

WHEN WAS THE LAST STEAM TRAIN ON THE UNDERGROUND?

by Brian Pask

In connection with the recent 150th anniversary of the London Underground this question was frequently asked. The press and others have given various answers to this simple question, ranging from 1905 to 1971. But the variety of answers given shows that this is not a simple question! The answer all depends on how you define “the Underground” and “last steam train”. This article will look at various contenders for the title of “last steam train on the Underground”.

In its early days the Underground was, of course, entirely steam worked and it was not until the advent of first tube line (the City & South London) in 1890 that electric traction appeared on the scene. In simple terms we can say that the sub surface lines (Metropolitan and District Railways and their associated joint lines) were at first steam worked and the tube lines were always electrically worked. In the early-1900s much of the Met. and the whole of the District were electrified. The District was first with its Ealing & South Harrow line, electrically worked (as a test bed for the whole scheme) from opening in June 1903 and the rest of the system followed in 1905. First were the Hounslow and South Acton branches on 13 June, the main line through central London on 1 July and the whole system was completed by 5 November. The Met. started with Baker Street to Uxbridge on 1 January 1905 and steam working south of Harrow ceased on withdrawal from 1 January 1907 of the GWR Aldgate – Richmond service (replaced by a Notting Hill – Richmond steam shuttle, itself withdrawn from 1 January 1911). However, the Met. main line was only electrified as far as Harrow and Met. steam working continued beyond there or, later beyond Rickmansworth. The Met. & GC Joint Line north from Harrow was also, of course, used by steam trains of the GCR.

There are two possible late survivals of steam passenger working with other company’s trains over the Met. and District, through GWR suburban trains to the City and L&NWR Outer Circle trains to Mansion House. Later these were worked over the Met. and District by electric locos, but when did the change to electric working take place? Through Met. and District steam trains to the East London Line were withdrawn on electrification of those lines, but the East London was not electrified until 31 March 1913. Even after 1913 this line continued to be used for steam worked freight, parcels and excursion trains off the GER. One section of the Met. which definitely did retain steam (for both passengers and freight) was the City Widened Lines from King’s Cross to Moorgate. These were not electrified and were steam worked by trains of the SE&CR (until 1916), GNR and Midland. Finally, District trains would have shared tracks with steam passenger trains of the L&SWR over that company’s lines from Studland Road Junction to Richmond (until 1916) and East Putney to Wimbledon.

There were also a number of places (in addition to those already mentioned) where there were steam worked freight trains over Underground owned lines. These were:

- (1) GWR trains to Smithfield over the Met. from Bishop’s Road to Farringdon, where they switched to the Widened Lines.
- (2) Midland trains to that company’s coal depots at West Kensington and High Street Kensington over the L&SWR and District from Turnham Green.
- (3) Steam worked freight trains served goods depots on the Met. main line and the Hammersmith and Uxbridge (and for a short time Stanmore) branches.

No part of the tube owned lines was ever steam worked, but there was one place where tube trains shared tracks with steam freight trains. This was the GWR owned Ealing & Shepherd’s Bush Railway, which carried GWR freight trains between Ealing, North Acton and Wood Lane Junction. Freight working from Ealing Broadway ceased and separate tracks from North Acton for the GWR trains were provided from 19 June 1938. There was also one GWR passenger working over these lines, an unadvertised railmotor service from Greenford to Kensington Addison Road.

Under the LPTB, working of Metropolitan Line trains north of Rickmansworth and the Met. line freight traffic passed to the LNER in 1937 together with most of the Met. steam locos. However, a small number of steam locos were retained by LPTB for use on works trains and shunting and this continued for many years.

After the Second World War, the existing steam workings over Underground lines continued. There were also additional workings resulting from the takeover of two LNER suburban lines by the Underground under the 1935 New Works Programme:

- (1) Leyton Junction to Ongar and the Hainault Loop. The section from Epping to Ongar continued to be steam worked by BR on behalf of LT until 1957 and there were two steam worked trains Liverpool Street (BR) to Epping in the early hours of Sunday mornings before the tube service started. These were worked by locos and push pull sets from the Epping – Ongar line. There were also a few steam worked staff trains in the small hours on weekdays. Steam worked freight trains continued to be provided by LNER and BR. Also, there were fairly frequent steam worked excursion trains through to the South Coast via Liverpool Street and the East London Line.
- (2) Highgate to Edgware and High Barnet. Steam worked freight trains continued to be provided by LNER and BR. Also, there were fairly frequent steam worked excursion trains through to the East Coast via Finsbury Park and Stratford.

From the early-1950s the running of railtours for enthusiasts became common and a number of these involved the Underground and LT steam locos:

- 4 July 1954 – Uxbridge line 50th anniversary train – steam worked by loco L44 Baker Street to Uxbridge returning via South Harrow and High Street Kensington.
- 22 May 1955 – Railway World special Baker Street to Stanmore and Chesham – steam worked by L44 to Chesham (probably from Rickmansworth).
- 3 June 1956 – John Milton Special (ramblers special train) to Chesham – steam worked by L48 Rickmansworth to Chesham and back.
- 22 September 1957 – SLS Circle and Hammersmith & City tour – steam worked by L46 Hammersmith – Edgware Road – South Kensington – Liverpool Street – Wembley Park.
- 1 October 1961 – Southern Counties Touring Society special – steam worked Wembley Park – Stanmore – Baker Street – New Cross Gate by L44 (this was last steam worked passenger train over any part of the Circle Line).

There were also some railtours over LT lines using BR steam locos:

- 5 May 1956 – LCGB Poplar & Edgware Tour steam worked over Northern Line East Finchley to Mill Hill East (en route to Edgware GN) and back.
- 28 September 1958 – Essex Wealdman ramblers special – steam worked Liverpool Street BR to Ongar and back.
- 9 September 1961 – LT farewell to steam trip Baker Street to Amersham and back – steam worked Rickmansworth to Amersham (then empty to Aylesbury) and back.
- 7 and 28 April 1962 (ran on both days) – LCGB Great Eastern Suburban Tour – steam worked to Ongar and back.
- 26 May 1963 – LT centenary special Baker Street to Aylesbury, returning via Watford – steam worked Amersham – Aylesbury and back (this section actually BR owned by then, but this was an LT train with LT stock).

Steam passenger working by BR locos of the Epping – Ongar line ceased from 18 November 1957 and the Sunday early morning trains from Liverpool Street probably ceased at the same time. Met. passenger trains north of Rickmansworth ceased to be steam worked from 10 September 1961. Through BR excursions over the High Barnet and Epping lines may have ceased after the late 1950s, although a Chingford-Brighton train ran via the East London Line as late as 17 May 1964. This was diesel worked and, if excursions from the High Barnet and Epping lines continued, they were probably later diesel worked. BR passenger workings over the Widened Lines were probably diesel worked by the end of the 1950s, although odd steam workings of LMR trains are known as late as 1962. The various BR freight workings over LT lines will have ceased by the mid-1960s with closure of the goods depots concerned. Many would have gone over to diesel before withdrawal, although dates for this do not seem to have been recorded. Three services about which there is some information are:

- (1) The WR trains to Smithfield would have ceased on closure of Smithfield goods depot from 30 July 1962. There is no record of diesel working on these trains (and the WR would not have had any suitable diesel loco). The condenser fitted pannier tanks used on this service were all withdrawn together in 1964 and it seems possible that this service was steam worked to the end.

- (2) The LMR trains to High Street Kensington were cut back to West Kensington on closure of High Street Kensington goods depot from 25 November 1963. They ceased with closure of West Kensington from 14 July 1965. There are reports of steam still being used as late as 1963/64, so this probably continued to the end.
- (3) Borley gives withdrawal of freight to the Ongar line and Hainault Loop as from 18 April 1966, but another source records the last freight as being on 3 January. Whichever is correct, this is well after withdrawal of the last GE section steam locos on 16 October 1962, so these workings must have been diesel at the end. Tripcock fitted locos were available by 1959, but there were still 4 tripcock fitted J15s available at the end, one of which had tripcocks fitted as late as 1961, so it seems probable that some steam working continued to 1962.
- (4) Diesel working over the East London Line became possible with availability of tripcock-fitted diesels in the late 1950s. Suitable steam locos continued to be available until 1962 and it is suggested that some steam workings continued as late as this. However, a railtour returning over the East London Line on 21 March 1959 was worked by D8401, suggesting that steam workings might have been infrequent.

LT retained a small steam loco fleet for works trains and shunting. Use of these ceased in 1971 with a commemorative working from Moorgate to Neasden on 6 June 1971.

To commemorate the centenary of the Chesham branch, Met. No.1 was used on runs between Chesham and Watford on both 1 and 2 July 1989. This loco also visited Upminster District Line depot for an open day on 5 August 1990 and worked at least one trip from a platform within the depot to Upney. There were also regular "Steam on the Met." events using preserved BR steam locos between 1990 and 2000 and a similar event on the District in 1994.

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- ❖ *Railtour details have been confirmed where possible from the six bells junction website.*



Above: The Circle and Hammersmith railtour of 22 September 1957 heading east and approaching Westbourne Park (*Left*), and at Edgware Road (*Right*), with E Class 0-4-4T L46 in charge.

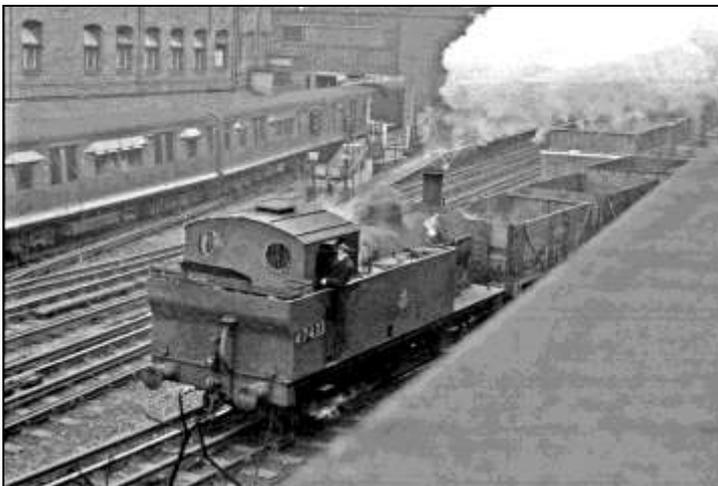




Above: 65476 is seen passing Debden (*Left*) heading to Ongar with the LCGB's Great Eastern Suburban rail-tour. The same train enters North Weald on the return journey (*Right*).

Left: 65440 with the "Essex Wealdman" ramblers trip at Ongar on 28 September 1958.

All photos:
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Above: (*Left*) A Loughton to the South Coast excursion approaches Buckhurst Hill on the westbound, while the same train (after a change of locomotive) is seen (*Right*) at East London Junction) at Shoreditch (which is behind the photographer).

Left: Coal empties from High Street Kensington passing Earl's Court.

All photos: **Brian Pask**