

In the air

Mind the Gap!

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We spent a few days in London recently and travelled around quite a bit on „the tube“, as the London underground is known.

The tube has changed over the years. Once it was a dirty but fast means of getting round London – the opposite of a visually rich, leisurely ride upstairs on a double-decker bus – used by mainly cheerful and healthy-looking passengers. These days, London Transport's „customers“ (people no longer travel but buy a service) are less bright and shiny than the trains and stations through which they hunch and hurry.

The greatest change of all though is that the tube has become egregiously bossy. You are constantly bombarded with information and instructions. The oral messages are intoned in that exaggeratedly slow, over-distinct voice the English use to make non English-speakers understand them.

Some of it is ancient, such as the comically stern baritone that tells you to „Stand clear of the doors“, or „Mind the Gap“, the latter being a warning to the unwary of the chasm that sometimes yawns between train and platform.

The „Dogs must be carried“ and „Perambulators are forbidden“ notices on the escalator are old friends – though I'd be interested to know how you're meant to tuck a Rottweiler under your arm, or if anyone under 50 knows what a „perambulator“ is ...

These signs have been joined by new ones ordering you to „Keep moving on the stairs“; if you must stand rather than walk up the (many, steep) steps, then you are to „Stand on the right“, a curious inversion of the usual English slow lane (on the left).

Some information has historical origins: the murderous King's Cross fire gave rise to a total smoking ban („Smoking is not permitted anywhere on the Underground“). And since „the Troubles“ in Ireland and more recently the „War on Terror“, you repeatedly hear: „Ladies and Gentlemen, please keep your belongings with you at all times. If you see a piece of unattended luggage or witness any suspicious behaviour, please report it to a member of staff“.

And of course there are signs informing the unobservant of the omnipresent CCTV cameras ...

One announcement, „Ladies and Gentlemen, please be aware that flash photography is not allowed in any station“, is a bit of a puzzle until you think how easy it would be for a member of staff to mistake a flashbulb for a bomb and evacuate the station, with the police swooping in to arrest (or possibly shoot) the photographer. No, no: better be safe than sorry.

New to me is the stuff aimed at tourists. A couple of examples at random: „Alight here for Trafalgar Square, the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery“, or at Covent Garden: „There are 193 steps up to ground level ...“ God knows what people make of that one.

One announcement really upset me: the nasty and mean-spirited „Please refrain from giving any money to beggars. They have no right to be here. If they insist, ignore them.“ Big Brother is not just bossy but uncharitable.

There was a moment of Epiphany though: a neat green notice, pasted above two fading official ones („Obstructing the doors can be dangerous“ and „There is a penalty fare if you fail to show on demand a valid ticket or validated Oyster card for your entire journey“).

The rogue notice said „The astonishing irregularity of this service can generally be put down to gross incompetence.“



Photo: ryangladstone.com

Our last afternoon: coming home on the tube, we notice groups of men in supporters' scarves, heading up the escalators, like us, towards Piccadilly Circus. The nearer we get to the surface, the greater the crowds wearing red and white checked sweaters, hats and scarves. Filtering down from outside, the booming roar of a rally.

„Croatia“, says a red-white-blue flag with a red-and-white check centrepiece.

Of course! England are playing Croatia this evening at Wembley, a match that will decide whether or not they stay in the UEFA Cup. These are Croatian supporters massing for the match.

We emerge from the tube and are suddenly among them, a vast vociferous rallying around the small statue of Eros, the „hub of London“.

The statue and the area around it have been cordoned off and draped with flags – *Dubrovnic, Mostar* – , red-and-white is everywhere. Piccadilly in moto perpetuo: a jumping up and down, a dancing, a milling

and a swarming. Piccadilly in uproar: rhythmic chanting, the football-traditional „Ole, ole, ole, ole,“ and fierce singing, – defiance hurled at England from the heart of London. In counterpoint, police sirens whoop and wail.

And up above, *Coca Cola, Sanyo* and *TDK* flash unperturbed their neon message to the world.

The shrill hysteria of rallying humans pursues us to the hotel doors.

In the early evening, we venture out again, direction Festival Hall, for a concert performance of Korngold's opera *The Miracle of Heliane*.

It's gone quiet around Eros, the rally has broken up. But as we go down the stairs to the tube, a mighty beating of drums booms up towards us. The station is packed with red and white-clad people and we are taken in and squashed among them. It is the march of a conquering army, no, more overwhelming, a migration of peoples, forward moving,

flags held high, drums banging, war-like singing. They occupy the place, are many, tall and strong; we move between them, small unseen creatures. They are not hostile but self-absorbed, gaze fixed straight ahead.

We feel small and weak, clutching each other and inching towards the ticket-barriers. Two policemen stand passive and neutral-eyed as I glance at them, just wanting to be seen in this anonymous mass.

Hearts thumping to the thumping drum, fighting down panic, we eventually reach the barrier, feed in our tickets and are out the other side. They are following; we're all taking the Bakerloo line. Then I realize they're going north while we go south ...

And suddenly it is over.

We ride in a quiet carriage to Waterloo.

A short dark walk and minutes later, we are in the calm spacious atmosphere of the Festival Hall. People study programs, sip coffee or wine, talk softly to each other or wander around.

While we sit and listen to a work of high musical art, England lose to Croatia.

Back in Piccadilly after the concert, the conquering red and white army is celebrating victory.

The defeated are not to be seen.