

# UNDERGROUND ITEMS FROM THE TELEVISION AN OCCASIONAL SERIES

by Paul Creswell

## GOING UNDERGROUND: A CULTURE SHOW SPECIAL

Wednesday 6 March 2013. BBC2 from 22.00 to 22.30.

This programme was narrated by Alistair Sooke, who also conducted the various interviews. Art, architecture, design, persuasion and even propaganda have all played their part in bringing the underground to the public's attention.

'Art on the Underground' issued invitations to a presentation of a Turner Prize, but (deliberately) did not say to whom the prize would be given. It transpired that the recipient was to be Mark Wallinger for his work 'Labyrinth' displayed on all 270 stations.

Mention was made of the first section of underground, from Paddington to Farringdon Road (sic) and how almost 40,000 people travelled on it on the first day. One hundred and fifty years later, enthusiasts paid £180 to recapture the 'romance of steam'.

In 1887, an American journalist described travelling on the underground like this: "I had my first experience of Hades today and if the real thing is to be like that, I shall never again do anything wrong! The atmosphere was full of sulphur, coal dust and foul fumes from the oil lamp above, so that, by the time we reached Moorgate, I was near dead from asphyxiation". However, by the end of the 19th century, a new form of power was taking over, and there were now electric trains.

The underground 'created' the suburbs and would introduce the phrase 'Metroland', used to persuade people to move out to the new suburbs which sprang up alongside the Metropolitan Line.

Mark Wallinger was interviewed and it transpired that he was brought up in the Chigwell area and that location and also Central Line views and rolling stock featured during this portion of the programme. Mark had been responsible, in 2010, for a display of pictures, titled "unconscious" of people asleep on the tube, which he felt showed how relaxed they felt about travelling this way.

In an interview with John Lanchester, author of "What We Talk About When We Talk About The Tube", he mentioned that people do not seem too worried that they are in an eleven foot diameter tube and that they could be stuck there for a journey of seventeen miles, such as on the Northern Line.

Paul Morley, author of "Earthbound", reminded us that we tend to deal with people in a different way on the tube – you just know that you will never speak to them. The surrounding earth could fall in on you at any time – which he likened to flying! "You are locked in a metal tube with strangers" he wryly observed.

The scene moved to the inside of a "padded cell" car, assumedly in the LT Museum. Our narrator pointed out that this was the first time that people had travelled deep underground. "The Times" commented that "It was like being in a gigantic iron drainpipe thrust by main force through solid London clay, much as cheesemonger might thrust a scoop into his Cheddar or Gloucester"!

The Central London Railway, known as the 'Twopenny Tube', concentrated some of its advertising in trying to persuade people how safe it all was. People had to use the new electric lifts to reach the new electric trains and the carriages they found themselves in were classless, a relative novelty at the time. Persuading people, and especially women, to take on all these 'new-fangled' ideas was not simple, a fact explained by Anna Renton, Curator of the London Transport Museum. Many people would not have had electricity in their own homes, and all this new technology was really quite frightening for them.

A 'Labyrinth' at St. James's Park station platform was shown. The word apparently originated in Greek mythology, where Theseus had to enter one to kill the Minator (a beast). A labyrinth is not the same as a maze. In a labyrinth, there is only one way to the centre and only then one way back to the start. You cannot get lost in a labyrinth.

The tube lines were expensive to build, so the only way to make them pay was to get more people on them, more often. This was the mission of Albert Stanley, later Lord Ashfield, and Frank Pick, a

draper's son from York, who had trained as a lawyer. For thirty years, Pick tried to bring clarity and identity to the network, elements which eventually made the underground a globally recognised brand. He brought in calligrapher Edward Johnston to provide a new typeface, cleaner and more modern than the previous ones. The roundel was introduced to highlight the station names amidst the 'clutter' of advertising that was the typical Edwardian platform.

Antony Asquith's film "Underground" (1928) featured Lots Road power station (known as the 'Chelsea Monster') as a 'symbol of the age', staging, as its climax, a dramatic murder there.

David Welsh, author of "Underground Writing", told us that H.G. Wells' book "Lord of the Dynamos" represented that author's vision of an 'alien underworld'. Later, his book "Anticipations" moved forward and showed a future transportation system, where everything had moved upwards to the clean and 'futuristic'. Frank Pick was the heir to this 'Utopian world', with his emphasis on 'fitness for purpose'.

The interview with David Welsh was one of the poorer parts of the programme, your reviewer felt. Interviewing someone in the noisy surroundings of a working station environment (Baker Street, platform three), complete with public address announcements, is hardly the best of arrangements.

Pick had no training in art himself and his posters took the angle of 'nudging' rather than 'nagging' the public to use the tube, encouraging them to visit the sales, the boat race and the countryside.

Some posters were humorous, some were beautiful, some were bold, enigmatic and challengingly modern. There was an exhibition of posters (no mention of a date), with no explanation of each one or even a catalogue available. Pick boasted that "there is no catalogue, a good poster explains itself!"

In an interview with Sam Mullins, Director of the London Transport Museum, we were told that Pick considered that 'art had to come down off its pedestal and earn its living'. He intended to use art to serve his purpose – to get people to use the transport system.

Pick brought in architect Charles Holden to design the stations for the Morden extension of the Northern Line. Morden, Balham and Clapham South were seen (exterior views). The design even included specific positions for posters at the station entrances.

On 10. December 1928, the new (re-designed by Holden) Piccadilly Circus station was opened and became something of a 'wonder of London'. Soviet engineers were sent to study it, as a source of inspiration for the Moscow metro system. Pick had a view that the Underground was a significant part of a civilising the city and that people will engage with well-designed items.

Attention then turned to the Underground's headquarters building at 55, Broadway, also built in 1928 and designed by Charles Holden, on a cruciform plan. The 'Observer' described it as "a cathedral of modernity". We were told that Pick commissioned it and Charles Holden built it. (Not quite true – he was an architect, not a bricklayer!). The architecture included statues by Eric Gill, Henry Moore and Jacob Epstein and constructing it consumed no less than 78,000 cubic feet of Portland stone. It is situated above St. James's Park station, where the first of Mark Wallinger's 'Labyrinths' was unveiled. The train interval clocks were featured, which the narrator likened to the whirring of the Minator's brain!

A glimpse of Pick's scrapbook was given, in which he always entered his comments in green ink.

In an interview with Peter York, author of "The Blue Riband", a book about the Piccadilly Line, he described it as "The line of luxury, the lovely line", on the basis that it goes to all the lovely places in London, on its central stretch. On its outer reaches, it gets to some quite unlovely places, but brings a 'mission of civilisation' with 1930s modernist stations. Holden's stations were successful because they glorified the suburbs where they were built. They indicated an 'escape route' to central London. Pictures of Arnos Grove and the 'flying saucers' atop Southgate adequately demonstrated this point.

The narrator thought that the Underground's greatest monument to the success of the design of the period was Harry Beck's map of the Underground, which is consistently voted as one of the design classics of that century. Beck was an engineering draughtsman, not employed by London Transport at the time. The map was something of an obsession for its creator and has inspired countless variations on its colour coded theme.

The most popular tube poster, in the 150 years of its existence is “The Tate Gallery by Tube”, designed in 1987 by David Booth. Toothpaste and plastic mouldings were used to create it. So, art has always been an essential element in the London underground identity – the people have spoken! All 270 of Mark Wallinger’s ‘Labyrinths’ were manufactured using vitreous enamel on metal, just like many other Underground signs. The narrator suggested that they will last as long as the stations themselves. (Your reviewer wonders what other station ‘fixtures’ have not passed that illustrious test of time!).

The programme then harked back to the Second World War and the London ‘blitz’. People flocked to shelter in the tube. At first this was frowned on by the management, but they then relented and bomb-sheltering was made official, to the extent that over 22,000 bunk beds were made available to shelterers. The Narrator explained all this whilst traversing some of the subways at Aldwych disused station. The station also became home to the famous ‘Elgin Marbles’, thus removing them from any possibility of bomb damage.

We saw an excerpt from the film, made in 1944, “Out of Chaos”, where the sculptor Henry Moore was seen seeking inspiration from the rows of resting shelterers. This was another example of the system turning a situation to its advantage, having initially not wanted people sheltering on it. The Underground took its blows, but, by and large, kept running. It paid the price after the war ended, being nationalised in 1948. It was starved of funds and entered a rather ‘dark’ period.

A reminder of work ‘behind the scenes’ was given with a few clips from the classic film “Under Night Streets” (1958). Whilst interesting in themselves, where these clips fitted within the ambit of the programme’s title and prior content left your reviewer just a trifle puzzled!

In 1986 came ‘Poems on the Underground’, where poems were displayed in the advertisement frames in carriages. A short example was read to us (by a lady obviously filmed at the period when they first appeared).

The narrator commented that everyone both loves and hates the tube (he did not explain why) and tend to remember the first time that they used it. Paul Morley, author of “Earthbound” was asked to describe his favourite line, the Bakerloo, in one word, to which he made the earth-shattering response ‘brown’!

Peter York naturally opted for the Piccadilly Line. Your reviewer says ‘obviously’, based on Peter York’s comments earlier in this review. He also appreciated the ‘glass and steel cathedrals of the Jubilee Line’.

Mark Wallinger’s ‘Labyrinths’ lend a ‘mythic’ dimension to our daily lives, but in a contemporary way, we were told. The closest we would get to a Minator would be our boss! They seemed to resemble a cross-section of the human brain, with its various ‘lobes’. Who knows what we will find at that ‘centre’?

Your reviewer felt this was quite an interesting programme, especially for someone like himself, who has absolutely no interest in the ‘arts’. The only real fault I could find was where one or two interviews were conducted (as mentioned once above) in an environment that was a little noisy for viewers to follow the actual conversation.