

MY MEMORIES OF LONDON UNDERGROUND

by John Laker

A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Club House on Tuesday 11 March 2014

Since 1999, John Laker has been the 'J' in J&K Video, publishers of over 10 Underground videos and DVDs, including the "Past & Present" series. He was an employee of London Transport and its successors from 1976 until 1995, and has been a member of LURS for over 30 years. John is a Londoner born and bred and his earliest memory is catching a train of Met. Saloon stock from Ruislip to Uxbridge, when he was about 5 years old. He would regularly travel between Ruislip and Uxbridge to attend school, using the P Stock (and the later F Stock) on the Met., or Pre-1938 Standard Stock on the Piccadilly.

After National Service in the RAF as an Air Radar Mechanic, John resumed his use of the London Underground to travel from home to employment with Ultra Electronics, and later Hoover at their head office in Perivale, where he was a Buyer.

John joined London Transport in 1976 as an Executive Assistant Buyer in the Chief Supplies Office, based at Chiswick Works, who dealt with the purchasing of all revenue and consumable requirements for both train and bus fleets. These included track materials, brake blocks (from Ferodo and Trist Draper). The business was allocated on a line by line basis. Other purchases included uniforms, energy and food. The Purchasing Office also sourced wooden sleepers from Australia and Scandinavia; along with maple wood flooring for trains from Canada. They bought track ballast from Day & Sons, who sourced it from the Foster Yeoman Quarry in Somerset. It was transported by train from there to Brentford Sidings, and transferred to Lille Bridge Depot by lorry.

In-carriage line diagrams for the Metropolitan A Stock were purchased in bulk from Formica Limited. However, when they came to be fitted it was discovered that the frames in every carriage were a different size, as they had been built by hand! Seat coverings (moquette), came from three different suppliers: John Holdsworth and Firth Furnishings, both of Halifax, and Birr Fabrics in Ireland; whilst seats on older stock were stuffed with horse hair sourced from a company in Cumbria.

John's interest in photography began at an early age, but initially he was more interested in trams and trolleybuses than trains. It was only when a friend advised him that the trains he had used in his younger years were being phased out, that he decided to take a few photos for the record – and he's never stopped recording rolling stock and infrastructure changes on London Underground.

During his talk he showed 200 slides of rolling stock and stations covering almost 50 years. Highlights included:

- 1960 Stock on the Central Line, with pink and blue pastel shaded interior panels.
- Pre-1938 Standard Stock trailer cars, with florescent lights and dark green interiors.
- T Stock at Harrow with one car recently repainted.
- New A Stock with black roofs.
- The long demolished Goods sheds at Paddington.
- New 1967 Stock at Ruislip depot, en-route to the newly opened Victoria Line.
- COP Stock trailers passing West Ruislip, en-route to scrapping, after being made redundant by the District Line 7-car programme.
- Building of the extension of the Piccadilly Line to Hatton Cross and Heathrow in the 1970s.
- Guard located in the rear cab on CO Stock.
- Mansion House station without any roof.
- CO Stock passing Turnham Green.
- Headlight codes in their last days of use in the last 1970s.
- Baker Street Circle/H&C platforms before they were given their "Victorian" makeover.
- Bakerloo trains in the Metropolitan Line platform 4 at Baker Street during Jubilee Line construction.
- 1938 Stock en-route to Stanmore in the last days of Bakerloo Line service there.
- Trafalgar Square Station just before it was renamed Charing Cross.

- Father Christmas stickers on the front of Northern Line trains (including a 1956 prototype unit) in December 1978.
- Harrow-on-the-Hill station, still with tungsten lighting in 1979.
- Upminster Depot with its water tower. This was subsequently sold to the Buckingham Railway Centre and is at Quanton Road.
- White painted R Stock (originally it had been red).
- White City depot with tracks under parts of the old exhibition buildings.
- Gloucester Road station before it was covered over by the Waitrose supermarket.
- The Met. bay platform at Liverpool Street in its last days during 1981.
- Bakerloo Line between Watford and Harrow before its withdrawal in 1982.
- Watford Junction station with wooden platform ends.
- Croxley Green Depot.
- Depot workings on part of the Croxley to Rickmansworth branch, which closed in the 1950s.
- Watford High Street station in 1979.
- Bushey and Hatch End stations.
- Shoreditch station before A Stock was converted to OPO.
- The former stabling shed north of Wembley Park station.
- Sloane Square station before it was re-tiled.
- The erstwhile South Harrow sidings.
- 1938 stock trailer 012193 used for air-conditioning and ventilation experiments.
- The white roof experiment, which compared these with unpainted aluminium roofs, as a means of keeping surface stock carriages cool.
- The last semaphore signal on the Underground, which was on the Richmond branch of the District Line.
- A North London Line Class 313 EMU which was wrongly routed to the District Line in September 1991 and nearly reached Turnham Green station.
- The new (February 1992) platform 3 at North Acton before opening.
- Hillingdon station undergoing re-locating and rebuilding between 1991 and 1994.
- The closure of Aldwych station on 30 September 1994.
- C Stock behind a class 37 locomotive, en-route from West Ruislip for refurbishment.
- Trial liveries on A and C Stocks during 1992.
- Ealing Common Lifting Shop in 1993.
- 1992 Stock being delivered to West Ruislip in July 1994.
- Acton Works before the Engineering Block was built.
- Shunter L11 in Acton Works.
- The “bogie park” at Acton with 1962 and 1967 Stocks.
- Personnel carrier in maroon.
- T stock Electric Sleet Loco set which is now on the Spa Valley Railway.
- Yellow-painted Q Stock pilots.
- 1973 Stock at Acton Works painted in unpainted aluminium with red end.
- View of Lillie Bridge from Ashfield House, headquarters of the Civil Engineering Unit.
- Prototype Refurbished 1973 Stock with dark red front.
- Mock-up (taken in February 1981) for the unsuccessful 1985 Battery Locomotives.
- Rail Grinder car number RG803.
- A Stock being refurbished at BREL in Derby during 1996.
- The LURS organised visit to Horbury Works, near Wakefield, in 1997 to see the 1973 Stock being refurbished.

In 1970 came the first whispers that the Epping to Ongar section of the Central Line was at danger of closure, so John quickly made a trip specially to photograph here. He saw and recorded the passing loop at North Weald and Blake Hall station with passengers!

John talked at some length about the procedure undertaken during the 1980s to remove all Asbestos, which had been used until then in all brake units, as he was the Lead Officer for this. John and his colleagues worked closely with Rolling Stock Engineers to source suitable, non-

Asbestos replacements. The first source of non asbestos brake blocks was Australian. However, there is no truth whatsoever in the long-standing rumour that the new linings contained Kangaroo dung! Sarah Siddons was used to test the new non-asbestos brakes. Blue asbestos had also been used within some BR passenger carriages and these were burnt in a special facility at Kings of Newmarket, to enable the Asbestos to be removed and disposed of safely. Some CO/CP and R Stock was dealt with there, although it did not contain this lethal substance.

Energy purchases included gas oil for heating in all LU locations, heavy fuel oil for use at Acton, Aldenham and Chiswick Works; Gas and Gas Oil for Lots Road and Greenwich Power Stations.

Gas was purchased under contract from British Gas under what is known as an "Interruptable Gas Contract". This meant the supply could be cut off for a specific number of days per year, at very short notice, in exchange for a lower price. This would normally be when national demand was high. To allow for this, a 14 day stock of 35 sec gas oil was held at Lots Road, as an alternative fuel. This represented 12,000 tonnes. During the severe winter of 1981/82, inevitably the gas supply was interrupted, and the plant switched to oil. Shell held the contract to supply oil, which was by means of 400 tonne barges. These had to arrive at the unloading dock one hour before high tide, unload, and sail before the tide went out, to avoid being beached. At that time there was a very high demand for all fuels and Shell were not able to re-supply until nearly all the stock had been used up, which led to some anxiety. Road deliveries were not an option for the quantity needed. In those days it was not possible to supply the bulk of Underground from the National Grid.

As a result of this experience, it was recommended that a new unloading wharf be built on the main river to take 1,200 tonne barges, which would not be so dependent on the tide. This was subsequently built.

In 1983 when it was decided to scrap the R Stock the disposal contract was split between Booths of Rotherham and Kings of Newmarket. However, before scrapping John had attempted to sell the stock to the Athens to Piraeus Railway in Greece.

Food was purchased to supply the Croydon Food Production Centre. This produced meals for all the canteens in depots and bus garages. Some meals were cooked at Croydon, and then blast chilled/frozen, before distribution to the depots, where they would be reheated using microwave ovens.

John was also deeply involved in negotiating with British Rail to keep the rail link between West London Line and Lillie Bridge Depot. Agreement was reached that LU would pay a modest fee to BR for them to maintain it.

In 1980 John made a visit to the Metro-Cammell Works and saw D Stock under construction. Also this year, John was privileged to visit a private exhibition held at Ruislip Depot, which included the Advanced Passenger Train prototype, a new Class 508 EMU, a Tyne & Wear Metro car and the Q35 trailer which was then owned by LURS.

John regularly used the District Line during the 1980s and one day was very surprised to find himself at South Ealing instead of Ealing Broadway when his train was diverted.

After the creation of London Buses Limited from 1 April 1985, the Chief Supplies Office was split in two, one part to cover buses, the other trains. John became the Contracts Manager for London Buses and retained the rank of Principal Executive Assistant. This ended his involvement with procurement for London Underground except for the purchasing of energy, which involved him in monitoring the Rotterdam Spot Market price, and the £ to \$ exchange rate, and frequently renegotiating prices.

After 10 years with London Buses, John accepted a redundancy package and, what he thought would be early retirement, following the sale to the bus operating companies. However, only a few weeks later he took a position with Rank Xerox's purchasing department.

John finally retired in 2000 but continues to record events on the Underground, no longer on slides but using digital media. He has contributed cine films to Online Video's tapes "London Underground Volume 1" and "Paris Metro". Since 1999 he has produced videos under the J&K Video label which donates a proportion of its profits to the London Transport Museum Friends, for the Q Stock restoration project.

The society thanked John in the usual manner and a Q & A time followed which included questions and discussion about who designed the Tunnel Cleaning Train? Was it Keith Ware, Peter Longhurst

or Bob Greenaway? Also, why was hardwood used in tunnels and softwood in the open – shouldn't it have been the other way around? John replied that hardwood was the much more expensive wood, and he had also been involved in purchase of prototype concrete sleepers and the development of alternative track forms.

Amanda Day