

# **YEARS OF THE PICCADILLY**

## **by Desmond Croome**

On 15 December 1906 the initial section of the Piccadilly Line was officially opened between Hammersmith and Finsbury Park by the Rt. Hon. David Lloyd George, President of the Board of Trade.

This oddly-shaped line was the offspring of railway power politics, and resulted from the amalgamation of two straightforward tube lines – the Brompton and Piccadilly Circus, authorised in 1897, and the Great Northern and Strand, authorised in 1899. The former line came under the wing of the American tycoon, C.T. Yerkes, six months after he had acquired a controlling interest in the sprawling Metropolitan District Railway in March 1901. The Great Northern & Strand was also brought into the Yerkes net in September 1901, and was a further pawn in the battle for control of London's underground railways, between Yerkes and John Pierpont Morgan. Unfortunately the Morgan Group did not take care to ensure that its allies in a tube-building consortium were kept happy. When the White tramway interests of Bristol fell out with Morgan on control of the consortium's policies, the Yerkes Group was pleased to welcome them into its fold. In the previous autumn, Yerkes had promoted a new linking tube between Piccadilly Circus and Holborn, and a change of name to Great Northern Piccadilly & Brompton. This was approved in November 1902. The powers of the District Deep Level railway between Brompton (South Kensington) and Earl's Court were taken over by an agreement of 1902, and linking tube tunnels were built between Earl's Court and Barons Court (thence to Hammersmith by running powers over the District). The Great Northern Railway built Finsbury Park tube station and retained control, a crafty move which caused a great deal of contention in later years.

Construction took from 1902 to 1906, and even then, some stations were not able to open until later. As mentioned above, the formal opening of the main line was in December 1906, and for nearly 26 years, the Piccadilly trains shuttled between Hammersmith and Finsbury Park.

Apart from major national events which affected all lines, the only significant Piccadilly Line event was to take delivery of 40 trailer cars with air-operated sliding doors which were hauled or propelled by former gate-stock motor cars which had been converted to air-door operation. The first train was introduced on 9 December 1921, but the completion of the scheme had to await the delivery of further modified motor cars, by 20 December 1923.

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The air-operated doors were a success from many points of view. The greatest benefit was a huge saving in train staff, but enhanced speed of operation was also a major bonus factor. The success of these trains led to the building of new experimental cars, and soon afterwards to a huge fleet of air-doored tube stock for all the ex-Yerkes tubes and the City & South London line. The final deliveries of this stock were in 1934.

Otherwise the Piccadilly continued as a sleeping beauty, to be awoken by the kiss of a handsome prince in the shape of an injection of taxpayers' money. Each end of the line had its own compelling reasons to be graced with an extension.

At Finsbury Park, the difficulties experienced by home-going passengers had been a bone of contention with the travelling public for many years. Two tube lines ended at Finsbury Park, and although the homeward journey could be made by a London & North Eastern suburban train, the stations were generally far removed from the shopping centres, and the services were slow, uncomfortable and infrequent. Tram and bus were the preferred method of onward travel, but the multiplicity of transport authorities meant that there was no agreement on the best way to clear the interchange traffic, so that there were nightly struggles to gain a foothold on a northbound tram or bus. Eventually a high-powered committee made some rather mild recommendations for a tube extension, but the Underground Group maintained that it had no spare money, and the Metropolitan (Great Northern & City) saw north-west London as a more remunerative area for investment. The unemployment of the late 1920s caused the Government to pass the Development (Loan Guarantees and Grants) Act, 1929, which provided for outright grants for works of public benefit.

The Underground Group had been preparing extension plans and quietly buying parcels of land for many years. Parliamentary powers were obtained quickly under special provisions for rapid progress. Public opinion strongly favoured a tube extension, and the opposition from the LNER was brushed aside.

The extension was in tunnel from Finsbury Park to north of Bounds Green, and there was a further stretch of tunnel at Southgate, including an underground station. It terminated at the then little-known hamlet of Cockfosters, just beyond a new tube depot between

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there and Oakwood (then Enfield West). The opening dates were synchronised with those for the western extensions, to which we must now turn.

In the west, there was no single point of public dissatisfaction, but pressure had been steadily building up. Housing development was overloading the service that the District could provide on two tracks. Some space for an extension was available in the shape of the disused ex-London & South Western tracks between Hammersmith and Turnham Green. A bold scheme embraced these tracks in an extended Piccadilly Line, continuing on two newly-excavated tracks thence to Northfields, where there was another new depot. These extra tracks permitted express operation of the tube trains, allowing the District trains to serve the intermediate stations.

The	principal	opening	dates	were:
Hammersmith	– South Harrow		4 July	1932
Finsbury Park	– Arnos Grove		19 September	1932
Acton Town	– Northfields		9 January	1933
Arnos Grove	– Oakwood		13 March	1933
Northfields	– Hounslow West		13 March	1933
Oakwood	– Cockfosters		31 July	1933
South Harrow	– Uxbridge		23 October	1933

Both eastern and western extensions witnessed widespread activity in station construction. In the east, the new stations on the extension gave full rein to C.W. Holden's design talents. In the west, many District stations were rebuilt and sometimes resited. In central London, the reconstructed and resited Piccadilly Circus station (10 December 1928) provided a fitting hub for the Empire, but other reconstructions of the 1932-39 period included Earl's Court, Knightsbridge, Hyde Park Corner, Green Park, Leicester Square, Holborn and King's Cross. By comparison, the unrebuilt stations had the air of interesting historical relics. Some stations with light traffic were closed permanently, which helped to reduce journey times.

The Piccadilly Line was certainly the centre of attention in the 1929-1939 period and detailed attention was given to every possible way of reducing overall journey times. These improvements coincided with the housing boom in Greater London, so the extended passenger facilities were soon used to full advantage (or disadvantage if you could not find a seat). Conditions were probably more favourable to the Underground management than at any other time in its history but

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the talented management team of Ashfield, Pick and Thomas certainly took full advantage of its opportunities and laid firm foundations for later developments, particularly in reaching out to Heathrow Airport.

The extension to Heathrow, first mooted many years ago, wasn't finally approved until 1970, with construction starting in March 1971. Serving the Heathrow complex will have taken three stages, the first, to what is now Terminals 1, 2 and 3 (originally Heathrow Central), opening on 16 December 1977 (a preliminary stage saw the line extended from Hounslow West to Hatton Cross from 19 July 1975). Around that time, plans were formulated for another terminal at Heathrow because it was realised that the Airport would soon become saturated – enter Terminal 4. This extension to the Piccadilly Line, in the form of a one-way loop, was authorised in October 1982 and the new station opened to passengers on 12 April 1986.

Now, as we celebrate 100 years of the original Piccadilly Line between Finsbury Park and Hammersmith, we are expecting another extension to be complete for opening in March 2008, from Heathrow Terminals 1, 2 and 3 onwards to Terminal 5, on which much construction work has already been done.

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