

design icon

Read between the lines

The Tube map is a design classic that helps millions of people get to their destinations. And it all started with a man called Harry

WORDS ANDREW LOSOWSKY

In 1931, a 29-year-old draughtsman called Harry C Beck was out of work. He had been working in the Signal Engineer's office of the Underground Railways, drawing electrical diagrams and schematics. One day, while idly looking at the sprawling, geographically precise but hard-to-follow map of London's Underground, he had an idea.

"It occurred to me," wrote Harry later, "That it might be possible to tidy up the map by straightening the lines, evening out the distance between stations. The more I thought about it, the more I thought it was worth trying."

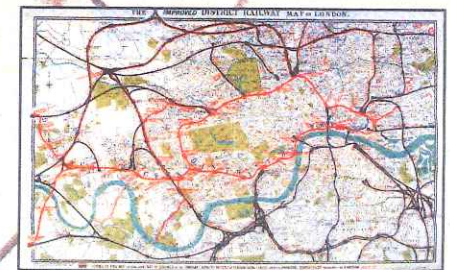
So he produced a sketch in an old exercise book, constructing a network of verticals, horizontals and diagonals. The only overground feature he included was the River Thames. He showed it to some colleagues, who urged him to submit it to the Underground's publicity department. He drew it up as a full presentation visual; his design was rejected. It was, apparently, "too revolutionary".

But Harry refused to give up hope, and the following year decided to try again. This time the head of the department greeted him by saying

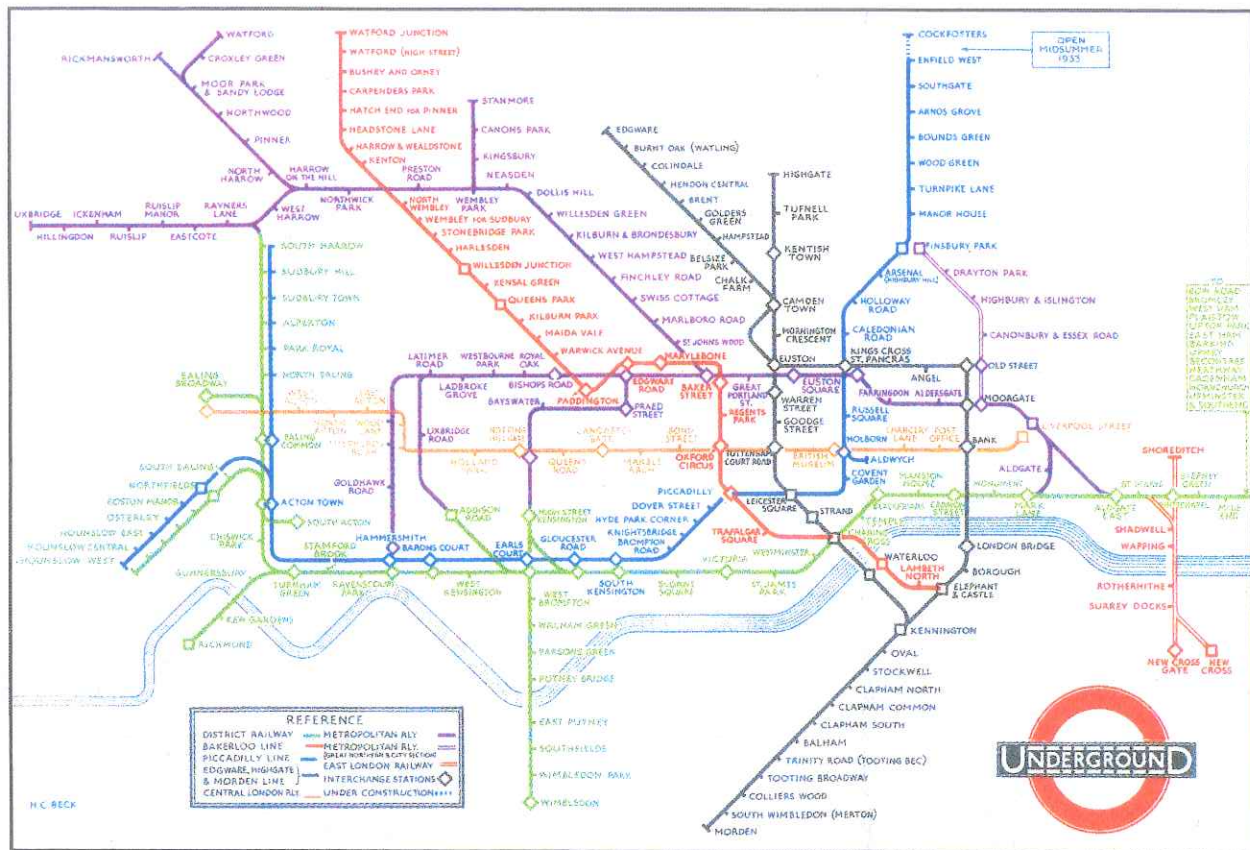


Left: Harry Beck in 1965, holding the first Underground map based on his designs

Below: the 1879 District Railway map (price 6d). In the early days of the Underground, several different companies ran rail services under the capital. But as services expanded, it soon became difficult to calculate the different fares involved in a single journey. In July 1933, Parliament formed a single governing body called the London Passenger Transport Board



Above: Harry Beck's original sketch from 1931 for a new, radically redesigned Tube map. The sketch was done across two pages of his tatty exercise book; a version of his sketch is still in use today



KEN GARLAND/LONDON'S TRANSPORT MUSEUM/TRUSTEES OF THE V&A MUSEUM

“You’d better sit down – I’m going to give you a shock. We’re going to print it!”

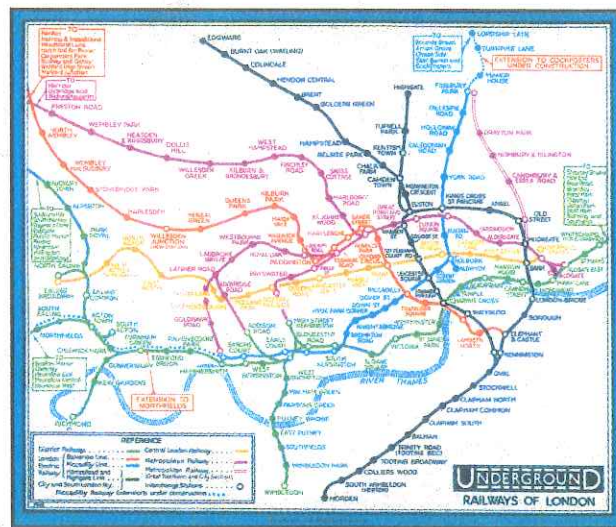
In January 1933, the Underground printed 750,000 card folders of Harry’s work with the title “A new design for an old map. We should welcome your comments.” By February, a reprint of 100,000 was needed, and the design was heralded a success.

Harry received 10 guineas (about £400 in today’s money) for the design and artwork, but the map did get him another job on the Underground, working on the map as it evolved over the next 20 years. He finally left when the Victoria Line was being built, as London Underground brought in a new designer.

Now 70 years old, the map is a design classic. The BBC devoted a programme to it in 1988 and it was voted one of the top ten designs of the century in a MORI poll for the Audi Design Foundation in 2001. London’s Transport Museum has a permanent exhibition dedicated to Harry’s most famous work and there is even a work of art – *The Great Bear* by Simon Patterson (owned by the Tate Collection) – based on the map, using the original design but replacing the traditional station names with those of comedians, actors and explorers. Harry Beck, who created the first-ever spoof of his own design for the train staff magazine in Christmas 1933, would probably have approved. 🔄

London’s Transport Museum, 020 7379 6344. Open 10am-6pm (Friday 11am-6pm) 📍 Covent Garden

Above: the first edition of Harry Beck’s design in January 1933. Harry’s name appeared in the bottom left-hand corner



Above: the last pocket version of the old Underground Railways map produced in 1932. The design was strictly geographical and could be overlaid on to a map – but it remained confusing for customers. Several stations are listed that no longer exist, including Dover Street (between Hyde Park Corner and Piccadilly) and British Museum on the Central Line

The map is still evolving. To pick up the latest version, ask at your local Tube station or visit www.thetube.com