

January 10, 2013 8:39 pm

London celebrates 150 years on the Tube

By James Pickford, London and Southeast Correspondent



Clouds of steam and smoke will once again fill Baker Street station as London Underground, the world's first underground railway, launches a year-long celebration of its 150th anniversary this week.

Metropolitan Locomotive No. 1, a restored steam engine, is to give modern-day passengers a taste of 19th-century travel as it runs on a special service between Kensington Olympia and Moorgate on Sunday.

The Metropolitan Railway ushered in a global revolution in urban transport when it took the public along a 6km route between Paddington and Farringdon on 10 January 1863. Since the first engine puffed along the line, the network has expanded to serve 270 stations, last year achieving a record 1.17bn passenger journeys.

Boris Johnson, London mayor, said "the engineering ingenuity of our Victorian forefathers" had laid the groundwork for what remained a vital economic tool of the capital. "It annihilates distance, liquidates traffic and is the throbbing cardiovascular system of the greatest city on Earth," he said.

The Underground's founders had to overcome suspicions of the new subterranean transport system, characterised in one newspaper leader as "suggestive of dank, noisome tunnels... passages inhabited by rats, soaked with sewer drippings and poisoned by the escape of gas mains".

Their solution – bright, gas-lit trains and airy, vaulted platforms that are still in use – had the desired effect: on the first day 30,000 took the service, producing revenues of £850. By the 1880s a network of lines extended across central London, relieving pressure on the roads above, which had been jammed with horse-drawn carts and cabs.

Its construction was highly innovative. Engineers pioneered the technique of "cut and cover", where a trench was dug from above and roofed over, with open sections at regular intervals to release fumes.

Christian Wolmar, author of *Subterranean Railway: How the Underground Changed London*, said: "This was an unprecedented piece of engineering – to build an urban railway in a virtually continuous tunnel by cut and cover."

A second era of expansion around the turn of the 20th century required new deep tunnelling techniques – for which London's clay underpinnings were an ideal medium – to build the Piccadilly, Northern and Bakerloo lines.

Today, London Underground generates £2.18bn in revenues, just over half of Transport for London's annual income, and a long-term programme of upgrade work has been spared from the government's public spending cull. With London's population expected to rise from 8.2m to 9m by 2020, pressure to expand capacity and frequency on the network remains unrelenting.

Despite the changes it has undergone, the Underground retains its place in the popular imagination, with its instantly recognisable logo – the circle and bar "roundel" – and a map, drawn by electrical draughtsman Harry Beck in 1933 that is still upheld as a paragon of clarity.

Used in the second world war to store the treasures of the city's public galleries, the Tube gave protection to thousands of its Blitz-terrorised inhabitants – a moment captured by artist Henry Moore in his eerie sketches of the city's sleeping "shelterers".

It can also lay claim to the creation of the London commuter, liberating workers from the city slums in the 1920s and 1930s by sparking construction of suburban estates that fanned out from stations along the new lines.

As well as steam rail trips, a string of activities and events is planned for the celebration, including two new two-pound coins issued by the Royal Mint, stamps from Royal Mail

and 12 short stories commissioned by Penguin Books. Aldwych station, closed in 1994, will stage theatrical events to mark the occasion.

Content recommended for you

Based on your browsing history

Labour to focus on train fare squeeze

Planes, trains and magazines

Commuters squeezed but services have deteriorated

Britain's fare deal

High cost of rail travel causes outcry

Rail chiefs hope for a Go signal

Commuters struggle back to work

Floods cause more Christmas travel chaos

Rain brings Christmas travel chaos to UK

New rail data show scale of late running

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b7f8dba0-5b4d-11e2-8ccc-00144feab49a.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© **THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013** FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.