

Mobile Holmes: Transportation in the Canon

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Sherlock Holmes is indelibly associated with Baker Street. But as we know, he traveled throughout London, throughout England, and to other parts of the world. Clients came to consult him as well. Those travels required the use of various forms of transportation.

Mobile Holmes describes all of those modes of movement. Starting with walking, the book then covers horses, carriages, railroads, ships (both surface vessels of all types and submarines), bicycles, automobiles, and even airplanes.

In this excerpt from the book, John Durein provides a fascinating account of London's Underground (the Tube), including its development and its part in the Holmes stories. He also brings a personal perspective – his great-grandfather played a critical role in converting the Underground from coal to electricity.

Sherlock Down the Tubes

by John Durein, BSI

His paper begins on the next page.

Sherlock Down the Tubes

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Although not mentioned as extensively in the Canon as hansom cabs and other means of surface transportation, London's Underground is referred to in several of the stories, and features prominently in the "Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans." In fact, 221B Baker Street is in close proximity to the Baker Street station, entrance to one of the oldest parts of the Underground. During the era of Holmes and Watson, the station featured brass lift doors, like those of a five-star hotel, and there were clean, unbroken, brown and white tiles all the way to the lifts. It is fitting that the Underground appears in at least some of the stories, because, to a great extent, Sherlock's heyday coincides with the time when the Underground showed its greatest commercial progress.

References to the Underground appear in at least six of the stories in the Canon. Minor references appear in "The Adventure of the Retired Colourman," "The Adventure of Abbey Grange," and "The Adventure of the Three Gables." Holmes and Watson took the Underground to Aldersgate station on their way to Saxe-Coburg Square in the "The Red-headed League," and Alexander Holder rode the Metro Line to Baker Street station in "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet." The most extensive references to the Underground appear in "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans." You will recall that the body of Cadogan West was placed upon the roof of an Underground carriage that was stopped near the Kensington intersection of the Inner and Middle Circles, and was at last jolted off by the motion of the train travelling over switching points near the Aldgate station. Sherlock's resolution of the case depended upon many characteristics of the Underground itself: the lack of a ticket in the victim's pocket and the fact that the train would be

stopped to wait for cross-traffic or switching; the stop being long enough to allow the placement of the body on the roof of the carriage. Holmes walked along the Underground line from Gloucester Road station with a cooperative station agent in order to investigate the case.

It is interesting to consider the history of travel beneath the city of London. In his book, *London Under: The Secret History Beneath The Streets*, Peter Ackroyd wrote:

When a system of underground railways was first proposed in the middle of the nineteenth century, a popular preacher declared very seriously that “the forthcoming end of the world would be hastened by the construction of underground railways burrowing into the infernal regions and thereby disturbing the devil.” — A correspondent in *The Times* believed that a scheme for journeys beneath the surface was equivalent to absurd notions of flying machines and tunnels under the Channel.

In the 1830s, a plan was advanced for an underground railway between King’s Cross and Snow Hill (near St. Bart’s Hospital in the City). Britain had previously led the way in main-line above-ground railways, and so it was somewhat natural that underground railways should also be proposed there. At this same time there was a plan to have the final stop of the London & Birmingham railroad be on the bank of the Thames. These plans interested future City Solicitor Charles Pearson and future Architect and Surveyor To The City (Western division) John Hargrove Stevens. They worked together for the next 25 years toward the goal of a London underground railway. The streets of London were already clogged by horse-drawn vehicles carrying hundreds of thousands of people into and out of the city, not to mention the myriad pedestrians.

In 1846 city-planning proposals were made to improve London in the area between Holborn Hill and Clerkenwell Green. Pearson campaigned for a covered way through Fleet Valley through which trains

could pass. Aided by Stevens, he continued to make his case for a railway, and a committee was formed to consider Pearson's "Railway Terminus and City Improvement Plan." The Plan consisted of a 100-foot-wide road from Holborn Hill to King's Cross, the road to be supported by the arches of a tunnel wide enough for six standard-gauge and two broad-gauge railroad tracks. The Great Northern line would connect to the new line at a point a quarter of a mile from King's Cross. The Plan was approved by the committee, and subsequently by the Common Council. Unfortunately the main-line railways did not show the interest in the project necessary to move it forward.

A new proposal, a Bayswater, Paddington & Holborn Bridge Railway, was suggested to join Paddington with King's Cross. This plan would follow the New Road which was wide and fairly straight, and the cost was estimated at less than half that for Pearson's plan. This route was already successful with busses, so passengers were assured. John Stevens was appointed surveyor of the line, and John Fowler the engineer. Stevens, Fowler and other influential voices promoted the concept.



Fig. 1. *Cut and cover construction, 1861.* wikipedia.com

Projected to cost £1,000,000, it was approved by Parliament in 1854 as the Metropolitan Railway. London's Metropolitan Line was the world's first and is arguably the most famous of all underground lines, but it is ironic to note that only six of its 41 miles are actually underground. That underground/above-ground ratio is consistent throughout the London Underground system. Only 105 miles are underground: 20 miles of "cut-and-cover," and 85 in tubes; the other 139 miles which complete the system are above ground.

Initially the money required to wage the Crimean War hindered funding for the railway project, but Pearson urged the Metropolitan Railway Company to purchase the right-of-way while it was cheap; it had been cleared for the Clerkenwell Plan and so far had not been redeveloped. The Great Western Railway was to pay £175,000 to the Metropolitan Railway line in return for which the Metropolitan Railway Line would connect to it and build its tracks in Great Western's broad gauge. East of Euston Square the route was above ground for most of its length. The line west of Euston Square, being underground, was constructed by the method of "cut-and-cover," [Fig. 1] whereby a trench was dug for the railway and then roofed over, the roof being suitable for a road or other purposes. If the roof construction was strong enough, buildings could be supported. Cut-and-cover worked well under existing streets or undeveloped land, but was prohibitively expensive for developed land. Because of this, as much of the Metropolitan route as possible was built under existing roads to avoid the cost of razing buildings or having to purchase right-of-way. The downside was that all the pipes laid under the roads — gas, sewer, water, telegraph wires — had to be relocated. Contractors were hired and construction began in 1860. The tracks were laid to "mixed gauge," as per agreement with the Great Northern and Great Western Railways which had different gauges (distance between the rails). "Mixed gauge" had three rails, with the outer ones set to broad gauge for Great Western, and the third one placed so as to provide, when paired with one of the outer rails, standard gauge for Great Northern.

A typical cross-section of the cut-and-cover tunnel featured an elliptical brick arch, with a 28-foot 6-inch span, set on sidewalls. [Fig. 2] Cast

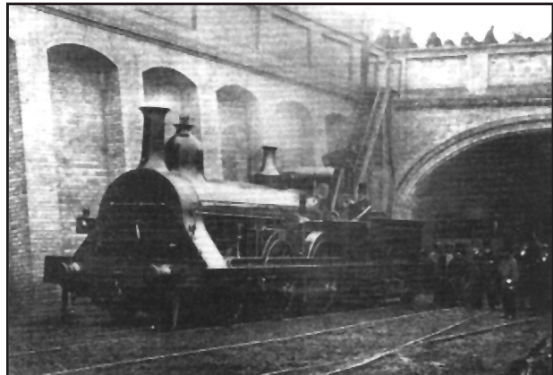
Fig. 2. Cross-sectional view of the Metropolitan Underground Railway. wikipedia.com



iron girders were sometimes used when there was not enough vertical clearance for the brick arch. As part of the project, the Clerkenwell Tunnel was built during 1860-1862. The original intention was to have all stations underground: Portland Road Station, Gower Street Station, and Baker Street Station.

As the project proceeded there continued to be doubts regarding ventilation of the tunnels if steam locomotives were to be used. San Francisco-style cable cars were suggested, as was the use of compressed air to power the trains. In 1854, John Fowler had suggested that, with proper design, steam locomotives could refrain from burning coal while negotiating the underground sections of track. He went ahead with his idea of a “fireless” locomotive, and a prototype was built with a small firebox and a large amount of firebrick in a chamber in the boiler to retain heat after the fire was extinguished. [Fig. 3] The plan was to run it normally

Fig. 3. Fowler “fireless” locomotive of 1862. wikipedia.com



Mobile Holmes – Book Excerpt

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