



# HIDDEN LONDON

PICCADILLY CIRCUS THE HEART OF LONDON





## PICCADILLY CIRCUS: THE HEART OF LONDON

Piccadilly Circus is one of London's most popular tourist destinations and home to one of the city's most distinctive Underground stations. Originally opened in 1906, the station was completely remodelled in the 1920s. The new station, designed by architect Charles Holden, became the Underground's flagship in the heart of London. No expense was spared in delivering the station's extraordinary design features, reflecting a time when London was still perceived as the capital of the

British Empire. Today, the station continues to be a busy hub, serving over 40 million passengers a year.

Piccadilly Circus reflects the different periods of the Underground: the rapid expansion of Tube railways in the early 1900s, the golden age of design in the 1920s and 1930s, the Underground as a place of shelter during the Second World War, and refurbishment in the 1980s to keep pace with demand.

Piccadilly Circus 'stomach' diagram  
by Gavin Dunn, 1989.  
1989/158



The three entrances into the original Piccadilly Circus station: Haymarket (top), Piccadilly (bottom left) and Jermyn Street (bottom right) all showing slight variations on the typical Leslie Green station facade.  
1999/10745, 1998/83994, 1999/7101

## PICCADILLY OPENS

Piccadilly Circus station opened on the Baker Street & Waterloo Railway (now the Bakerloo line) on 10 March 1906, followed by the Great Northern, Piccadilly & Brompton Railway (now the Piccadilly line) on 15 December the same year. The booking hall, entrances and platforms were designed by architect Leslie Green.

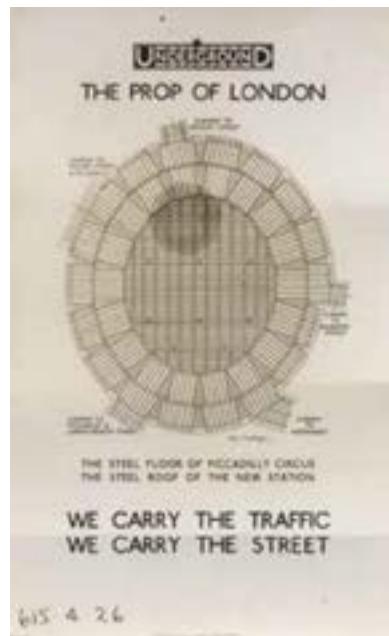
From the booking hall, eight lifts (four for each line) transported passengers to platform level. In 1914, Piccadilly Circus became the first Underground station to operate two automatic landing-operated lifts (previously serviced manually by lift operators), quickly followed by two

more. This reduced staff costs and improved passenger flow at a time of rising passenger numbers.

Annual passenger traffic at the station was 1.5 million in 1907, but by 1922 the number had risen to 18 million. The effects of this growth were clearly felt in the station with large queues in the booking hall and crowding on the platforms. Escalators were required to improve the flow of passengers, but they could not be installed within the existing station design. So, a brand-new station was proposed, to be constructed underneath Piccadilly Circus itself, right in the heart of London.



Former booking hall at Piccadilly Circus in 1928. The station was equipped with eight lifts, four for each line. On the left are the lifts serving the Piccadilly line.  
1998/87913



A poster by Charles W Baker from 1926 advertising the new steel roof, capable of bearing a load weighing over 400 tonnes at one of London's busiest intersections.  
2005/14493

Installation of the steel roof at Piccadilly Circus nearing completion around 1926. Excavation of the concourse is underway using a narrow-gauge railway to carry the spoil to the access shaft.  
TfL archives LT0032/213



The new ticket hall in January 1929. Timerecording clocks and ticket windows are visible on the far wall.  
1998/79909

## AN ENORMOUS UNDERTAKING

To achieve this ambitious vision of building a station directly beneath one of London's busiest thoroughfares, the proposed design was meticulously planned and tested with a full-scale mock-up erected at the Earl's Court Exhibition Centre. The final design included a flat steel roof deck able to bear the weight of the traffic above, a circular booking hall connected with several subways to the surface and a total of 11 escalators connecting to both Underground lines below.

Construction began in 1924, shortly after the statue of Anteros (commonly known as Eros or The Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain) was relocated to Victoria Embankment Gardens. A 5.5 metre (18ft) wide, deep shaft was sunk in its place from which all the construction was undertaken, starting with the fortified steel and concrete roof, installed in stages to minimise disruption to the roads above.

## THE UNDERGROUND'S FLAGSHIP STATION

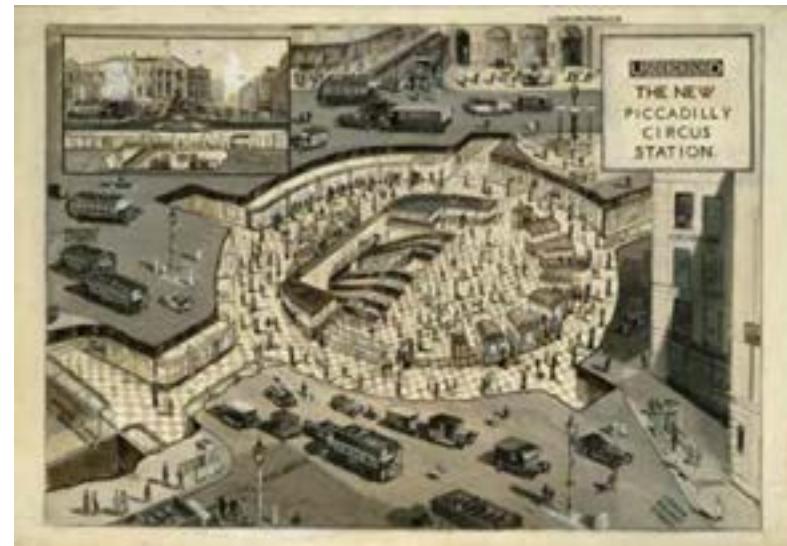
The new station was commissioned by Frank Pick, Managing Director of the Underground Group, and designed by architect Charles Holden. Pick's vision was for a flagship station, to project a sense of sophistication and modernity for the rapidly growing railway company. Holden created a concept which celebrated the Underground using his signature 'art deco style' design. The station theme was 'The Heart of London' and opulent finishing materials were used to offer a luxurious experience to 50 million annual passengers. They enjoyed Travertine marble from Tripoli, bronze poster frames, telephone booths, shop windows and lampshades, and red scagliola marble finishes on the concourse columns.

Original sketch for the 'Hub of Empire' mural by Stephen Bone. The central panel featured a world map with London at its centre and the other two showed activities connected with Underground travel: business and commerce, outdoor pleasure, shopping and amusements around town.  
1990/141



Piccadilly Circus station opening ceremony with the Mayor of Westminster, Major Vivian B. Rogers (wearing mayoral chain), starting the escalators and buying a 2d ticket made of ivory from a machine. Lord Ashfield, Chairman of the Underground Group is standing on his right.

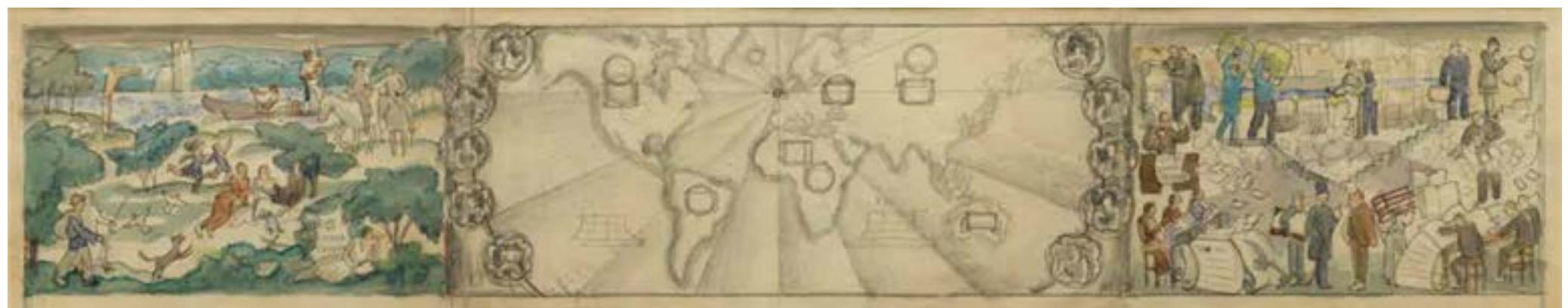
2007/12243



The New Piccadilly Circus station, by P G Davis, 1925 showing a cutaway view of the station's new booking hall and escalators, as well as the station shops and subways. The subways were endorsed by Westminster council to facilitate safe pedestrian movement to and from the streets above.  
1995/4207

A 'world clock map' was installed showing the time around the world with London at its centre. The Underground also commissioned artist Stephen Bone to paint a grand mural (now lost) above the escalators. The rebuilding of the

station cost a total of £500,000 and the main opening ceremony was held on Monday 10 December 1928. The old station was closed the following year on 21 July 1929 and a shopping arcade was built on the site, utilising the three original station entrances.





Shelterers settle down for the night on the platforms at Piccadilly Circus in 1940, while passengers continue to get on and off trains. Despite initial concerns that sheltering would affect the running of the railway, the Underground ran a good service throughout the Second World War.

2004/15903

## SHELTERING FROM THE BLITZ

During the Second World War, when the Blitz started in September 1940, Londoners started seeking shelter from the air raids in the Underground, at first without official permission. London Transport resisted allowing people to shelter on the platforms since the company's priority was for the Underground to run a good service, so people could get to work and support the war effort. However, the devastating effects of continuous bombing forced London Transport to reconsider and allow sheltering at their stations.

At first the conditions were very unpleasant. Hundreds of bodies were packed together on the cold

platforms, trains were still running with passengers trying to get on and off and there was very little in the way of lavatory facilities or first aid posts. The station grew increasingly dire and members of the public complained to their MPs and the management of London Transport, asking for basic facilities to be installed. In November 1940 the old passageways of the Leslie Green station were adapted to provide 24 toilets for male and female shelterers. Piccadilly Circus, being so centrally located and one of the main Underground stations for the West End and the many social clubs of Soho, was continually packed night after night with up to 2,000 people seeking shelter.

The platforms at Piccadilly Circus were often so full that shelterers would sleep on the escalator landings and even on the escalators themselves. Shelter wardens supervised the shelterers but the wardens did not always get on well with the station staff, whose main priority was to keep the railway running and serve passengers. By 1943 over 50 female staff were working at Piccadilly Circus station as women stepped into roles previously occupied by men.

The government responded to public complaints by installing lavatories, bunk beds and first aid posts in Underground stations. This first aid post at Piccadilly Circus was at the far end of the westbound platform of the Piccadilly line. Here you can also see the first fluorescent lights on the Underground, installed in 1945.  
I998/60224



Shelterers sleeping on the escalators as the platforms and landings are full.  
I998/89538

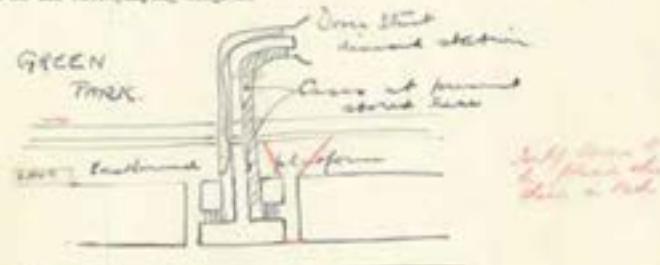
MEETING OF MEMORIAL COMMITTEE FROM GREEN PARK TO PICCADILLY CIRCUS  
Meeting in connection with the removal of museum artworks from Dover Street to Piccadilly Circus held at Green Park at 10.30 a.m. on Friday, 7th March.

Present: Miss Eates  
Mr. McLaren  
\* Mr. N. Clark  
\* Mr. E. Simpson  
\* Triangular  
\* Bletchley Park  
\* Beebe  
Loomes

- London Room  
- National Gallery  
- Chief Engineer's Office  
- Permanent Way Department  
- Removal Contractors  
- Operating Department

44-341/087/019/01

The cases (approximately 150) are at present located in one of the two subways connecting the platforms at Green Park with the disused Dover Street station. It is required to move these to Piccadilly Circus to the subway shown on the accompanying diagram.



After discussion it was suggested that the following arrangements should be made:

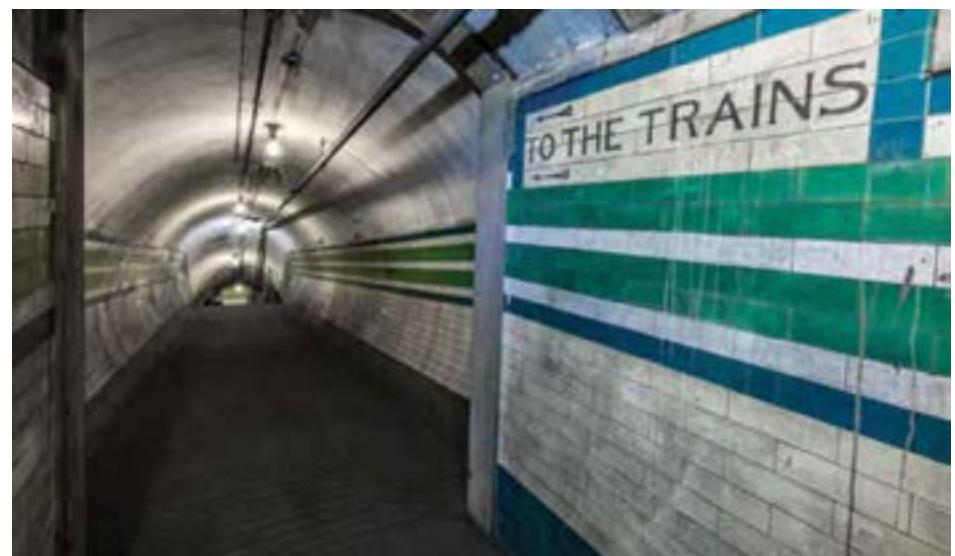
- (1) The cases to be moved on Saturday night and Sunday night, 22nd and 23rd March - the work being carried out between 1.30 a.m. and 5.30 a.m. on the Saturday night, and 10.30 a.m. and 4.30 a.m. on the Sunday night.
- (2) Two 7-car service trains to be used - the first running to Green Park, anti-clockwise, and loading up, then proceeding to Piccadilly Circus, anti-clockwise, to unload, and the second train standing west of Green Park until the first train is loaded.
- (3) Miss Eates was anxious that the shelterers should be unaware of the contents of the cases, and Mr. Clark said that the MRC would provide screens at Green Park to screen off the section of the platform between the cases passage and the train, and to make similar arrangements at Piccadilly Circus. It was also agreed that only one car should be loaded at a time (the outside door seats being used to open the doors), and that the Rolling Stock Department should be asked to ensure that the two trains employed on both nights should be provided with netting on the windows.
- Mr. Beebe also suggested that one of the refreshment trains might be used.
- (4) The removal contractors will provide the men to load and unload the trains on both nights.
- (5) Mr. Beebe undertook to arrange with the shelter marshals for the areas of the northern platforms at Green Park and Piccadilly Circus to be left clear on these nights.

Mr. N. N. Clark is making all arrangements in connection with the moving at Piccadilly Circus.

## SHELTERING FROM THE BLITZ

Toilets were not the only thing kept in the disused passageways of Piccadilly Circus. On 22 and 23 of March 1941, over 150 crates of artwork from the Tate collection and London Museum were moved in to a secure storage especially built for safekeeping purposes. The collections had been stored at Dover Street station (Green Park) in the disused passageways there since

the beginning of the Blitz in 1940, in 1941 the entire collection had to be moved but in secret, away from the curious eyes of the shelterers by erecting screens on the platforms at both stations. A special train with covered windows transported the collection between the two stations. The collections stayed there until 1946 when they were restored to their respective homes.



This closed passageway was utilised for museum storage during the Second World War.

Minutes of a meeting between London Transport officials, Margot Eates of the London Museum, and a representative from the National Gallery, detailing the precise operation of the move from Dover Street to Piccadilly Circus. The location of the screens erected on the platforms is marked in red pen.  
TfL Archive LT 000341/087/019/011

## THE UNDERGROUND'S FLAGSHIP STATION

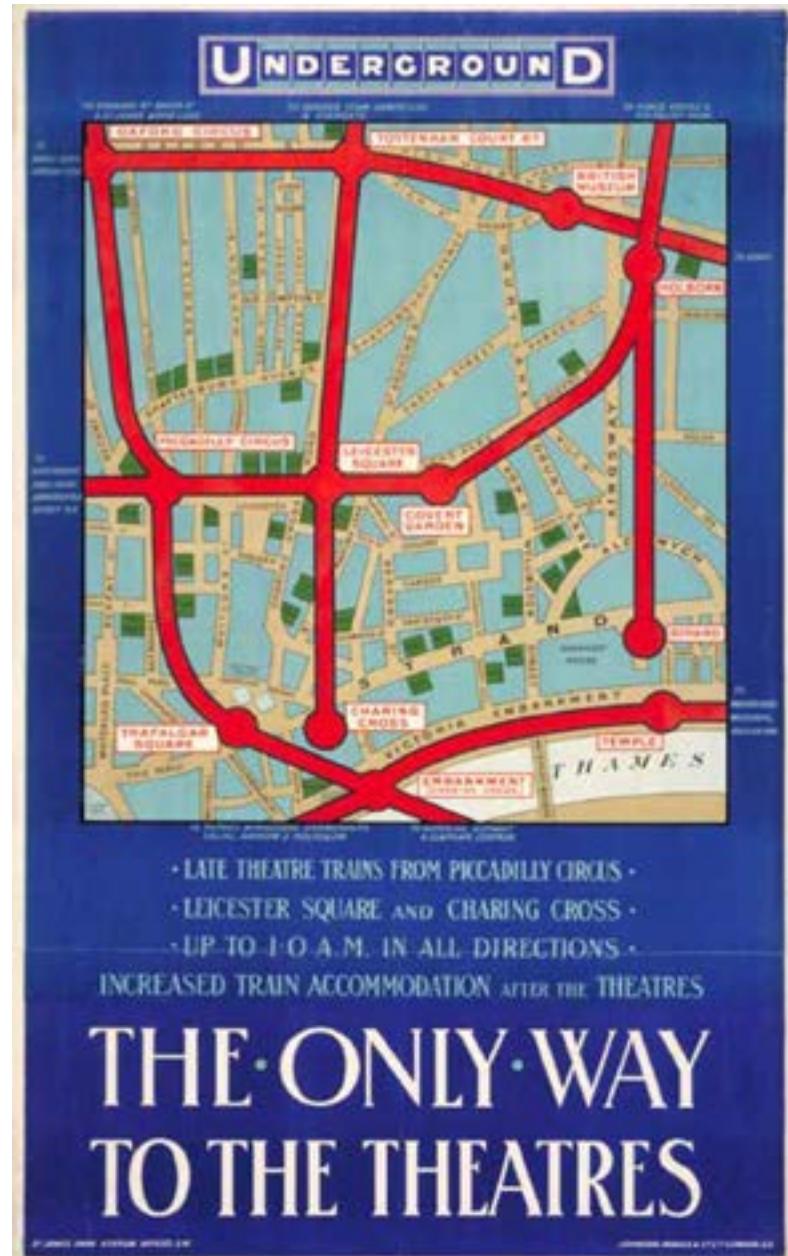
As a flagship for the Underground, Piccadilly Circus has often been prioritised for station upgrades. On 2 October 1945 it was the first to receive fluorescent lighting, a state-of-the-art technology at the time. It made this station appear bright as day compared to the gloom of the Underground elsewhere. By 1969 all the escalators had been upgraded and by 1979 powers were being sought to modernise the entire station as a part of an upgrade programme planned for the 1980s.

The refurbishment included a new subway leading up to a market and Anteros (or Eros) and a complete retiling of the landings and platforms. The new tiles were designed especially for the project, inspired by the bright lights and the atmosphere of Piccadilly Circus above. The tiles were fixed directly onto the old tiles, this method having been successfully tested on the disused platform at Aldwych station in

1983 before being used at Piccadilly Circus. As well as improving the passenger environment the upgrade included improvements to staff facilities and ventilation.

Piccadilly Circus was intended as a stop only proposed Chelsea-Hackney line in the 1970s. This was planned as the next major construction project after the Victoria and Jubilee lines. It was designed to relieve pressure on other Tube lines in south west London. For financial reasons the line was not built, but the idea has recently been revived in proposals for Crossrail 2. However, after much consideration a station at Piccadilly Circus has been ruled out due to constraints underground.

So, Charles Holden's cleverly designed station will continue to offer a glimpse of the best of transport for London's heritage for years to come.



Poster advertising the nearest Theatredland stations, including Piccadilly Circus and Aldwych, 1910.  
1983/4/100

For more information about the history of the site, the context in which it was built, and other underground structures, the following publications are recommended:

**Chris Nix, Siddy Holloway, David Bownes with Sam Mullins**  
**Hidden London: Discovering the forgotten Underground**  
Yale University Press, 2019

**David Bownes, Oliver Green and Sam Mullins**  
**Underground How the Tube-Shaped London**  
Allen Lane, 2012

**Antony Badsey-Ellis and Mike Horne**  
**The Aldwych branch**  
Capital Transport, 2009

**Desmond F Croome and Alan A Jackson**  
**Rails through the Clay**  
Capital Transport, 1993

Titles still in print are available in the London Transport Museum shop or can be ordered from the Museum's online shop. All the publications and further information can be consulted in the Museum library by appointment. See the Museum website for details.

For an informal look behind the scenes, exclusive access and information, check out the [Hidden London Hangouts series on London Transport Museum's YouTube channel.](#)

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**Paul Ross, Patron**

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As an educational charity, the Museum conserves and explains the city's transport heritage, offering people an understanding of the Capital's past development and engaging them in the debate about its future.

The majority of our collections are stored at the Museum Depot at Acton in West London. It is open to the public on special weekends and for guided monthly tours.

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