what was going to be happening a year or so hence, so he had to keep ahead with his documentation. The stations most under threat were thus the top priority.

But by 1935, 17 station platforms had already 'gone' through closure or modernisation (eight at Brompton Road, Down Street, York Road and South Kentish Town closed, six at Leicester Square and two at Knightsbridge modernised, one at Holborn and Strand [Aldwych] abandoned and one never opened at South Kensington deep-level District). Furthermore, Baker Street, Charing Cross, Highgate [Archway] and Oxford Circus had disappeared for various individual reasons when Doug had started the project in earnest. He had also decided to leave the 'disused' stations to the end as it was thought unlikely that these would be altered in the time span. First priority, therefore, were those stations under 'threat' from modernisation.

In the meantime, at Waterloo on the Bakerloo Line, there was just one name panel where the station name had been fired into the tiling – but it was covered up with paint! It took over a year for agreement to be given to remove the paint. The station name finish was different from all the other Leslie Green stations, in that the name was in green, four tiles high and was noticeably much thinner than other stations' brown and thicker lettering and five tiles high (but even these varied). It was thus concluded by Doug that Waterloo was the first station to be tiled in Leslie Green style, not the single southbound platform at Trafalgar Square. In the light of experience (at Waterloo) Doug also believes that the lettering in green was thought too weak and therefore made larger, in brown. Doug also illustrated the

fussy and complex tiling where the base of the rings met the plinth, which must have been a tile-fixer's nightmare.

Because even the brown five-tiles-high station names were different, Doug then went around the system tracing each individual letter of every surviving name panel on the wall. He recalled that in those days you could just turn up at a station with a pad of A2 tracing paper, pencil and sticky tape and nobody (passengers or staff) would bat an eyelid while you got on with what you needed to do – he thus considered himself lucky for it to be done when it was! Permission was given for Embankment to be traced overnight, but that in itself presented another dilemma. In first stripping off the layers of posters, he came across a 1951 Festival of Britain poster and it was over the station name that needed to be traced. On the basis that it was going to be destroyed anyway (because of modernisation) it was thoroughly photographed before being stripped away. The station name was found to be much bolder (and in brown) and the same as Regent's Park, than at Waterloo. Another station that needed urgent attention was Goodge Street which revealed "Tottenham Court Rd" underneath. Because the station name was too long to fit into the panel between the passageways, it is the only example of a name ('Rd') having to be abbreviated on any of the Yerkes stations. Later, having got tracings of hundreds of individual letters, it became very obvious that none of them were literally speaking identical and visually there were distinct differences in the style of alphabets – Simpsons had two styles, whereas Woolliscroft and the Permanent Decorative Glass Company had one style each – though this only became apparent while this particular exercise was being carried out.

We then turned to the temple pillar 'Way Out' (and 'No Exit') signs and it was soon evident that there were two different types, one having pillars in a very pale green with a brown outline and a slightly raised pipe edge round the edge of them to 'lift it out', whereas the other style had pillars in cream and were completely flat. It transpired that W.B. Simpson tiles had Way Out signs with light green pillars and G. Woolliscroft tiles had the cream pillars. It was therefore possible to identify which companies had tiled which station, backed up by the pattern on the tile backs from tiles that had fallen off and hadn't been replaced, though only about half the stations had the Way Out and No Exit signs in the tilework, and none from the Permanent Decorative Glass Company.

In summary:

Simpson stations:

- Thick lettering at the early stations.
- Thinner lettering at the later stations.
- Way Out signs with light green pillars (not at every station).
- Double dovetail tile back grips.

Woolliscroft stations:

- Thinner (outlined) lettering.
- Way Out signs with cream pillars (not at every station).
- Three different styles of tile grip back.

Permanent Decorative Glass Company stations:

- Slightly thicker lettering.
- No Way Out signs at all.
- Weak double circular tile back grip.

Meanwhile, the station modernisation programme was continuing and there were still plenty of stations to survey. It was found that London Transport's photographic collection had almost no photographs that were of any value to the project that were taken before the Second World War, but there were just a few taken in the 1920s when deep level tube stations were having 'anti suicide pits' built. One example was at Chalk Farm where tiles had since been destroyed, painted over or fallen off. From this photograph it was possible to establish the pattern on three panels there. Belsize Park, the next station north, was described by Doug as 'astonishing', having panels of different widths varying from 12 tiles up to 19 tiles. Another example of a station in a poor state was Elephant & Castle and it was only when he was alerted to its forthcoming modernisation that he was able to capture some of the design. The station name tiles were not abbreviated but the 'and' was in tiles just two tiles high. An interesting variation was Golders Green, which was an open-air station, but the staircases from the ticket hall subways to the platforms did receive patterned tiles. Another station in a bad state before refurbishment was Hampstead but the tiled name was "Heath Street" (it's intended name but changed close to opening).

We noted that at some stations the bottom of the pattern panels were not tiled. At some of the stations to be tiled later, money was tight and so lower sections of pattern panels lacked tiles and left in unfinished concrete condition, ten such stations being finished thus. It was the intention in the early

days that no adverts would be applied to the tiles to spoil them, but within about a year adverts began to appear and these lower un-tiled sections, which had wooden formers top and bottom, were used for that purpose.

Piccadilly Circus was probably the most complex and difficult to survey as much had changed (and much lost) in the 1928 rebuilding. Taking a year and 29 visits to survey, points to note were:

- Originally, Bakerloo and Piccadilly Line passengers were segregated at ticket hall level and each line had its own lifts.
- Emergency spiral stairs comprised a double helix which came out at booking hall level which prevented unauthorised interchange between the two lines (through ticketing was to come later).
- The 1928 escalators caused much alteration to the tile patterns with the additional passageways puncturing the platform walls, which totally 'wrecked' the original.
- The disruption caused by the then new passageways and escalators in 1928 meant that a lot of retiling had been done and it was difficult to work out what was original and what wasn't. However, it was discovered that the patchwork tiling of the 1920s was not always earthenware but vitreous enamel that was hollowed out and stuck to the wall with cement. They did look the same, but the 'knuckle' test enabled them to be 'audibly' distinguished and confirmed later using a magnet.
- Using the rule that double rings were used at passageway entrances and name panels, we were shown a pattern panel with double rings either side on the westbound Piccadilly Line platform. It turned out to be a former name panel but why it was changed remains a mystery.
- Also on the Piccadilly Line a double ring had the name panel encroaching into where one of the rings would have been.

Having done as much as was possible on existing stations, Doug and his team turned their attention to the closed stations. Those which had platforms removed had to be revisited with a ladder in order to get access up to trace the lettering and reveal the patterns, much of which were covered in paint. Brompton Road was pretty much complete and was comparatively simple to survey. South Kentish Town was the last closed station to be done and the station name fired into the tiles, covered with years of dirt, grime and paint, revealed "Castle Road" which was another last-minute change of name like Hampstead was. Our last port of call was Aldwych, which was surveyed before it closed in 1994.

The meeting concluded with a short question and answer session. Members showed their appreciation to Doug for both an informative and entertaining evening.

Brian Hardy