

REPORTS OF SOCIETY MEETINGS

150 YEARS OF PIONEERING DESIGN THAT CHANGED THE CAPITAL FOREVER

by Mark Ovendon

A Report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Club House on Tuesday 11 June 2013

Mark entitled the talk “*TfLL* – Transforming London’s Look: The History of Design on the London Underground”.

When trying to summarise 150 years of design of London Underground it is such a huge subject that it’s difficult to know where to start, so the question was asked – “*What are its most famous elements?*” Our speaker attempted to do this by splitting design into three main elements: the map, the logo and the font and how these elements of design are used and represented in things like publicity, signage, stations and architecture and the corporate identity of the system.

Right back in the early days of what is now known as London Underground there was very little in the way of continuity or design standards. This, the speaker refers humorously to as the “BC” period – Before Continuity. At this time there were a number of different companies running the Underground all of whom were working in different offices more or less in complete isolation to each other and therefore resulting in radically different designs.

This started to change slightly at the beginning of the last century – after major financial problems (the “AD” – or after debt – period as the speaker referred to it). During the early years of last century the Underground began to amalgamate with the help of characters such as Charles Tyson Yerkes, Frank Pick, and Edgar Speyer and what resulted started to create some coherence in design.

ARCHITECTURE

At the beginning of the Underground one of the most fundamental questions to be answered was ‘*How do you show the presence of a station when most of it is below the surface?*’ Unlike most cities which have built subway systems more recently, London decided to have full station buildings as opposed to just some railings round the stairs down to sub surface level. Most of the very early station buildings have now gone, though plans show carefully-constructed edifices with a high-degree of decoration. No photographs from 1863 itself have survived either, but illustrated newspapers show us what the stations looked like. By the time the next section of Underground was built, the Metropolitan District, photos of the construction in 1868 have made it to the archives, showing features such as decorative urns, lettering on the front and glass canopies over entrances. Some elements are still extant today: during the Earl’s Court rebuild (after the wooden station burned down) the distinctive glass globes – one of the signature design features of this time – are preserved.

By 1890, the City & South London Railway was even more elaborate, although Kennington has the only surviving dome (which holds the lift mechanism). The CSLR marked a step change in station architecture design. By the opening of the Central London Railway in 1900 design was becoming more interesting: with wider entrances stations almost took on a “shop front” feel, which has stood test of time and a number of original entrances remain. Only one, however, has not been built on, being Holland Park. As architecture and structural design improved, design of stations also got better, though it can be argued that the aesthetics didn’t necessarily always match. Clapham and Great Northern station photographs were shown. Wonderful cornices with lightning coming down at the head office of the City & South London at Moorgate were presented. Mark then explained that the appointment of Leslie Green in the early 1900s marked a turning point: Green was tasked with the design of forty or so stations in one go which was in itself groundbreaking. His buildings were assembled using a pioneering kind of “pack” system – the same basic design for all façades – though the concept was adapted to fit different plots, sizes of gaps in buildings, etc.

Another element of what surrounds us constantly on the Underground is tiling. A common misconception is that white tiles were first used in Paris (1900) but the first ones (in a subway environment) were actually in London, on the CSLR (1890): the material is a practical way of covering dark and bland platforms and walls. These in themselves were all different, such as the beautiful black and cream tiles still at Elephant & Castle. When construction started on the Central London Railway (1896) tiles were also used on the interiors and Leslie Green employed them

throughout – his “ox-blood” tiled exteriors becoming London landmarks. Tiles were also used as way-finding systems – with cartouches showing the way out of stations. Most importantly, Green used tiling as a way of naming stations – up until this point naming of stations was still rather an afterthought (station nameboards added afterwards). Green had their names fired into tiles mounted on the platform walls, and the station exteriors themselves. Many of these have been preserved. Banding of the tunnel platforms were also a way of taking away the otherwise austere hospital look. Additionally, and in a stroke of genius, they were colour coded for those who couldn’t necessarily read, with different coloured tiles for different stations.

In 1902, upon its formation, Underground Electric Railways inherited a bit of a mess, design-wise. They had fantastic letters, liveries, logos, lettering, etc., but no cohesive look to the system and this is where the genius of George Gibb was proved: by 1907 he had appointed Frank Pick and Albert Stanley to try to do something to make the Underground more easy to follow and a co-ordinated network.

It was a convoluted journey to the roundel that we now know. In 1907 UERL’s Walter Gott held a competition to design a logo to unite tram and train services: the winner had a semi-circle with the tracks running through the letters of “LONDON”, a silhouette of London’s skyline, and horrendous Gothic looking text complete with arcs of lightning and a slogan. The cumbersome device was used briefly on publicity material but way too fiddly for signage. However the skyline and a vaguely circular shape with a strap across were due for greater things. What was needed was something simpler, instantly recognisable at a distance, even if you can’t read the text on it. Other companies were also using logos with bars across them such as gas utilities, commercial map covers, even soap powders. There were also logos around at the time – newspapers for instance – having bigger letters at one or both ends of the word. With the adoption of the name “UNDERGROUND” for the entire system in 1908 and the decision to display each letter in a box (as if fired onto a tile) the first element of the logo we know now was born.

In mid-1907 a photographic survey was carried out of each station. A commercial artist then drew on top of each photo in pen and ink to show the positioning of new “UNDERGROUND” signs.

Many of these were vertical (with each letter stacked on top of the next). They were to be formed from a triangle or a box with lit from the inside. These were duly erected to the outside of all stations in the UERL’s domain – some of them seemed quite “tacked on” and even covered existing signs and lettering. Special placeholders were made for the display of posters (bordered by the “UNDERGROUND” word) and more elaborate, larger displays were made from enamel for the display of the map in pride of place in the front of each station. These united the large U and D of UNDERGROUND, the skyline silhouette (improved from Gott’s logo of a year earlier) and the catchy slogans (“Underground to anywhere, Quickest way, Cheapest Fare”). The CLR came up with their own version of the vertical signs outside stations using the word “TUBE” and where these were almost thrown onto the side of buildings they looked even more precarious.

Pick commissioned popular contemporary commercial artist John Hassall to produce a piece of work that was to become seminal in corporate design. Hassall’s Great Northern Railway poster *The Jolly Fisherman* of “Skegness is so Bracing” fame appeared in 1908. The original artwork for Pick showed a “jolly p’lcceman” pointing out the Underground map but when the poster was produced many more graphic elements of station interiors were added (in the Leslie Green style of ox blood tiles and faience lettering) and the map was surrounded by the new house style of large U&D Underground word, London skyline and slogan. It became effectively one of earliest examples of what we now call “corporate design standards”.

As above, so below. Station interiors looked just as uncoordinated and the job of Pick was to try to bring some unity. Although Green’s (more modern) stations were relatively uncluttered, it was hard to see name of stations between huge numbers of adverts on the sub-surface lines. Albert Stanley had returned from a tour of the Paris Métro in 1908 and reported on their good use of large blue horizontal plaques or tiling of about a metre wide for station names (an idea the Métro had borrowed from the street names at surface level). Space was cleared between some adverts at St. James’ Park (as it was then) and at least one large blue plate was made for the station name. Though an improvement, it was quickly realised that Paris’s signs stood out better because of the white tiled walls with few posters on them. So a large white space was made around the new blue St. James’ Park nameboard. Pick was still not convinced and asked for different shapes to be tested *behind* the

blue bar – a triangle, a star, and oblong were all tried. Eventually Pick settled on the concept of a red disc and something near *five hundred* metal semicircles were ordered to surround 250 blue enamel station name plates (up to 11 per platform). The ramifications of the shape were not realised, but in many ways this was the birth of the “roundel”.

At this point, however, it was still ostensibly just a red disk with a blue bar. Other cities have pinched the idea (Madrid and Sydney for example), but this was essentially just an elaborate way of attracting attention to a station name, not yet a system logo. Inevitably it wasn't a huge leap for designers to lay the large U and D “UNDERGROUND” word over the top of the station name on the blue bar thereby forming a complete system logo. Archives proved this was definitely in use during 1912. More recent evidence implies that it was possibly being used at least a year earlier (arguably earlier on a paper sticker provisionally dated to 1909). It was soon realised this was the logo for London Underground. Evidence of this comes from a poster that was produced – “Hermes For Speed” – which featured the newborn logo as bulls-eye having arrows fired into it by Greek gods. The poster became a template for LU's “corporate identity” (even though this modern term didn't exist at the time). In 1933 the roundel logo was almost lost, when the newly formed LPTB commissioned a “winged” design from Cecil Bacon – it appeared on a handful of posters it thankfully didn't stay.

During Pick's hive of rebranding activity, the Metropolitan Line was not part of the combine. In terms of identity it had good station name signs, nicely produced publications and strong posters. It used a red colour for lettering (or white on red), which also ended up on signs, platforms, etc., though its use was not as consistent as Pick's efforts or as distinctive as the Leslie Green stations. Even by 1914 with “Metroland” publicity at its peak, there was no proper logo for the Met. Eventually though, they had to do something to compete with the Underground's roundel. Their answer was a *diamond* – though its use was not exactly alien – a Metropolitan Railway stamp in the form of a diamond was found from 1886 as well as on some 1890s Met. maps. A small entrance to Baker Street station sported a Met. Railway sign with squashed diamonds in 1909. At this time diamond devices seemed to be in the air, but a 1914 flier clearly displayed a diamond surrounded by the words “THE MET.”. It was replaced by a circle in 1916 which was displayed across a much larger red diamond – clearly aping the Underground's disc device. However, it was not until after World War One that this shape was also used for station name board signs. Unfortunately not a single one is known to have survived.

An interesting diamond sign that *did* make it (to the London Transport Museum at Acton Depot) was from the East London Line. Its manager, a Mr. Parsons, who had noted what had happened with the UERL re-signing (from 1908), decided to go his own way and commissioned a *green* diamond in 1912. Between Parsons and Pick, a Victorian argument ensued, typed out on carbon copied letters. Our speaker uncovered the never previously published technical drawings of these for his book. From the evidence it seems that these were put up *before* the Met. adopted their red diamond (in 1916). Although only the physical sign to survive was Shoreditch, photographic evidence shows them in situ at Wapping too and there is no reason to believe that, despite Pick's objections, they were also positioned at every ELR station.

The first red diamond station name signs on the Met. were thought to have been erected in 1916, or possibly 1917. The Met. then went full pelt, signing up to sixty stations all the way out to Watford and using it on station frontages featuring a large M and N to form a METROPOLITAN logo – this was even displayed briefly at Paddington Praed Street although it didn't survive much after the Met's amalgamation into the LPTB in 1933. The Met. even developed their own style of lettering – a serified type style used extensively from the early 1920s. Echoes of the cream of METROPOLITAN styling still remain, such as at Willesden Green.

The final and one of the most recognisable features in Pick's jigsaw of unifying the look, was the lettering used in signage and publicity. The commissioning and implementation of the Johnston font another lecture entirely, but it was (another) idea which spread across the world, where standardised “in-house” fonts are now ubiquitous to transportation, public bodies and commercial organisations. Some people argue that Coca Cola was the first brand to develop its own in house font (and there are other contenders like Shell) but it's safe to say that in the transit world, London was definitely the first to commission its own lettering.

Edward Johnston's typeface began appearing on posters (from June 1917), map covers (three years later) and being station signage from the early 1920s (construction sites and first roundels on the

Edgware extension). There are few genuine examples of this first use of (hand-drawn) Johnston still in situ: for example at West Brompton (recognisable by the crossed $\frac{1}{2}$, soon changed by Johnston. Another at Edgware on the enormous “tombstone” roundel is a later reproduction in the same style). At this time the B, R and S are not exactly the Johnston letters as we know them today – appearing somewhat poorly executed. Despite these flaws, and with some early improvements, Johnston quickly became integral to the look and feel of all publicity material, station signage and indeed the design of the entire London Underground (and Buses and Tramways too).

With the Johnston typeface, the roundel, the architectural style and the design ethic in place, Pick and his staff had transformed the London Underground into a much more cohesive, easily recognisable organisation with matching station style and publicity – a unique feat at this time. The speaker showed other examples like ‘To The Trains’ signs, a clock with roundel shaped hands (Central Line eastern extension), blue shaded hexagon lampshades with the large U&D sign (of which none survive but hung outside all stations, digitally recreated for his book), a plethora of posters and even door handles in a loose roundel shape all to underline his point about the core role well thought out design has had on the Underground.

Pick himself had early on realised that no matter how well these individual elements were executed, when they were tacked on to existing stations they would never convey the whole picture the organisation was trying to portray. What he wanted to do was redesign the look of the stations, trains and environments from scratch. Architectural design was the key to this.

It became possible given the unprecedented plans for growth of the system in the 1920s, 1930s and even 1940s. Pick tested (at a side entrance to Westminster in 1922) and ended up appointing (in 1924) Charles Holden whose contribution to the look of London cannot be under-estimated. His use of a single clean pediment of Portland stone (Westminster, Post Office and Bond Street for example), making specific spaces for publicity displays, having the station name clearly and simply in blue bands across the top, or on glass canopies projecting over the street led to a “house style” which is clearly attributable to his foresight. What was crucial about the Holden’s stations was that the *whole wall facing the street becomes a station entrance* – addressing a key difference between mass transit and more rural stations (lots of people need to get in and out quickly). Narrow doors to fiddle with opening were an impediment to getting in quickly: Pick and Holden understood the need to create an unimpeded flow for passengers straight down to platform level. These stations these weren’t universally popular: staff considered these doorless entrances, very chilly. They were, however, great for passengers and remain so to this day.

The next extension to be constructed was the Morden section (1926). Here, Holden (like Green 20 years earlier), utilised a kit form; a similar design for all station sites. Façades were divided into blocks of three which could even bend around corners. The whole line had balance, clarity and authority. Although Holden was also working on the jewel in the crown: Piccadilly Circus (opened in 1928), LU’s new headquarters at 55 Broadway (1929) and many other stations, he and Pick went on a tour of European architectural projects. Inspired by the use of brick, concrete and glass in Amsterdam, Stockholm and Berlin, and by the emerging Art Deco movement and form, Holden conceived of a solution for the forthcoming Piccadilly Line extension stations which he termed “*brick boxes with concrete lids*”. The simplicity of his work extended to simple yet ornate light fittings, interior and furniture design and even litter bins. Although Sudbury Town was the first completed (1931), other masterpieces were already underway – the circular Chiswick Park with large tower, Northfields, Boston Manor, Osterley, Turnpike Lane and the magnificent Arnos Grove (said to have been inspired by Stockholm Public Library). All opened in the 1930s while the Art Deco movement was celebrating its peak, yet nothing quite on the scale of these edifices had ever been seen in the UK. These bold stations, located in the suburbs, made them a pleasure to use and virtually made the stations into destinations themselves.

Although mainly functional, there were also even elements that were just simply decorative, such as with the shelters with posters underneath (Oakwood, Queensbury etc.). Even today they seem a design joy. Ideas like this spread across the system. At Manor House a station with little on the surface, there was a huge totem pointing far off directions reachable by tram and bus – what a shame it’s gone. Other design quirks of the 1930s include a variation of the Johnston font, designed by Delph Smith – it featured tiny serifs on the letters and was intended for use in 55 Broadway, but leaked out onto certain other Piccadilly Line extension signs of the epoch, for example Sudbury

Town (still in situ) and at Piccadilly Circus and Manor House (long since gone). One poor recent design 'addition' is the vandalism of railings on the roofs of stations like Boston Manor and the incomparably brilliant Southgate where "Health & Safety" has almost destroyed Holden's clean design lines.

Pick pulled all design work together under the term 'graphic standards' in 1938 – which defined the shape and sizes (in imperial!) of designs. Manuals are now a key for every transport system in the world. New York moved to this standard in the 1960s while British Rail in 1948. However, again, London was the leader. In 1948 the Carr Edwards report wanted to bring even more unity – with the idea to expunge the work 'Underground' and replace it with the phrase London Transport. This was achieved in lots of sites across London and by 1959 someone would be hard pressed to find the word UndergrounD. However, under Hutchison, it was to make a reappearance. Graphic Standards are still a bible to this day – and even today's different transport modes, from taxis and the DLR, to tram and now Crossrail have their own roundels.

A map was then shown with a projection of how the map would look in 2016, though many of the schemes have not in fact been commissioned. It shows how a good design can be ruined or retained – Max Roberts is perhaps better placed to comment this.

In more recent decades there was a definite lack of the Johnson font – perhaps due to modern printing methods having changed. In the 1970s the Johnson font hadn't really evolved with modern printing methods and it became somewhat out of favour – so much so that it was in danger of being lost. However, it was decided to try to keep it. Eiichi Kono was asked to look at Johnston font and see what he could do. Taking this on he produced bold and medium versions as well as a light version for lightboxes on platforms. The new version was completely redrawn, altered in hundredths of millimetres in some cases, for modern typefaces – honouring of the original font but redone for modern technology. It was almost universally felt that this fantastic solution that went into use almost straight away and is still with us now, albeit in a very slightly revised version. This font is so ubiquitous that it was even used during the Olympics, not just in London but the TfL Johnson font licensed for Olympic signage all over England and Scotland.

There are huge areas not discussed in any great detail: the work of Leslie Green who was pioneering, use of moquettes which were simply a brilliant design, Robert Dell who designed some of the automatic signalling, fireproofing of the Jubilee Line, water cooling solutions at Green Park, etc. At times London Underground seems to have fallen behind at times but in many ways is still at the absolute cutting edge of design. Will it still be like this in 2063?

Michael Woodside