

# FROM 2019 TO COVID-19

by Richard Clowser

## The changing face of passenger numbers – from a Train Operator's viewpoint

It hardly needs me to point out the totally dramatic and largely traumatic way that our way of life has been affected in 2020. Not seen since World War 2 has something had such an impact. To date it's still ongoing and we don't yet know what the long term effects will be.

How then has the Covid-19 crisis affected the usage of the Underground system?

The following narrative is my own experiences of what I've observed as a Train Operator and is not intended to represent other colleagues views, who either work at different times or on other lines.

### PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I wrote an article in 2017 about my experience as an external applicant to a Night Tube Train Operator (see *Underground News* No.672, December 2017, pages 816-822). After 16 months in the role I transferred to full time at East Finchley in March 2018, then to the Central Line in November 2019. This was always my intention from my first day in the role.

A change of line meant eight weeks of training, which included line based operational procedures, stock training and route knowledge. This resulted in a road test on the 17 January 2020. Following that, I was back on my own in the front of the train, although I was now back in the pool (of spare Operators) and no longer rostered.

Line transfers and new operator training is currently a victim of Covid-19 as they've been suspended, largely as a result of social distancing restrictions.

### JANUARY TO FEBRUARY 2020

Even towards the end of January after I had passed my road test on the Central Line, there was no real hint of the crisis to come in the UK. While the virus was certainly in the news from late-2019, it clearly wasn't affecting passenger numbers at this time.

While not currently rostered, I'm able to have my preferred duties of 'lates', which normally means booking on mid to late afternoon. Passenger numbers are traditionally heavier eastbound in the evening peak and any slight gap in service can be a very challenging journey. Monday 3 February as a good example:

I was due to depart White City eastbound at 17.45 on train 005. The platform was busy as I arrived to pick up my train which, due to a service delay, was 5 minutes late. Luckily I wasn't first out but was right behind the preceding train. The platforms at most stations as far as Stratford were heavily loaded. Keeping time, especially at stations like Oxford Circus and Bank is extremely challenging and I arrived at Loughton 15 minutes down.

Morning peak duties are rare, but I had an early duty on Tuesday 25 February and the following was typical at the time:

I reversed at Newbury Park on train 022 and left westbound at 08.23. By Wanstead the train was already fully loaded. By Leyton the train was rammed full. Stratford in the morning peak can be very daunting with both platforms packed and the train arrives, parting what feels like a sea of people. There is an extra challenge here with doors opening on both sides and is often not helped with a TfL Rail service arriving at the same time.

Saturday afternoon would often feel like the peak too, with very heavy loadings, especially eastbound from Marble Arch. By the end of February it all still seemed totally normal with train loadings as expected.

### MARCH 2020

As March began, I was based at Waterloo for a week of training on the Waterloo & City Line. Leytonstone train crews cover the line but it's very much a 'Marmite' line, drivers either love it or avoid it as much as possible. The week of training ended with another road test before returning to the Central Line. By now, passenger numbers were decreasing noticeably. Another trip east on train 005 from White City on 10 March was nowhere near as packed as the previous time in early February. In the week leading up to the lockdown, passenger numbers were seriously declining and services were already being run down. By now, a number of trains were already being cancelled due to a lack of Train Operators. Station closures were also announced with up to 40 to be closed.

On Thursday 19 March I had my 'sweat day' on the Waterloo & City Line. Just two trains covered the off peak with one added for the evening peak. It was already known by that date that the service would be suspended after close of traffic the following day.

On what would prove to be the last normal weekday working for some time, Oxford Circus eastbound on Friday 20 March at around 17.35 saw barely 20 people there. Clearly things had to change!

## **INTO LOCKDOWN**

Immediately prior to the Prime Minister's announcement, special workings were in force. The Central Line stations to be closed from that weekend were Redbridge, Chancery Lane, Lancaster Gate, Queensway and Holland Park.

The special workings split the Central Line down into shuttle services, Epping to Leytonstone, Hainault to Ealing Broadway and North Acton to West Ruislip with a nominal 10 minute service on each. Hainault to Woodford shuttles continued too, but with only one train. All of these were subject to driver availability. The booking on sheets by now showed a lot of blank spaces!

Services in the 'peak', such as it was, included pushing a few extra trains into service, subject to Train Operator availability. These workings included Woodford Sidings to White City and back. This meant detraining at South Woodford eastbound as the trains ran directly into the sidings. Additionally, trains also ran from White City to Loughton and back. Even without these extra trains, a train every 10 minutes, even at 17.30 was more than sufficient to cope with passenger demand from late-March until well into May.

One concession made to alleviate Train Operators concerns on social distancing when traveling to and from a remote location to start or finish a duty 'on the cushions', was to allow them to travel in the rear cab, with permission of the relevant train's operator. Traveling backwards when leaving central London stations gives a very good view of the rapid descent as the line falls away. This isn't that obvious from the front. This, of course, was very much a feature built into the original line.

At the beginning of the lockdown, Train Operators would book on according to their duty start time, then sit around, subject to social distancing rules, until required to pick up a train. Invariably this was either 3 Epping shuttles or Hainault – Ealing Broadway - Leytonstone and finish. Later on, it became common practice to ring the desk beforehand and only come in at pick up time.

At the same time, with Night Tube suspended until at least March 2021, the operators affected were offered the choice to increase their hours to full time equivalent, by working three extra days in addition to their contracted Night Tube hours. This was on a temporary basis for an initial three-month block. This has already been renewed once but is not guaranteed on an ongoing basis.

Despite efforts to introduce a new temporary timetable due largely to a desire to increase service frequency, the Central Line retained the ad hoc shuttles until WTT70 was restored on 17 May. Even then, shuttles were retained on the weekend until the end of June. A number of the weekday duties had specific trains cancelled to at least guarantee a minimum number of trains and avoid large gaps. For some Train Operators, this could mean a very short duty.

## **LOCKDOWN EASES**

On 23 June, the government announced further easing of the lockdown restrictions, having already started to ease things during May. The expectation now was that this would lead to a rise in passenger numbers.

WTT70 continued until 5 July, after which a temporary timetable TTN223 was introduced, specifically to cater for the suspension of Night Tube. Prior to this, trains numbered 2xx and 3xx that ran daytime Friday and Saturday and onto the night service continued to run but were curtailed at normal traffic hours.

Passenger numbers were certainly rising towards the end of July, but still nothing like the levels as before. An eastbound train at Oxford Circus during the evening peak is still not as challenging as pre lockdown, where hundreds of people got on and off with the challenge being to keep to time.

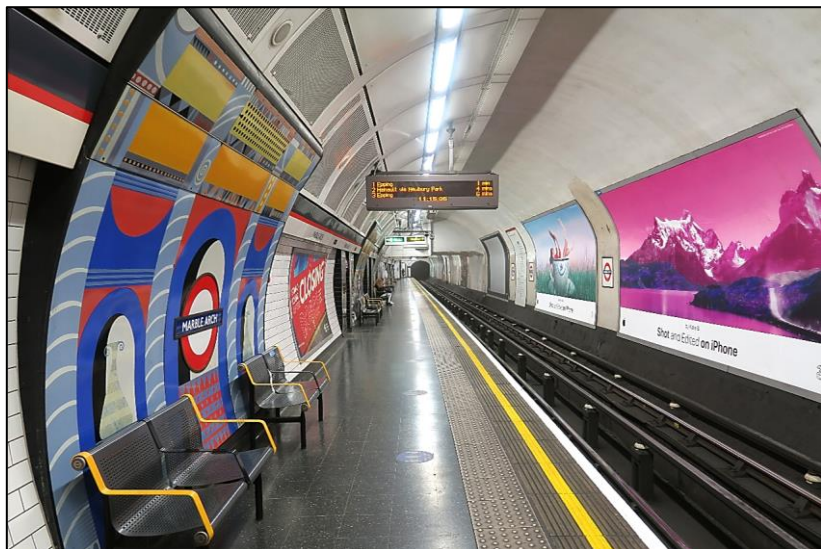
Even during morning peak, numbers are still a fraction of what they used to be. Seen at 08.20 on 5 August, the westbound train at Leytonstone had no more than half a dozen or so passengers per carriage. Clearly, passenger demand doesn't warrant a full timetabled service, but an intensive service is the only way to maintain a level of social distancing. Even so, the lack of patronage, bearing in mind how much lockdown had already eased by the end of July, is worrying for the long term.

TTN223 as per WTT70 factors in dwell times at certain points. This is to allow the service to recover when trains are delayed at stations due to heavy demand. All that happens now is that trains often arrive

early at these stations and are held there longer. This is quite common at Leytonstone and White City, especially westbound.

The numbers of late night revellers are down too, though they have increased since bars and pubs reopened on 4 July. However, without night clubs and other venues being open, it's unlikely passenger numbers will get to a level that would justify Night Tube resuming. What form, if any, that restarts is anyone's guess right now.

As July moved into August, the news continued to talk about a 'second wave' of the virus. We can only wait and see what will happen in this uncertain future. Watch this space for part two of this story ...



**Left:** The eastbound platform at Marble Arch at 11.15 on Wednesday 26 August 2020 looking west with just one passenger seated.

**Below:** (Left) Looking in the opposite direction at the same time, this shows the 'extended' section of the platform which was done in the late-1930s in anticipation of eight-car trains on the Central Line, which were eventually introduced some ten years later. Well into the 1950s (and maybe longer in some cases) the extended platform sections remained either in concrete or bare tunnel segments.



**Bottom:** (Left) Less than a dozen passengers wait on the eastbound District Line platform at Mile End on the same day at lunch time, most of them probably having alighted from the Central Line train seen the other side of the pillars.

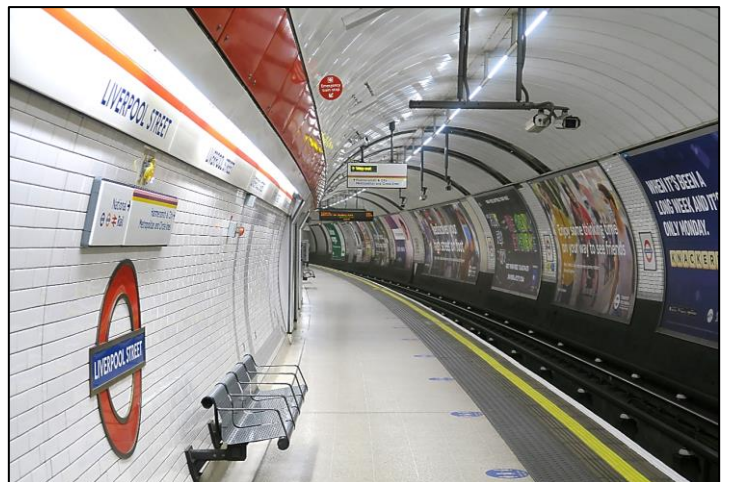
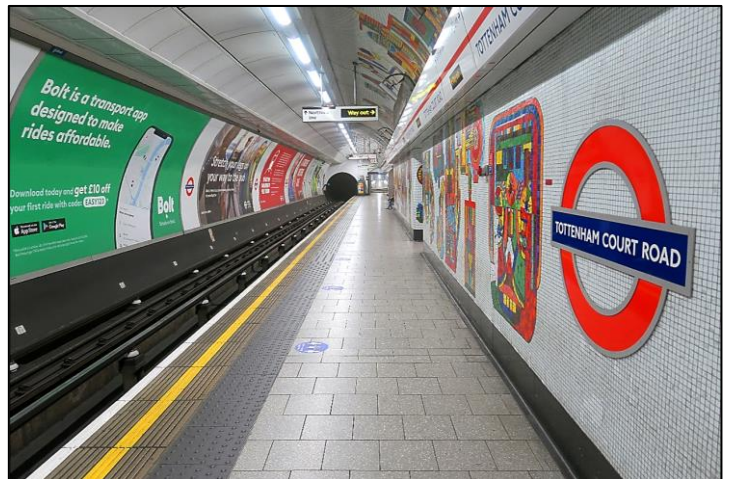
**Below:** Two views of dot matrix train indicators at Tottenham Court Road on Thursday 3 September 2020. Recent additions include 'here' and 'ready'. Another legend is 'held'. Are there any others and do other lines have the same facility?

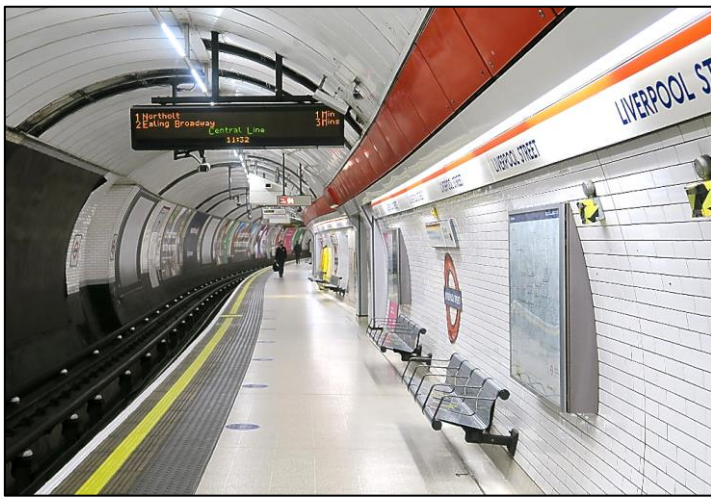
**All photos: Brian Hardy**



**Below:** Working from west to east on the Central Line into the central area, a selection of photos on Thursday 3 September 2020 showing how quiet the Central Line still is in the midday off-peak period..

**All photos: Brian Hardy**





**Above:** (Left) The westbound platform from the east end looking west.



**Above:** (Right) The bank of three escalators at the east end of the Central Line platforms at Liverpool Street (Right), again with little passenger traffic to match the usage of the rest of the station. Note the advice warnings on the tread uprights – “Please stand on the right” and “please hold the handrail”.