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GOING UNDERGROUND

HARRY BECK and London’s iconic Tube map

By Dan Carrier
At the time, the maps of the network showed individual lines run by different railway companies. It was geographically correct, but impossible to read. The lines snaked all over the place. The first map, published in 1908, betrayed the fact that different operators were competing with each other and could not agree where the Underground ended.

Beck first drew his diagram in 1931 – a difficult time to be working for the newly established London Transport Passenger Board. With money tight, the board’s employees could be laid off at short notice. Beck, then 29, had been employed as a “temporary” since he first started in 1925. While at work drawing an electrical circuit diagram, he had an idea: a new map that would raise the profile of the tube and attract much-needed new passengers, and that would make the system seem modern, quick, efficient – and, above all, easier to navigate.

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Harry went one morning to his local station and there on the wall was a diagram that was not done by him. It was devastating. To add to the insult, he thought it was a crude and ineffective version of his own diagram. It was signed by Harold F Hutchison, not a designer but head of the publicity department. According to Garland, Beck had become known in the publicity department for being “helpful” suggestions from tube bosses.

His idea was dismissed as ridiculous – people couldn’t understand why it wasn’t geographically accurate – and later he was laid off.

The maps had gone within an hour. Beck had been proved correct, and the publicity department arranged for a print run of 750,000. Beck’s map was the catalyst, says Garland. “He had a bright idea to sell the Underground.”

Garland continues: “Beck would not take no for an answer. He went back with a revised copy, and finally they agreed to produce a small print run of 1,000 fold-out versions, put them in central London train stations and ask passengers for comments. One of the publicity team went to Piccadilly Circus and asked staff if anyone had been interested in the diagram.”

For the best part of 30 years, his home was turned over to the map, recalls Garland. “There were sketches all over the place. The front room would often have a massive copy spread out on the floor for Harry to pore over. His wife Nora would find, when making their bed, a pile of scribbled notes under the pillow that Harry had been working on in the middle of the night.”

But in 1959, after three decades of working on the diagram, he was unceremoniously dumped from the project. Garland explains: “Harry went one morning to his local station and there on the wall was a diagram that was not done by him. It was devastating. To add to the insult, he thought it was a crude and ineffective version of his own diagram. It was signed by Harold F Hutchison, not a designer but head of the publicity department.”

According to Garland, Beck had become known in the publicity department for being “difficult” when it came to the diagram, and there were moves to remove his stewardship. Beck embarked on a letter-writing campaign to take back control of his life’s work. It was fruitless. London Underground accepted no argument that the current map was influenced by his work, or that it was an inferior design. When Beck fell ill, his piles of sketches were destined for the dustbin, but Garland stepped in and saved them – recognizing that they were crucial to understanding its development. Among the papers Garland saved was the first pencil sketch of the diagram, now at the V&A Museum. The diagram’s iconic status should not be overlooked, says Garland. “It has touched so many people. The tube diagram is one of the greatest pieces of graphic design produced, instantly recognizable and copied across the world. His contribution to London cannot be easily measured, nor should it be underestimated.”

Harry Beck’s London Underground map has been reproduced as a consumer item more times than can be counted — and often in some unpredictable ways. Here’s a few desirable examples:

The posters, now part of an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, were the crucial face of a pioneering public transport campaign for coherence and efficiency that also included station architecture, train interiors — and Harry Beck’s map.