

HIDDEN LONDON : HOLBORN

THE SECRET PLATFORMS

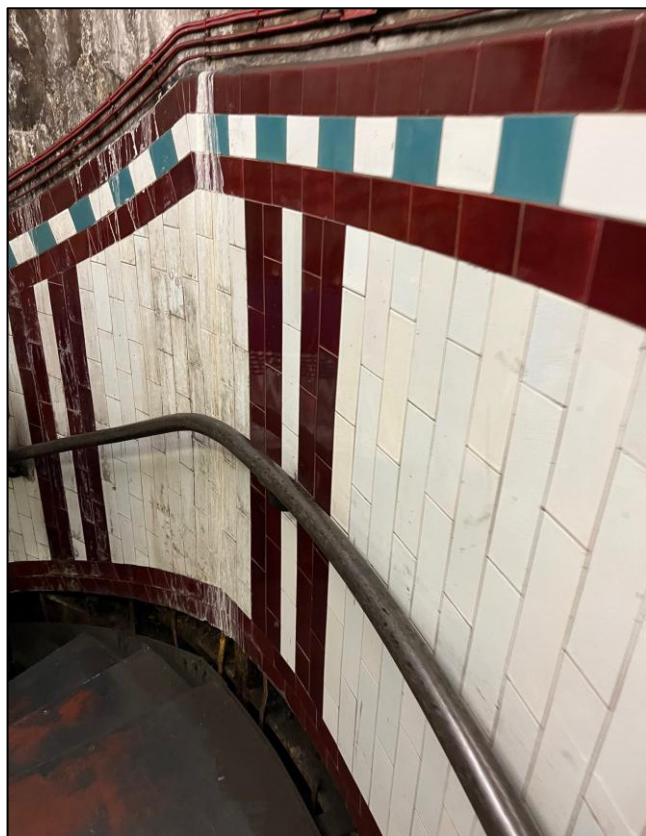
by Roger Tuke

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Back in February, when LTM Hidden London released details of and priority booking for their newest tour of Holborn, with dates in August and September, I reserved a place on this tour for the mid-morning of 14 August 2024.

The tour group were met by three Hidden London guides, Esea, Marilyn and, to keep us all safe, Bev, in Gate Street, which is just to the south of the station entrance in Kingsway. Once formalities were undertaken, we were led to the station's main entrance in Kingsway, on through the gate line and to the far right of the escalators in the ticket hall through a staff door down a flight of stairs to a lobby area containing back of house staff accommodation. There we had the history of Holborn station explained. It was constructed in what had been a slum area, that is until the LCC clearance scheme and construction of the wide Kingsway boulevard scheme of 1898, which was also responsible for the creation of Aldwych at its southern end. The station was constructed by the Great Northern, Piccadilly & Brompton Railway, opening on 15 December 1906, but the "Strand platforms" didn't open until 30 November 1907.

To understand the station's layout, one has to understand the history of today's Piccadilly Line, which originally comprised two separate proposals, the first being the Great Northern & Strand Railway from Wood Green, via Finsbury Park, Russell Square, Holborn to Strand, and the second being the Brompton & Piccadilly Circus Railway from South Kensington to Piccadilly Circus. These schemes came under the control of American financier Charles Tyson Yerkes, who was keen for his schemes not to terminate in Central London, so combined the both proposals to provide a through route. Therefore, in 1902, a further Act was passed which authorised an extension of the Brompton line from Piccadilly Circus to meet the GN&SR at Holborn. This explains the branch line south of Holborn to Strand being part of the GN&SR Act, meaning that the station had two through platforms eastbound and westbound on the main line, and between these two other platforms, the Strand bay platform to the south and the Strand through platform roughly between the main east and westbound platforms beneath the new Kingsway. The eastbound line and the Strand through platform running tunnels formed a junction north of the station, while the westbound running tunnel and platform was constructed at a lower level than the eastbound.



The station constructed at Holborn was by the architect Leslie W. Green, but unlike all of his other stations for the Yerkes tube lines, its frontage to its steel frame, whilst substantially similar, did not have the familiar oxblood terracotta cladding. Due to LCC retaining rights to approve elevations, it had red granite facings to the station entrance on Kingsway and side exit in High Holborn, surrounded by Portland stone.

The original station was served by four lifts, two each in two shafts, which served a landing between the eastbound and westbound platforms with steps up to the eastbound and steps down to the westbound. These were accompanied by an emergency spiral staircase adjacent, which was then used for our journey down to platform level.

This staircase (*Left*) is tiled in the usual Leslie Green style using sea green, burgundy, cream and white tiling, most tiling remaining in situ. Whilst no maker's tile was seen, from the backing in render left by a few missing edge tiles Holborn was obviously a W.B. Simpson & Sons tiled station.

We then had the history of the 1933 rebuilding explained to us. The earlier Central London Railway had constructed a station nearby when it opened in 1900, called British Museum. Holborn station was

therefore rebuilt in 1932-33 to incorporate new platforms on the CLR, now Central Line, which ran beneath High Holborn and crossed the Piccadilly Line here. These platforms came into use on 25 September 1933, complete with a rebuilt station on the same site with escalators, four to an intermediate landing serving the Central Line and three more to the lower level serving the Piccadilly Line, reusing most of the lower-level passageways. The exterior of the station benefited from a new front designed by Charles Holden, and which could be said to harmonise more successfully with the buildings in the vicinity. The station was renamed Holborn (Kingsway), although the suffix (Kingsway) has been gradually dropped. The biscuit-coloured 1930s wall tiling and the Yerkes' era tiling have both now been covered over in the 1980's refurbishment of platform areas with panelling depicting scenes from the nearby British Museum.



Onwards along the eastbound Piccadilly platform heading north (platform 4) on what is now an eastbound and westbound railway, to its southern end and then in through a private door in the 1980s platform panelling via a short corridor and various small steps to the Strand bay platform (referred to as platform 6, although by the 1930s reconstruction was no longer used – I'm not sure it ever officially got this number). This platform closed during WW1 and was decommissioned from August 1917. The trackbed is filled level with concrete but platform edge nosing stones are still in situ (*Left*). The platform area contains small rooms built during the Second World War and the area was used for essential staff dormitories/hostel use into the 1950s. Hidden London had displayed pictures from the LTM collection in most of the rooms, so you could understand what most were used for. Intriguingly, one of the room doors has the sign "Central Line Model Railway Club" from a subsequent use. Our guides believe this was still used into the 1980s. *As an aside, your writer would love to know more. From speaking with two of his modelling friends who have worked for LT/LUL, none have any knowledge of such a club, so if any reader remembers anything, an update would be gratefully received via the Modelling Secretary's contact details or via the Editor.* This whole platform area has been whitewashed but the trackside and overhead tunnel tiling rings are still in place.



At the southern end of this platform via an exposed tunnel lining segment corridor (*Left*) we were allowed access through a flood defense door into a fenced area to view the crossover junction just south of the station. Tunnel lining segments generally bore the maker's name of 'Sheepbridge' (*Below, Left*), the name of Sheepbridge Engineering company, which I believe was from Chesterfield. Returning via the platform area, we viewed some still pictures of WW2 shelterers on a screen in this area. It was explained that it was considered for museum storage and was actively considered by the Wallace Collection until use of parts of Knightsbridge station was used instead. As the Strand branch was closed 1940-1946, platform 5 was used by LT for file storage during this time.



This was followed by some footage of film using Holborn station during the 1960s to late-1990s. Excerpts from "London on the Move", a 1969 LT transport film, showed clearly the "Birds Nest" control room over the base of the upper escalators (Nos.4,5,6 & 7) at this time, and we were told it had eight CCTV cameras

used to test the technology before introduction onto the Victoria Line – in context, today's Holborn station apparently has some 117 CCTV cameras. We were also informed that "help points" were also first

developed in use here at Holborn station¹. This was followed footage of Superman IV dating from 1987 and music videos by both Howard Jones from 1983 and Aqua from 1997.



Above: The 'bird's nest' station control room at Holborn, at the bottom of escalators 4/5/6/7.

Photo: LT Museum

Above: (Left): The former crossover tunnel just 'south' of Holborn looking towards Strand (Aldwych). The door in the centre of the photo leads to the disused tunnel to Strand, last used c.1910.

Another unusual use of parts of the disused station was by Birbeck College, part of London University, to house experiments into cosmic ray detection. This use continued post-WW2 up to the lab's closure in 1993 in what was described as the "Holborn Laboratory". It was latterly under the auspices of John Barton, one of the founders of particle astrophysics. The laboratory use was deemed no longer compatible with the stringent fire regulations introduced post the King's Cross fire, but the lab was apparently relocated into the deep level WW2 tunnel shelter under Godge Street station.

We then retraced our steps back along platform 4 through another secret wall side door into the long closed-up and over passageway, fully tiled still with Leslie Green era tiling to the closed Strand through platform (platform 5), observing on our way a paper



poster with a yellow background (Above), complete with three feathered arrow directing passengers to Piccadilly Line platform 4. Given it excludes the stations closed on the Piccadilly in the early 1930s and has the three feathered arrow, it has been dated to between 1934-1939 and is a remarkable almost totally intact survivor.

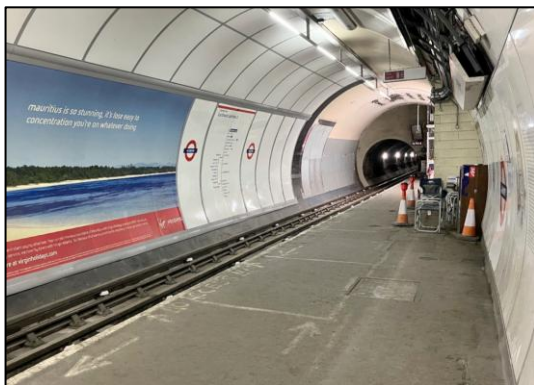
Once on platform 5, we were treated to the voice recording of a Piccadilly Line driver who regularly worked what was by then the Aldwych shuttle up to its end on 30th September 1994. This was followed by a voice recording by Hidden London team member Pat Dennis, remembering the closure of both the Aldwych branch and the Epping to Ongar branch of the Central Line on the same day, and the fact that many staff members visited both in their final days of operation although most did not admit to being enthusiasts. But the same date of closure of course meant it was impossible for enthusiasts to ride both last trains. Your writer chose the Aldwych shuttle and clearly remembers how unusually busy the branch was that day, let alone how full the final train was.

¹ The control room at Holborn was commissioned in December 1962. Later, from 17 October 1966, a Passenger Information Point (PIP) was commissioned at the adjacent Russell Square which connected with station control room at Holborn for enquiries, Russell Square being a busy station with tourists and hotels.

On this platform, there was a fairly new substation constructed for the Central Line power upgrade, and at the far southern end was a complete GN&PR signal box in relatively good condition, one of only two remaining, the other being at the long-closed York Road station. Along the length of the platform were various mock ups, trackside panels with adverts and line diagrams for the Central Line Chancery Lane station. On the platform side were panels for Holborn, but with cabling ducting over labelled for St. Paul's station and decorative panels giving history of Queen Anne's Gate, seemingly appropriate for St. James's Park station. In addition, there was overhead exposure of tunnel lining segments, where prototype "Cooling the Tube" units had been installed, trial combined ventilation and lighting panels were present and even 1930s render advert panels remaining over the top of Leslie Green era tiling to see.



Above: Render advert panels on platform 5 over original tiling
Left: The original GNP&BR signal cabin at the south end of platform 5, being one of only two remaining, the other at York Road (also disused).

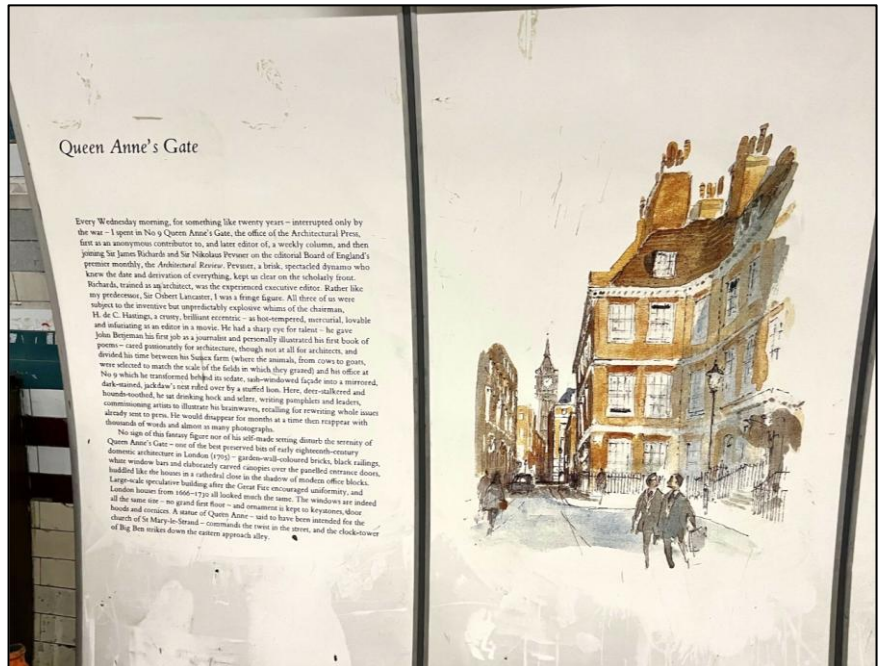


Left: Prototype panelling on platform 5 trackside.

Before we left, we were briefly told of future plans, firstly that a scheme was designed for a major upgrade of Holborn station pre-covid, including a new entrance on High Holborn. With TfL's funding issues, it is now unknown whether this will proceed. But refurbishment of the 1992 Tube Stock on the Central Line (the CLIP project) is underway and new nine-car air-cooled trains for the Piccadilly Line are due from next year.

The guides were then thanked for a most informative and very interesting

tour and, after nearly 90 minutes, we were then led back up the upper escalators to the ticket hall and back through the gate line to meet the midday sun.



Above: On the platform side of platform 5 is prototype panelling with Queen Anne's Gate information.