

Walk the Lines

by Mark Mason

As someone once said: ‘London – it’ll be a great place when it’s finished.’ But the joke isn’t simply that the city never will be finished. It’s also that London isn’t a place. Historically it was a collection of villages that got joined together. Today that’s mirrored by London’s status as a city that can – and does – mean different things to different people. All of this was brought home to me as I walked the route of one of the capital’s most iconic creations: the London Underground.

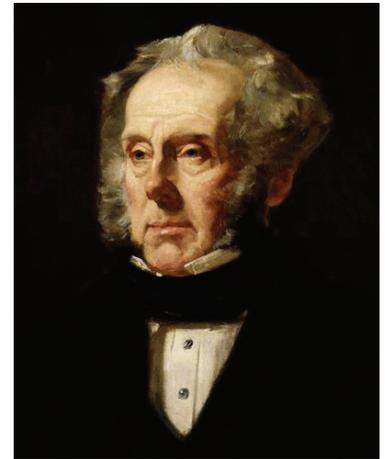
Right from the very first day, walking the Victoria Line, the city’s fragmentary origins showed up. Between Brixton and Stockwell I passed buildings that exhibited every style of the last 150 years (Victorian, Edwardian, 1960s brutalist concrete), and remembered that further back in history there was a place called Brixton and another place called Stockwell, with this road linking them. Hard to believe as I stood outside a shop selling T-shirts saying ‘American Gangster’ and ‘Got Swagger Like Me?’, but all this really was once fields. The evidence was a mile or so to the south: Brixton Windmill. The windmill is physical proof that until the 1850s the land there was open enough to let the sails turn. Then along came the railways, and suburban expansion, and all the new houses blocked the wind. As if to really rub the mill’s nose in it, Brixton became home to the first UK street lit by electricity, which in 1880 adopted the name that Eddy Grant made famous a century later: Electric Avenue. And now, proving that things always come full circle (excuse the unintended pun), the windmill has been restored and is itself powered by ... electricity..

So London’s village life is confined to history. Or is it? At the other end of the Victoria Line, between Tottenham and Walthamstow, my route took me past huge reservoirs on which it would be impossible to build. So never the twain shall those two places meet. And even in parts of the city where nature has been completely obliterated, a village feel can persist. One of my interviewees in the book was Tim Bentinck, who plays David in *The Archers* but was also once the Piccadilly Line’s ‘Mind the Gap’ voice. ‘Soho is still a village if you’re in my job,’ he told me. ‘That’s where all the studios are, so because it’s a community of voice artists there’s not a day goes by that I don’t see someone I know, and we’ll stop and have a chat.’ A nice echo of the area’s rural origins, when it was used for hunting. The very name ‘Soho’ was the cry for a hare. If a stag broke cover the hunters shouted ‘tayho’.

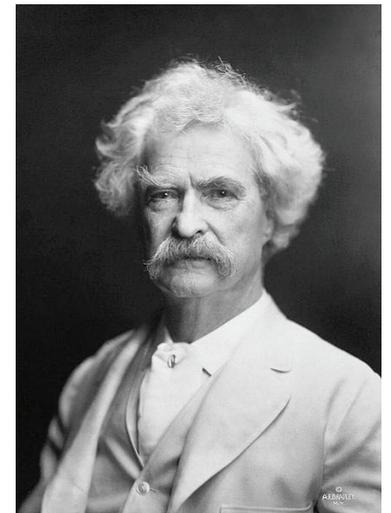
Nothing better exemplifies London’s ‘lots of different bits joined together’ character than the Tube network itself. The Underground map tricks you into thinking that the system is one unified whole, timeless and unchanging. The truth is rather different. The Tube was born in January 1863, when the Metropolitan Railway opened between Paddington and Farringdon. The elderly Prime Minister of the time, Lord Palmerston, declined to attend the ceremony, saying he was determined to spend whatever remained of his life above

ground rather than below it. Most of the other lines we know today followed over the next forty years or so. A passenger on the Central Line’s maiden journey in 1900 was Mark Twain, then a London resident. But the lines were run by separate companies, often competing with each other. The Circle Line, for instance, was formed by stretches of the Metropolitan and the District, each company operating trains on it – but they refused to sell their rival’s tickets. The Metropolitan ran clockwise, the District anti-clockwise, so confused passengers often found that to travel one stop they actually had to travel 26, in the wrong direction. It wasn’t until 1908 that all the different operators came to their senses and agreed to market themselves as a single entity, the ‘Underground’.

Just as there’s no such place as London, there’s no such thing as a Londoner either. It was over three hundred years ago that Dr Johnson called the city ‘the school for studying life’. Even then the capital acted as a magnet for the disaffected, the curious, the restless of the world – in short, anyone who wasn’t happy to remain where he or she was born. As a consequence the people-watching to be had in London was of the highest quality, simply because its inhabitants were so varied. All human drama was there. In 1767 the *Annual Register* recorded a man going home ‘in expectation of having his dinner ready, but found his wife on the bed intoxicated with liquor; on which he placed a train of gunpowder, with the diabolical resolution to blow her up, but in setting fire to the flame he was so terribly burnt that he was carried to the hospital with little hopes of recovery. The woman escaped unhurt.’ In 1814 the Monument was climbed, as a publicity stunt, by a pony belonging to a local fishmonger (the Monument being on Fish Street Hill). The animal was led ‘to the gallery ...



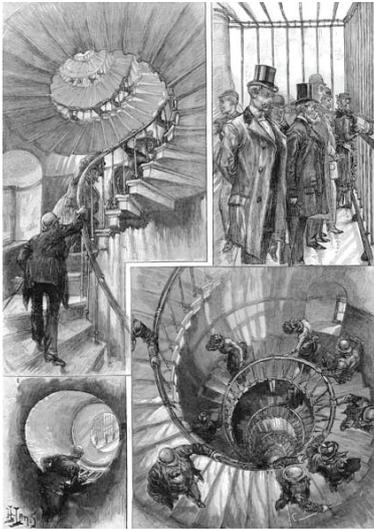
Palmerston: the elderly PM eschewed the nascent Tube...



...but Mark Twain was a fan.

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Walk the Lines (cont.)



and several times round the same, and down again, without a slip or a stumble. That's the Monument, incidentally, that killed more people than the Great Fire it commemorates: it was several decades before the platform at the top was enclosed by metal railings, meaning seven people either jumped or fell to their deaths. The Fire itself had killed only six..

Walking the Tube network overground led me past thousands of places with fascinating tales to tell. There was Barnet Hill, the incline that the Grand Old Duke of York marched his men up and down ... St James's Park, where James I used to keep elephants (each one was allowed a gallon of wine per day to get through the English winter) ... Tower Hill, where in 1685 the Duke of Monmouth's head was sewn back on after his execution so his portrait could be painted ... It may be a strange thing to say about somewhere that isn't a single place, but London – what a place.

The London Monument: if a pony can do it, so can you!



About Mark Mason

Born in the Midlands in 1971, Mark Mason moved to London when he was 20. Over the next 13 years he sold Christmas cards in Harrods, made radio programmes for the BBC and busked outside Eric Clapton gigs at the Royal Albert Hall. He also published three novels, several books of non-fiction, and wrote for publications as diverse as The Spectator and Four Four Two. He continues to do some of these things, though has now defected to Suffolk, where he lives with his partner and son. Mark's latest book, Walk the Lines, describes his overground odyssey covering the entire Underground network in the later part of 2010. He can be followed on Twitter @WalkTheLinesLDN