

UNDERGROUND OVERGROUND



A PASSENGER'S HISTORY
OF THE TUBE

ANDREW MARTIN

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PREFACE

‘DAD, I’M OFF TO LONDON’



I have always been keen on the London Underground, even though I was born in Yorkshire. I was like Richard Larch in *A Man from the North* (1898), by Arnold Bennett: ‘There grows in the North Country a certain kind of youth of whom it may be said that he is born to be a Londoner. The metropolis, and everything that pertains to it, that comes down from it, that goes up into it, has for him an imperious fascination.’

My father worked on British Rail, and I had free first-class train travel on the national rail network in the form of a Privilege Pass. I also had free travel on the London Underground, which seemed almost indecent, given that my dad did not work for the Underground and that I came from 250 miles north of London. If at all bored in York, I’d say, ‘Dad, I’m off to London,’ and I’d collect up my Priv Pass and a handful of the privilege Underground tickets that were usually lying about the house. (Whereas normal Underground tickets in the Seventies were made of green card, the privilege tickets were green and white card – special, you see.) ‘Well, don’t lose your Pass, or I’ll get sacked,’ my dad would say.

London wore me out. But then I had a very exhausting method of traversing the city, which involved pinballing about from one public street map to another. In theory you could work out your route by pressing buttons that illuminated little light bulbs, but the 'You Are Here' part had always been carefully vandalised, and without that you might have been anywhere. So I'd take the Tube, because the Tube map I could understand. But precisely because it is schematic rather than geographically accurate, with the central area magnified for clarity – so that the distance between Archway and Highgate on the Northern Line, which is about a mile, is shown as being less than the distance between Leicester Square and Covent Garden on the Piccadilly Line, which is about 800 feet – I would take journeys I didn't need to take, for example *from* Leicester Square to Covent Garden, which is the shortest trip possible on the Underground. 'When in doubt take the Underground', urged an early Underground poster showing a bewildered little bowler-hatted man with an illuminated 'Underground' sign behind him. That little man was me.

The Underground was my ally in London. I was the son of a railwayman, and what was the Underground but an incredibly high concentration of railways? Also it offered a key to the city ... so maybe I *wouldn't* get off at Leicester Square. I might stay on all the way to Manor House, where I would step out and have a walk around, always keeping Manor House station in sight, just as Doctor Who keeps the Tardis in sprinting range when he lands on a new and possibly dangerous planet. I would travel to a place on the slightest of motivations, to find things out. Was there a Manor House at Manor House? (No, only a pub called The Manor House.) Was there a hill at Gants Hill? No; that would be almost as naive as expecting a hill at *Dollis* Hill. (There isn't even an apostrophe at Gants Hill, a deficiency it shares with Parsons Green but not

Earl's Court. But by way of compensation, there is a beautiful Underground station.)

In my boyhood, the system was not what it had been in the triumphalist inter-way heyday, and nor was it like the spruce, sparkling (if badly overcrowded), upgraded Underground of today. In the Seventies the system was run-down and demoralised. Road transport was the future; the Underground was being 'managed for decline', and the system was filthier even than the streets above. You were not to lean against the station walls, or that was your rally jacket ruined. In most of the stations about a quarter of the tiles would be broken. Sometimes the station name was meant to be spelled out by tiles, and Londoners' toleration of the position at, say, Covent Garden – rendered for years as something like 'COV—T G—DEN' – implied an impressive broad-mindedness on their part.

You could actually see the atmosphere in the stations: it was sooty, particulate. There is an Underground poster from the late Thirties by Austin Cooper that advertised something as un-mysterious as 'Cheap Return Tickets' but did so with an abstract image: a lonely searchlight trying to penetrate a jaundiced miasma. That was the Underground of my boyhood: a marvel of engineering but also a dream space, in which people of all classes and races would float past you, with the strange buoyancy of a passing carriage. In the case of the people in your own carriage (or 'car', since the Underground is riddled with American railway terminology), you could look at them directly, or you could look at their reflections in the windows, and they would be sunk in their own dreams; all this under electric light, so that it always seemed – as it always still *seems* – to be evening on the Tube, which is my favourite time of day. The trains then still had smoking carriages, and I would sit in these because their passengers seemed the friendliest – and I would *smoke* in the smoking carriage, because it seemed the done thing.

The trains also had guards: a Gothic-looking priesthood, with their ill-fitting black uniforms and black DMs. They carried covetable, riveted black leather holdalls that contained the big key that unlocked the control panel by which they opened and closed the doors, and billy-cans they used for making tea at 'tea points' (basically kettles secreted behind panels in the station walls). I liked the way they would close their own guard's door after they'd pressed the button to close all the other doors, and they would then hang out of the carriage as it sped along to the tunnel headwall. They did this just for the hell of it, I thought. The guards were pale men, possibly as a result of spending too much time underground. Like most Londoners, they were slightly disreputable-looking, and intimidatingly self-contained. It was impossible, I reasoned, to be more of a Londoner than a Tube guard, since they actually operated the city. In the Seventies the guards did not command public address systems, but they would sometimes – when they could be bothered – bawl out their catchphrase 'Mind The Doors', and I couldn't believe they weren't doing it in a spirit of irony or, more likely, sarcasm. The idea that such a vast populace could be suborned by such a gnomish phrase ... it didn't make any sense, unless perhaps the passengers were in on the joke. (In the incredibly boring Underground horror film *Death Line*, from 1971, a dying cannibal who inhabits an abandoned tunnel somewhere near Russell Square station can speak no words of English except for a distorted version of 'Mind The Doors', which he has picked up, parrot fashion, from having heard it so many times.)

If I found the Tube trains morbidly fascinating, I had a simpler enthusiasm for the escalators. Everyone likes going on escalators as far as I know. It feels like a free ride, and the longer they are, the better. The only escalator in York was at Marks & Spencer's, and people would hesitate for ages before getting on, apparently

waiting for the right stair to come rolling along, whereas Londoners would step on while reading a newspaper.

My journeys were given a further spice by fear. A train travelling at a little over 20 miles an hour (the average speed of a Tube train in central London) with tunnel walls one foot away on either side feels much faster than one going at the same speed through fields. Surely the tiny clearance would eventually prove insufficient, and the train would scrape against the wall? Or the tunnel would collapse; or the train would run into another train coming the other way or, failing that, into the back of a slower one going the same way. In short, I considered the idea of trains in subterranean tunnels to be a very daring and audacious one. I was also disturbed by the noises of a Tube train, such as the roaring of the air-brake compressor, which sounds like a roar of defiance from the train. (The train will not go unless there is sufficient pressure to release the brakes, hence the noise.)

I have now lived in London for twenty-five years, during the early part of which I commuted from outlying parts of the city to central newspaper offices, latterly the *London Evening Standard*. After I left the *Standard*, I began writing a column called 'Tube Talk' for the paper's magazine, *ES*. This was in the second half of the Nineties, when the Underground was fitfully emerging from its post-war slump and becoming once more a fit subject for conversation. Every week I would receive a quantity of letters justifying the columnist's epithet 'a bulging postbag' (about six). Cumulatively, I received hundreds of letters in which people got off their chest things that had been bothering them about the Tube for years. Didn't anyone at London Underground know that the announcement, 'This train terminates at Morden via Bank' was ungrammatical, there being no place called 'Morden via Bank'? Why couldn't every third train in the rush hour contain no seats? Why wasn't there a Tube station at Victoria Coach Station? A poet called Roger Tagholm wrote in to say he'd seen

a man carrying a surfboard down the escalator at Tottenham Court Road. ('Now *that* was weird.') Tagholm himself had published a series of poetic parodies with Underground themes. One was called *The Rubaiyat of Totteridge and Whetstone*; his take on *The Waste Land*, which included the lines 'On Moorgate Station/ I can connect/Nothing with nothing.' An exasperated woman informed me that, for a year, there had been a sign at Kentish Town reading, 'Warning, Keep Clear, Grille May Be Dirty', and when I mentioned this in print, the staff at Kentish Town kindly sent me the sign, but whether they cleaned the grille I don't know.

INTRODUCTION

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON ... AND VICE VERSA



In a novel by Dorothy Whipple called *High Wages*, which was published in 1930 but set in the Edwardian period, young Jane Carter arrives at Euston station from the fictional Lancastrian town of Tidsley. It is her first visit to London. She steps onto the Euston Road and takes in the scene. ‘Not beautiful certainly, but how exciting! What cars, what buses, what bicycles, what horses – and what was that running with a roar under a grating?’

The roar under the grating was the Metropolitan Railway, currently trading – in somewhat reduced circumstances – as the Metropolitan *Line* of the London Underground. The stretch of the railway that ran under the Euston Road opened 150 years ago, in January 1863. It went from Paddington Bishop’s Road station, now called Paddington, to Farringdon Street station, now called Farringdon. It was the first urban underground railway in the world (there had been long underground stretches of main-line railways, also railways in mines), but the Metropolitan was very nearly the only outfit ever to use steam trains on a subterranean

railway (it was also done in Glasgow), so its project was only half-modern, and the tunnels under the Euston Road were badly polluted until 1905, when the Met began to be electrified.

By 'grating,' Dorothy Whipple refers to the grilles along the middle of the road that were installed in 1871 and 1872 for ventilation, the Metropolitan having given up pretending it didn't have an air quality problem. There were a dozen, each 28 feet long by 2 foot 6, and in *London's Metropolitan Railway* (1986) Alan A. Jackson has this to say about them:

The author's father, who worked at the Railway Clearing House in Eversholt (then Seymour) Street, Euston, used to recall that these grilles afforded a lunchtime diversion for the younger clerks, whose custom was to keep them under close surveillance. The reason for this was that should any lady be unwise enough to stand over them whilst a train was passing below, the force of the blast would raise her skirts in a satisfyingly revealing fashion.

If you stand over those grates today and crouch down (risking the malevolent stares of passing cabbies), you will see a black baffle plate littered with cigarette ends. You will eventually hear a rising roar from below, and you'll feel the warm updraft as the train runs beneath your feet. If you were also enveloped in steam, you'd also have the beginnings of a ghost story, but then London is full of black holes that take you back into the Underground past. Some of these are *on* the Underground, some are not. One is on the *Overground*: the railway called the London Overground, I mean. The under-river tunnel on that line between Wapping and Rotherhithe is pitch black when viewed from the trains that traverse it, but if it were to be illuminated, passengers would see that they were in what resembles the undercroft of a Gothic cathedral. That was the first of the

deep-level Tubes ... *in a way*, and it was once incorporated into a Tube line ... *of sorts*.

Or you could say the Tubes were more truly portended by what lies beneath a certain brick turret near the Tower of London that is ignored daily by thousands of visitors to the Tower. We will soon be lifting up that booth, so to speak, and looking into the momentous tunnel beneath. I take a perverse pleasure in seeing people streaming past it, or in watching City commuters ignoring the stone company crest of the City & South London Railway on the outside of Moorgate station. The simple motif on the crest says it all: trains in tunnels under a wavy river. Don't the passing crowds know how important was the work of that railway? It built what became the Bank branch of the Northern Line, and I suppose that most Northern Line users do try to ignore the Tube, or they see it as incidental penance of their life in London, but if it weren't for the Tube, they probably wouldn't be in London. In fact, there wouldn't be a London for them to be in – not one like the present city anyway.

You might object to the moles under the lawn, but what if the moles actually planted the lawn in the first place? In the inter-war period, the Underground would reach out more dramatically, horrifically some would say – *The Thing That Crawled Out of the Ground!* – to make the vast commuter city of today. It did so partly to solve successive crises of unemployment and partly, and somewhat less nobly, to acquire more passengers. Since we, the passengers thus acquired, are stuck with the Tube, I say why not understand it? The Northern Line commuter who reads this book will learn why the Northern is not so much a line as a network (and a right dog's dinner into the bargain); they will learn why it had the first suicide pits under its tracks (it's because of the Depression rather than anything *depressing* about the line); and they will find out about London Underground's ultimate answer to those who complain persistently about the Northern.

Turning to Central Line users, I say: Do you know about your glamorous line's association with the West End shops? Do you know why so many of the station interiors are coloured white? Do you know about the personage known as Sonia that it foisted on London?

The Central is my own favourite line. I lived on it for years, and appreciated its high train frequency in the rush hour. The other day I was at Marble Arch in the peak, and I saw a young boy rushing onto the platform in the company of a man who was probably his grandfather (well, I *hope* it was). As the train came in, the boy exclaimed delightedly, 'Just in time!' He probably didn't know that another would be along in ninety seconds. It is amazing that trains should be manifested so frequently, like a conjurer pulling endless rabbits out of a hat – and this book will explain some of the technical and operational wonders of the system. For example, it features an account of Underground electricity written *by* somebody who can't change a plug (me), *for* people who can't change a plug.

The London Underground is the oldest Metro in the world. It has 250 miles of track and 287 stations. At the time of writing, 1.1 billion passenger journeys are made on the Underground every year, the highest figure ever recorded, and more people use the Tube than the rest of the national rail network. You can push these superlatives of scale only so far. Shanghai has more track; the Paris Metro and the New York Subway have more stations. The Paris and Moscow metros are busier. But because the London Underground was never properly planned but just sort of sprawled, and because it was built over the course of 140 years, it is far more revealing of the history and character of the city it serves than any of the above systems. And at the risk of sounding like the compiler of a book of Underground curiosities (this book, I stress, is a full history, albeit one without footnotes and thickets of technical data), I might also mention that it is by