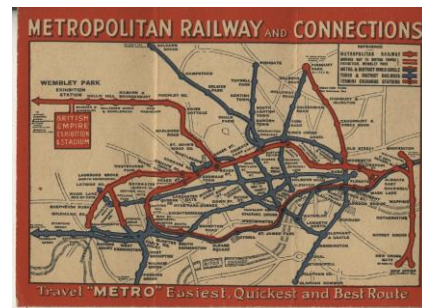




TfL Corporate Archives Research Guides

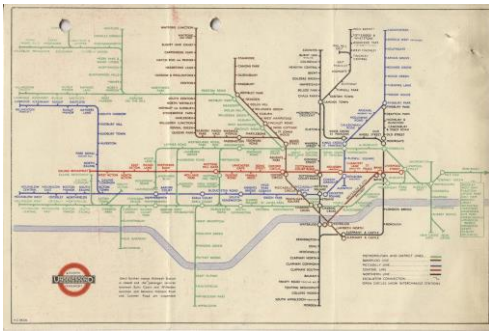
Research Guide No 24: Harry Beck

The underground map initially began as a collection of independent underground railway companies publishing route maps of their own service. It was only in 1906 that a combined map of London's underground railways was first issued to passengers by the Underground Electric Railways Company of London (UERL), using the 'Underground' brand as an advertising initiative. The other competing companies that agreed to participate were Central London, Metropolitan, Great Northern & City, and City & South London Railways. Some of these companies were later to become known as District, Piccadilly, Bakerloo, Central and Northern.



The map underwent various formats and styles over the next 15 years but it was not until the 1920's that it was fully developed once again and the geographic background was excluded from the map. However, the map remained semi-geographical in style and was therefore rather challenging as distortions had been made in order to fit in the ever increasing line lengths. The travelling public found it continually difficult to decipher the stations in the central area and this was largely due to the creators concern with geography and distance between stations.

An unemployed Harry Beck, formally an engineering draughtsman, thought he had the answer and produced a sketch of the Underground Diagram in 1931, with the intention of tidying it up by straightening the lines, experimenting with diagonals and evening out the distances. Unlike his contemporaries, he emphasised the connections on the network rather than its geography. Encouraged by his colleagues who thought it was a vast improvement, Beck submitted the sketch to the Publicity Department. The



design was rejected because of the use of 45 and 90 degree angles, which was seen as too revolutionary a design and one that would be incomprehensible for the public.

Nearly a year later and with no alternatives, the Publicity Team changed their mind and decided to trial Beck's Underground Diagram. Beck made several conciliatory changes and

following these the map was put into print. The design, the card folders holding the map, and the artwork were all produced by Harry Beck who received an amount of 10 guineas for his work. The map and its presentation proved a huge success, with public demand leading to large reprint orders and the commission of the artwork for the quad royal poster, which also resulted in uncommonly large print orders due to its success. Unfortunately for Beck his fees remained unchanged. However, the publication of the poster did confirm that Beck's designs were the authoritative representation of the underground.

As the underground network transformed, developed and grew so did the Underground Diagram. This suited Beck as it gave him the opportunity to perfect his simple and innovative design. And, perhaps more importantly for him, he believed that if he was employed to make the changes the design would remain in his hands. But the 1959 quad royal poster was to be Beck's last published poster. He was not to know it at the time but his freelance relationship with London Transport was about to come to an abrupt end and he was to be replaced by another designer. He did try to reinstate his position as the primary designer by designing a quad royal visual in 1964, but unfortunately it was not enough and he was never reinstated.

After Beck, numerous designers worked on the Underground Diagram to update, reinvent and modify the revolutionary classic design. They included new stations and tube lines. But it is Beck's Diagram that has stood the test of time and is ultimately this design that is used today.

Since 2001 there has been a re-evaluation of the value of the work of Harry Beck. His work on the map is now acknowledged, with a caption on the bottom right hand corner of all Underground maps stating: "This design is an evolution of the original design conceived in 1931 by Harry Beck". The uniqueness of Beck's Underground Diagram was its combination of simplicity and ease of use and it has come to be regarded as one of the design classics of the twentieth century, not only in London but throughout the world.

Key archival records

Unfortunately no corporate records exist about Harry Beck and there are also sadly few examples of his work in the TfL Corporate Archives collection. There is only one Harry Beck Underground Diagram card folder at the TfL Corporate Archives, but more records and examples can be found at the London Transport Museum.

Relevant records held by the TfL Corporate Archives are listed below.

Pre-Harry Beck

Reference	Covering dates	Event / subject
LT000346/090/005	1920	Metropolitan Railway – Map of London
LT000558/015	1922	What to see and how to travel: Underground map of the Electric Railways of London

Harry Beck Card Folder

Reference	Covering dates	Event / subject
LT000709/039	1943	Underground lines number 1 – Tube Map

Post Harry Beck

Reference	Covering dates	Event / subject
LT000460/233/1-7	1967	Memoranda relating to Victoria Line – extension to Brixton including map.
LT000632/043	1968	Parliamentary Questions – Station Car Parks including map.
LT000294/051	1979	Memoranda relating to Earls Court including a map.
LT001311/007	1988	London Transport map and guide for visitors