

# THE THAMES TUNNEL TOUR

by Antony Badsey-Ellis

On Friday and Saturday 12/13 March, the Thames Tunnel was opened to pedestrians, escorted in small parties from Rotherhithe to Wapping and back again. The tour guides described this as 'probably the last time this will happen in our generation', as in the next month or two the tunnel will reopen as part of the London Overground system.

The event was not widely publicised, with tickets available from the LT Museum and also the Visit London web site. Tours were scheduled every 15 minutes, and apparently the tickets all sold out within a few days.

I was part of the 13.15 tour on Friday 12 March. As instructed we arrived at Rotherhithe station 15 minutes early and waited outside. This gave an opportunity to see the impressive refurbishment work on the station building, with a wider entrance, cleaned up brickwork, and painted metal pillars. Inside, the ticket hall has been comprehensively rebuilt. The walls are covered in small square tiles in shades of grey, similar to King's Cross, but glossy. The gateline comprises one wide aisle gate and three normal electric gates, and there are two ticket machines of a new design on the right hand side, opposite the ticket office.

Once inside, our tickets were checked, we collected latex gloves (mandatory because of the risk of Weil's disease in the tunnel), and deposited bags. We then descended the escalator for a quick health and safety briefing, followed by a history of the tunnel from the Blue Badge Guide who was leading our tour. We were also accompanied by one of the engineers, who ably answered the technical questions.

The curved perspex roof over the escalators has been removed, and a stepped roof replaces it – this allows more daylight into the station, and the 'steps' are planted outside. The escalators have been cleaned, but are the same machines as served the East London Line. All of the stairs have been refurbished, with handrails in Overground orange.

At platform level, the enamelled panels along the platforms have been retained, but the Underground name roundels have been replaced with similar Overground roundels. The signs at the foot of the stairs still proclaim 'East London Line' though, and the paler orange East London Line stripe remains above the station name frieze.

Small scaffold steps had been provided to allow access to the track bed. The tour entered the southbound tunnel, heading north, with occasional stops to explain what we could see. The tunnel lighting was on, and provided excellent illumination. The track through the tunnel is unchanged from its Underground days, being fixed into a continuous concrete slab. The centre rail has been removed (although the small concrete plinths for the insulators remain as trip hazards). The remaining conductor rail is of high conductivity aluminium, and we were informed that the tunnel is now to National Rail standard, with the exception of the Underground-style tunnel telephone wires which remain. Other cables are mounted on the outside walls of both tunnels beneath the telephone wires, including trunking labelled as carrying 33 KV cables. We could clearly see the attention to detail in casting replicas of the original archways between the two tunnels when the tunnel was concreted in the mid-1990s.

TPWS and AWS equipment has been installed between the rails (and was covered over by temporary platforms during the tour). Speed restriction signs and signals are of NR design, and small gradient signs have been installed at each change in gradient within the tunnel. There are also regular signs giving the distances to both stations.

The tour took us all the way to Wapping station. Like Rotherhithe, this has retained its enamelled panelling, but with Overground roundels fitted beneath the original coloured stripe. A scaffolding bridge had been erected across the southern end of the platforms, and we used this to transfer to the northbound tunnel. Good views were had of the original portal, and looking along the platforms the new emergency exit at the north end of the station could be glimpsed. At the very

far end of the station were the standard lights and markers to show the northern limit of the possession that was in place for the tour.

We returned southwards through the northbound tunnel, which was very similar to the southbound. NR signalling equipment boxes are mounted in some of the archways between the tunnels, and prior to each of the signals an archway contains a telephone. A fire main runs the length of the tunnel, with occasional hydrant points. Towards the end of the tour we stopped to examine the end of the concreted section, and more particularly, the four remaining bays of original brickwork that remain at the extreme south end. We then stood beneath the original shaft – a new concrete slab has been constructed very recently above the tunnel, above which the nearby Brunel Museum is planning to extend its operations. The noise of the pumps draining Rotherhithe station was particularly noticeable here.

We then returned to Rotherhithe platforms via the tunnel built in the late 1860 by the East London Railway company, now called TL165, being a standard brick arch containing both tracks. Steps gave access to the northbound platform, and we returned to the ticket hall to collect our belongings.

Opposite the station, a new emergency exit from the southern end of the platforms can just be seen. This is a covered staircase leading on to Albion Street.

Overall, this was an excellent tour with knowledgeable guides, and a nice thought from the LT Museum before the tunnel returns to its primary (if not original) purpose of taking trains under the Thames.

*Editor's Note: Photographs from the Tunnel tours will be in the next (June 2010) issue of Underground News.*