

# FAREWELL TO 55?

by Geoff Skelsey

So Transport for London may vacate their headquarters building. '55 Broadway' must have been the best-known and most widely advertised street address in London for over ninety years, appearing for decades on the sides of buses and on notices and publicity for the Underground. The magnificent building was probably the last-built of Britain's historic railway headquarters, and is possibly the last to serve its original purpose, so this is an occasion to look back briefly at the history and character of premises which so many know, at least by name.

## ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

As we are all aware, London's underground railways did not arise from any systematic plan, like those in Paris. They were, rather, the product of vacillation, competition, limited access to capital, and the infusion of foreign investment. 55 Broadway represents in steel and Portland stone the amalgamation and assimilation of a chaotic inheritance.

It was the American corporate reconstruction of the District and tube railways which prepared the way for the new building. By 1913 all the underground lines except the Metropolitan were operated as part of the giant Underground Electric Railways of London conglomerate, a foretaste of the way in which controlling industrial groups were to develop later in the century. In 1915 Parliament further approved a pooling arrangement, drawing together all the private local transport operations in London under the Underground banner, known familiarly as 'the combine'.

As originally constituted the constituent railways had separate head office buildings, and it was the District's premises which were the nucleus of '55'. These were squeezed along the north side of St. James's Park station, where the company had acquired property when building their line in 1868. In 1908 all the constituent companies moved together into the District's offices which were enlarged to accommodate them, in a utilitarian extension built along Petty France and also partly over the tracks, named 'Electric Railway House'. The expanding Underground empire called for ever-greater administrative space and after delays due to the Great War the offices were further extended by wholly decking over the station. These new six-storey premises, completed in 1924, also had a flat glazed-brick frontage along Petty France faced with glazed tiles, white on the upper part and a brown dado below the ground floor windows. They were literally, but prosaically, named 'Wing Over Station'.

## 55 BROADWAY

In 1926 the UERL Company decided to complete their construction of new offices, on a far more ambitious scale than originally envisaged and occupying the whole of an awkwardly shaped site then covered with a maze of small buildings and streets which were obliterated for the new premises. The chosen architect was Charles Holden who was beginning his important association with the Underground and designing the stations on the Morden extension inspired by the Underground's legendary Managing Director, Frank Pick. The new building consisted of a 175-foot-high central block, topped with a clock, the tallest office building in London at that time. From this there radiated, cross-wise, four unequally-sized wings with the two lowest storeys expanded to fill the whole site. The building was clad in white Portland stone, with granite facings at street level. Its freehold remained with the underlying District Railway, which is why that name appears on the foundation stones laid in September 1928.

To anyone used to the general quality of office buildings in London then the scale, style, and amenities of the new premises must have been a revelation. The author indeed found them so as late as 1966 when he moved to 55 Broadway: his later career, spent in a converted building in Cambridge designed by Scott of St. Pancras, left him with feelings of chronic nostalgia for Holden's palatial and practical surroundings. 55 Broadway, a smaller version of an American skyscraper and a near contemporary of New York's Empire State Building, introduced American state-of-the-art features and incorporated décor and materials of almost palatial sumptuousness. The public entrance hall and the staircase landings were lined and floored in Travertine (polished limestone),

and the fittings were in polished bronze. The four principal passenger lifts in the west hallway were gilded and mirrored cages, despatched by uniformed attendants who used hand 'clickers' to signal departure.

The offices themselves, on seven stories above the two-storey podium level, were generally more utilitarian, but incorporated a then unusual open-plan design partly subdivided with metal and glass partitions. The thoughtful design of the building meant that office spaces enjoyed ample natural daylight, in contrast to the dreary light-wells which illuminated many contemporary and even later buildings. At first the Underground Group did not occupy the whole building and several floors were let to tenants. The basements alongside the railway housed storage areas, an Aladdin's Cave of files, many unculled in the 1960s.

## **HORROR!**

Secure in the knowledge that they were endowing London with a masterpiece Holden and Pick must have been startled by the horror which greeted its completion. They had resolved to incorporate sculpture into the rather austere facades, and for this they chose avant garde artists of the day. Eight bas relief figures were commissioned, one on each side of the four wings, appropriately representing the four winds. Three were by Eric Gill, and one each by Eric Aumonier, Alfred Gerrard, Henry Moore, Sam Rabinovitch, and Allan Wyon. Remarkably these eight 'winds' were partly carved in situ, from cradles suspended alongside the building: their elevated location means that the details are barely discernible from street level. However, public outrage was reserved for two other figures placed lower down, immediately above the lowest storey on its two long sides. These were by the controversial Jacob Epstein, and their unveiling in 1929 unleashed a tempest of fury. The figures represent 'Night' (facing north-east) and 'Day' (facing south-east), and they evoked universal indignation, one being characterised by the *Daily Express* as 'a prehistoric blood-sodden cannibal intoning a horrid ritual over a dead victim'. So jaded are we now that the figures no longer offend.

Although incomplete, 55 Broadway was officially opened on 1 December 1929 within days of the announcement of negotiations which would lead in 1933 to the amalgamation of all local transport in London and the establishment of the London Passenger Transport Board. 55 Broadway's greatest era began. Whilst furious newspaper-readers threw tar at Epstein's sculptures, others described '55' as 'the cathedral of modernity' and it was first listed as a building of special architectural interest in 1971, upgraded to the highest rank in 2011.

The 1929 outrage was repeated in what was perhaps London Transport's most dismal era. The fervent economiser Leslie Chapman, appointed to the Board in 1979, highlighted the wonderful staff library and the alleged extravagance of the executive offices and dining room on the seventh floor at 55 Broadway as examples of profligacy to be excised. He was cheered on from County Hall, where both premises and perquisites were on a far grander scale, and although external consultants found such amenities not out of line with those provided elsewhere, the smears inevitably stuck. The building's internal features were modernised in later years although the essential features survived and were even improved. Much of the ground floor, bereft of the 'extravagant' staff library, made way, inevitably, for a shopping arcade, and elsewhere modern furniture in particular sometimes strikes a jarring note. But whatever succeeds 55 Broadway's railway occupants we should recall it as one of the finest creations of an era when the wellbeing of employees was highly regarded and when public enterprises were allowed to be proud of their status and surroundings.



**Above:** (Left) The eight celebrated 'winds' sculptures on the facades of 55 Broadway are so high up that they are barely discernible from street level. This view, taken in June 1966 from the author's office window on the sixth floor of the North Wing, shows Henry Moore's 'West Wind'. Notice that the seventh 'Board' floor above the sculpture has taller windows, as its rooms were higher than elsewhere. In the distance is the Methodist Central Hall.



**Above:** (Right) Candid camera: in 1966 the furniture and fixtures must have been much as they had been when the building was opened – the light fittings, in particular, are typical of those throughout the office portions of the building. Taken across the author's table on the sixth floor.

**Both photos: G.B. Skelsey**



**Left:** This 1930 view taken looking along Petty France towards Westminster shows the north entrance to St James's Park station in the centre. On the extreme right are York Mansions, and between them and the Holden Building is the tiled frontage of the 1924 building with its two pedimented entries, one of which led into an elegant panelled foyer, originally containing the memorial to staff who died in the Great War. Notice the reflection boards 'borrowing' light for some of the rooms which were overshadowed by the massive bulk of Queen Anne's Mansions, the edge of which can be seen on the left, and demolished in 1973.

**Photo: London Transport Museum**

**Below:** This imperfect but expressive aerial view of the environs of 55 Broadway just after completion gives an idea of its sensational impact amongst older buildings. Just above the building and to the left is the vast south front of the fourteen-storey Queen Anne's Mansions, pioneering service apartments dating from 1873, whilst to the south is the St. Ermin's Hotel, originally also serviced apartments especially favoured by MPs. Christ Church,

Broadway, bombed in 1941, is further south. Although the pristine newness of '55' is clear in this view it did not last long in the polluted air of the era.

**Photo: Author's Collection**



THE UNDERGROUND ELECTRIC  
RAILWAYS COMPANY OF LONDON,  
LIMITED.

**GENERAL OFFICES.**

55, BROADWAY, WESTMINSTER, LONDON, S.W.1.

**CHAIRMAN AND MANAGING DIRECTOR.**

RIGHT HON. LORD ASHFIELD, P.C., 55, Broadway, Westminster, London, S.W. 1.

**DEPUTY CHAIRMAN.**

H. A. VERNET, 24, Old Broad Street, London, E.C. 2.

**MANAGING DIRECTOR.**

F. PICK, 55, Broadway, Westminster, London, S.W. 1.

**Left:** The UERL masthead at the time 55 Broadway was opened: the merchant banker Henry Augustus Vernet, who died in November 1933, was Deputy Chairman until the formation of the LPTB when he was succeeded by Frank Pick, who was then the Managing Director.

**Author's collection**