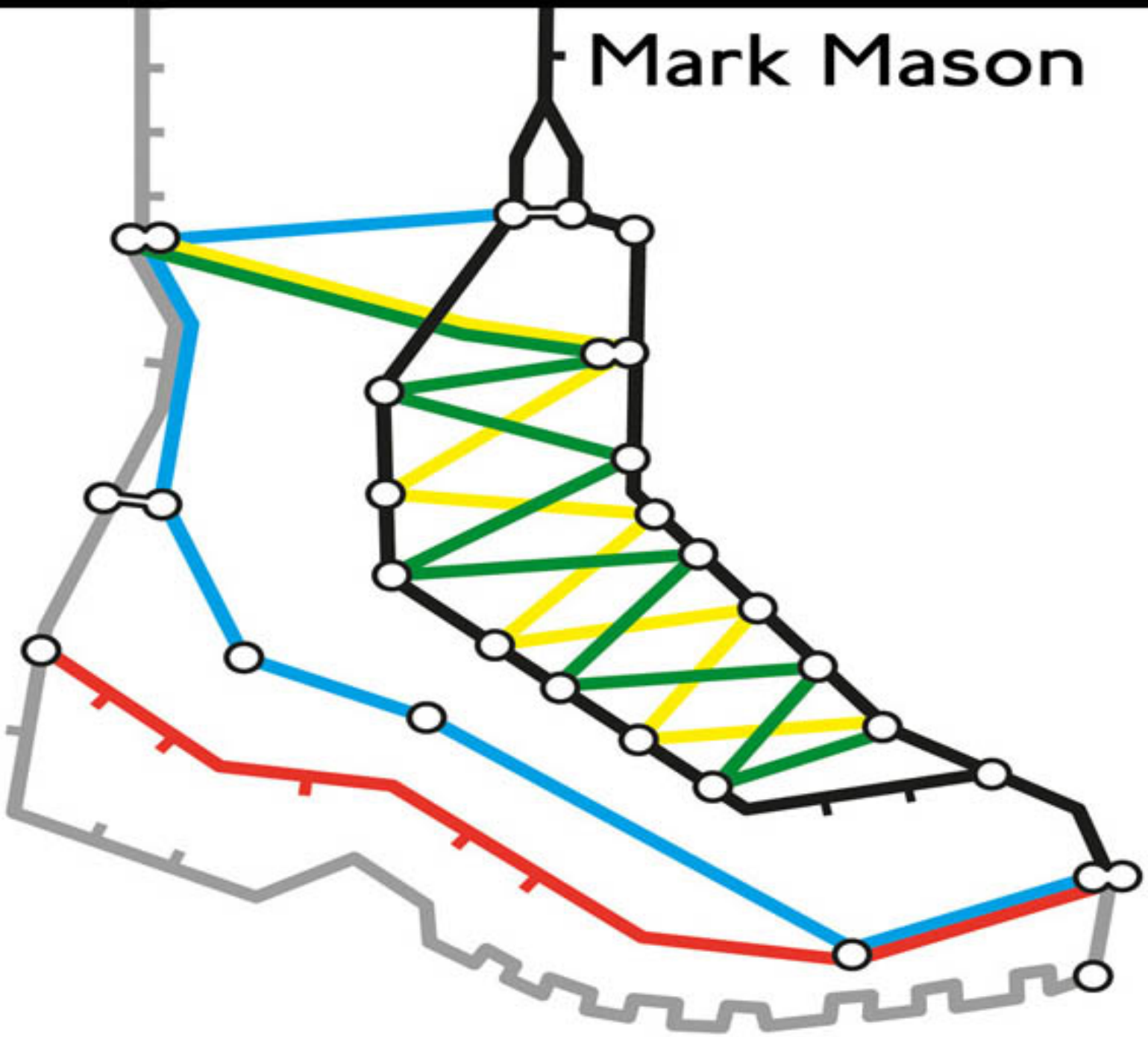
Mark Mason



WALK THE LINES

The London Underground, OVERGROUND

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1 city

11 Tube lines

269 stations

403 miles

912,384 footsteps

Countless overheard conversations

More London facts than you could shake an *A to Z* at

1 very battered pair of trainers

As a lifelong fan of London, Mark Mason embarks on a mission to ‘conquer’ the capital once and for all. The only way to truly discover a city, they say, is on foot. Taking this to extremes, Mark sets out to walk the entire length of the London Underground – overground – passing every station on the way.

Over the course of several hundred miles, he comes to understand a sprawling metropolis that never ceases to surprise. In a story packed with historical trivia, personal musings and eavesdropped conversations, Mark learns how to get the best gossip in a City pub, how the Ritz made its female guests feel good about themselves, and why the Bank of England won’t let you join the M11 northbound at Junction 5. He has an East End cup of tea with the Krays’

official biographer, discovers what cabbies mean by ‘on the cotton’, and meets the *Archers* star who was the voice of ‘Mind the Gap’.

On a broader level, Mark contemplates London’s contradictions as well as its charms. He gains insights into our fascination with maps and sees how walking changes our view of the world. Above all, in this love letter to a complicated friend, he celebrates the sights, sounds and soul of the greatest city on earth.

About the Author

Born in the Midlands in 1971, Mark Mason moved to London when he was 20. Over the next 13 years he sold Christmas cards in Harrods, made radio programmes for the BBC and busked outside Eric Clapton gigs at the Royal Albert Hall. He also published three novels, several books of non-fiction, and wrote for publications as diverse as *The Spectator* and *Four Four Two*. He continues to do some of these things, though has now defected to Suffolk, where he lives with his partner and son.

Walk the Lines

The London Underground, Overground

Mark Mason

BOOKS

For Barney

Introduction

IT SEEMS ALMOST ungrateful. An entire Tube network, waiting patiently and obediently for the chance to serve, for the honour of whisking me speedily off to any part of London my heart desires – and I'm shunning it. I'm insisting on going by foot. The whole way. Every one of the 11 lines, all 269 stations, God knows how many miles. In fact, forget 'ungrateful': it's positively perverse.

But the Tube needn't feel slighted. It's because of the Tube that the idea occurred to me in the first place. Without its multi-coloured tendrils spreading eagerly over the map, London would still be defying me. For years I've dreamed of the ultimate walk, the one that would comprehensively capture the capital. It's commonly agreed that Shanks's Pony is the vehicle of choice for anyone seeking to truly understand any great city, be it London, Paris, New York, wherever. (This is one of the reasons Los Angeles can never really be called a city: you have to drive everywhere.) But once you've lived in London for any length of time – it was my home for 13 years – you're kind of walked out. Not in the sense that you've done enough of it. The opposite, in fact: you can't *get* enough of it.

When you first move to London, necessity acts as your sat-nav. You walk to flat viewings, to job interviews, and then, with any luck, to your job. You walk to the shops, to the cinema, to parties. You walk purely to learn the city's layout. It becomes a habit. But like any habit it can gain the

upper hand, start to control you rather than you controlling it. At some point (it may take years) you realise you're an addict. Simple, honest right-into-Haymarket-left-into-Jermyn-Street isn't enough any more. You need the hard stuff. You need your Sackville Street (the longest London street without any turnings off it), your Knightsbridge (only street name with six consecutive consonants), your Haunch of Venison Yard (just a great name, though making the pilgrimage is particularly hardcore as it doesn't lead anywhere). A fascination with London powers not just your imagination but also your feet. The mind bone's connected to the heel bone.

Once you've caught the bug, you feel an urge to plan your walks, be it thematically, geographically or by some other means. There must be a *raison d'être* to your ramble. The first time I did it was one summer's day about ten years ago, when I happened to remember a house in East Finchley where a friend of a friend had put me up once. It was only for a couple of weeks, between leaving one flatshare and finding another. No sooner had the memory appeared than a mental triangle formed, linking the two flats with the house. As the flats were in Wapping and Kentish Town it was a very bizarre triangle, with two ultra-acute angles and one monstrously obtuse one, but no matter. I looked out of the window. Nice weather. Itchy feet. It was screaming out to be done: walk the triangle.

Even before my shoes were on, the plan had expanded. Obviously I should walk to the East Finchley starting point (I then lived in Marylebone). And if those three places could be linked, the first of my London abodes, then why not all the others? There'd been nine in total, which the more geometrically savvy of you will realise resulted in me walking a nonagon, beginning and ending at my flat. As most of the abodes were scattered across the Islington–King's Cross area it was a nonagon that made the triangle look normal, a shape resembling a collapsed wedding

marquee with only one pole left standing and several guests still seated at their tables.

Other walks followed: the route of the London Marathon; Lord's to the Oval; the boundary of the Congestion Charge Zone. Each time, needless to say, my partner's response was the same, and consisted of just one word: '*Why*?' It's the sort of attitude that always has men turning wearily to their friends, emitting a fatalistic sigh and saying, 'They just don't get it, do they?' Yet I can see Jo's point, which is that my walks don't *have* a point. Not one that's immediately obvious, anyway. There's always the 'because it's there' argument. But the route between Kettering's eight largest newsagents is there, and I don't want to walk that. No offence to Kettering, but I'm sure even its most vigorous defender will admit it's no London.

So that's the answer, isn't it? Not 'because it's there' but 'because it's London'. Samuel Johnson called the city 'the school for studying life'.[1] He's certainly right, but I think there's something else fuelling the need to walk it (a need I still regularly indulge even though home is now a village in Suffolk). It's not just about studying, about observing or noting. It's about owning. About claiming the city's greatness, or at least some small part of it, for yourself. That's why there has to be an order to the walk, some logic, a set of rules. It's almost as though those rules are a religious service, and by following them you achieve a bond with London.

It follows, therefore, that the more extreme the rules, the stronger the bond. There's an obvious conclusion to this, which is to take 'extreme' to the extreme, and walk every street in London. That's what a character in Geoff Nicholson's novel *Bleeding London* does. It appeals to the completist in me, but there are two problems. The first is the practical one mentioned by the character himself: it takes so bloody long. Several years, in fact, doing nothing

else for seven days a week. Even if you could spare the time, though, there'd still be the other problem: it's *too* complete. There's no method to it, no construction, no art. Walking every one of London's streets would be like reading a whole dictionary but never forming a sentence. It would be the trainspotter definition of 'complete', like those Bob Dylan fans who write out all the lyrics to every one of his songs in the belief that it counts as some sort of achievement.

But if 'all of London' doesn't count as 'all of London', then what does? For years I sought the answer, dreamed of some magical formula that would square the circle: a walk that took in the whole city, but without taking in the whole city. Surely there had to be a sequence, an equation, some sort of document that, were I only to follow it, would allow me to say 'London, you are mine'.

It would be nice, having mentioned the phrase 'square the circle', to tell you that it happened on the Circle Line. But actually it was the Bakerloo. Specifically, the bit between Embankment and Charing Cross. There I sat, gazing up at the line map opposite, and remembered a claim I'd recently heard: that the shortest distance between any two stations on the whole Tube network is not, as most websites and books will tell you, that between Covent Garden and Leicester Square, but the brief hop my train was doing now. As it turns out this is mistaken; distance between station entrances above ground doesn't, of course, equate to distance below ground. But still, let's say that Embankment to Charing Cross is 300 yards: if you were to make the journey on a standard Zone 1 single ticket, it would cost you the equivalent of £23 per mile. Not even the most money-grabbing usurer would expect any return business at those prices, which is why London Underground have taken to erecting signs at many stations in the centre of town indicating the pedestrian route to

other nearby stations. For a lot of journeys it's not only cheaper but also simpler and quicker to walk.

Quite right too, I thought. Might help with a few waistlines. That American family I'd just spotted at Waterloo, for instance. Then I caught sight of my reflection in the carriage window. OK, I'm no Mr Creosote, but which of us couldn't do with shedding a few pounds? Why hadn't I walked today's journey? Waterloo to Baker Street wouldn't have done me any harm in the trimness department.

By now my gaze had switched to the Tube map itself, the small one they display in carriages, depicting Zone 1 and a bit of Zone 2. I traced the Bakerloo Line as far as it went (Kilburn Park), and imagined walking it. Then I imagined the rest of the line, up to … Harrow and Wealdstone, wasn't it? At this point something fantastical happened: my mind drew in the rest of the map, each line snaking out from its central section like flowers shot in time-lapse. And there it was, the solution to my problem: walk the Tube system. Overground.

In the very instant the idea occurred, I heard two distinct sounds. The first was of my own footsteps rhythmically pounding the streets (and roads, and lanes, and alleys …). The second was the faint but unmistakable sound of Jo asking, '*Why*?' I already knew why. This was my way of covering the city. This was my route into, and out of, and over and through, London. It was geographically exhaustive, but in a very ordered, very logical way. The idea was – and I feel a little stupid using this word, but only a little – beautiful.

The Tube does this to people. It has achieved a special place in London's collective imagination. Originally a servant to the city, it has in some respects become its master. Rather than time-lapse flowers, in fact, the plant the system most closely resembles is ivy, gradually establishing a stranglehold over a stately home. Where once the Tube was a mere mode of transport, it now

dictates not just property prices but also where that property gets built in the first place, *and* how that property is viewed: flatshare adverts boast their location in Zone 2 rather than Zone 3. London has put the Tube train before the horse; so much so that the Underground gets referenced in all sorts of weird contexts. Cricket commentators talk of a batsman's near-miss as 'playing down the Metropolitan when the ball went down the Jubilee'. Meanwhile, at the other end of the latter line, a health study illustrated lower life expectancy in the east of the capital by saying that if you travelled from Westminster to Canning Town, you lost approximately one year per stop.

The system is also the inspiration for at least two other challenges, though unlike mine these involve actually using the Tube as a means of transport. There's visiting all the stations in one day (current world record: 16 hours, 44 minutes and 16 seconds), while in the Circle Line pub crawl – often now done for charity – you have to exit at each of the 27 stations and have a drink at the nearest pub. This is based on the old – some of us would say 'proper' – Circle Line, namely the one that actually formed a circle. None of this 'lasso-like extension out to Hammersmith' nonsense.

Having said that, what makes the pub crawl especially satisfying is that the old line wasn't a perfect circle after all. Look at the map and you'll see it narrows at the eastern end, forming the shape of (oh, the elegance of it) a beer bottle on its side. And herein lies one of the reasons I found the 'walk the lines' idea so beautiful: it would involve a map. In fact, given that I'd need an *A to Z* to find the shortest routes between all the stations, it would involve two maps. It would involve – and even writing the words now produces a frisson of a tingle – *cross-referencing between maps*.

At Baker Street station I paused on my way out and examined the full-sized Tube map in the ticket hall. A thing of beauty in itself, and like any thing of beauty a source of

inspiration. ‘Putting yourself on the map’ might be an obvious joke here, but that’s what it’s all about. Even respectable cartographers do it: look at the Ordnance Survey map of the Isle of Wight, just above the village of Blackgang, and you’ll see that the artist has subtly included his own name (Bill) in the short marks denoting the cliffs. Walking the lines – all of them, every last inch of the way – would be my own method of putting myself on the map.

Besides this, of course, the journey would be a structure on which to hang my education about London, both its history and its present. There are bits I know, but lots more I don’t. Sherlock Holmes may have said ‘it is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London’, but his namesake and contemporary[2] Oliver Wendell Holmes knew better, pointing out that ‘no person can be said to know London. The most that anyone can claim is that he knows something of it.’ Fulham, for example. I’ve never got to grips with Fulham. Been there a handful of times, but beyond a vague sense that it’s just past Chelsea and was once Hugh Grant territory, I know, as the Spanish waiter used to say, nothing.

After a while, it seems to me, every Londoner – whether born in the city or not – hardens in their partiality. You get to know the area you live in, and you still feel comfortable in the areas you *used* to live in, but there are huge chunks of the place you never go to, indeed never want to go to. Something quite parochial appears in you. It always reminds me of the Rabbi Lionel Blue joke about the Jewish guy marooned on a desert island for several years. His rescuers find that he’s built two synagogues. ‘We can understand you building one,’ they say. ‘But why did you need a second?’ ‘Simple,’ he replies. ‘That’s the synagogue I go to. And that’s the synagogue I don’t go to.’ Every Londoner, or one-time Londoner, needs parts of the city they don’t feel comfortable in, almost as though that gives

greater validity to the areas where they do feel at home. As I stood there in Baker Street station, I looked forward to challenging that instinct in myself. Like Sherlock just up the road, I was going to learn at least something about *every* part of the capital.

What's more, as I looked at the ends of the lines and saw suburban names like 'Amersham' and 'Epping', I remembered that the London Underground extends way beyond what any normal person – that is, anyone other than a local government planner – would reasonably define as London. This would be another question that the project could help resolve: what exactly *is* London? In my more fundamentalist moments I define the city as the City, arguing that anywhere outside the old Roman wall is an imposter. Other equally arbitrary definitions float in and out of favour: the area bordered by the mainline railway stations (Victoria, Liverpool Street, Euston and so on) … the 0207 telephone code area … a six-mile radius around Charing Cross (the area London cabbies learn for the Knowledge). A century ago Ford Madox Ford observed that 'London begins where tree trunks commence to be black'. What's the answer now?

As I stepped out onto Baker Street I knew I'd found my task. This would be my very own urban odyssey, my horizontal Everest. Eleven lines, one by one.[3] In each case I'd walk from one end to the other, station by station, travelling into the heart of the greatest city in the world, then back out again. Not that this was about finding London's heart. Or not just about that, anyway. This was about finding its soul.

Preparations for something like this are pretty minimal. A Tube map, an *A to Z*, some other maps to cover the bits the *A to Z* doesn't … and that's about it. Oh, and some proper footwear. The most comfortable my feet had ever been was

while training for a marathon several years back, so I decided to go for the same make of trainers, ASICS.[4]

And so there I was. Have maps, have shoes, will travel. I was going to do it. I was going to walk the lines.

1. You were afraid that was going to be a different quote, weren't you? Don't worry. When a man is tired of hearing that when a man is tired of London he's tired of life, it's entirely understandable.
2. Possibly even relation. What, you don't believe a fictional character could be related to a real one? I refer you to *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, in which we learn that James Bond might have been descended from Sir Thomas Bond, after whom the famous London street is named.
3. None of this London Overground or DLR nonsense: they're not part of the Tube. The purist in me even resents their presence on the map. Though the realist knows we can't expect tourists to be psychic.
4. Which, I discovered while being fitted, stands for 'Anima Sana In Corpore Sano', a variation on the Latin phrase meaning 'a healthy mind in a healthy body'. The project was educational before it had even begun.

1
Victoria Line
Drawing a bead

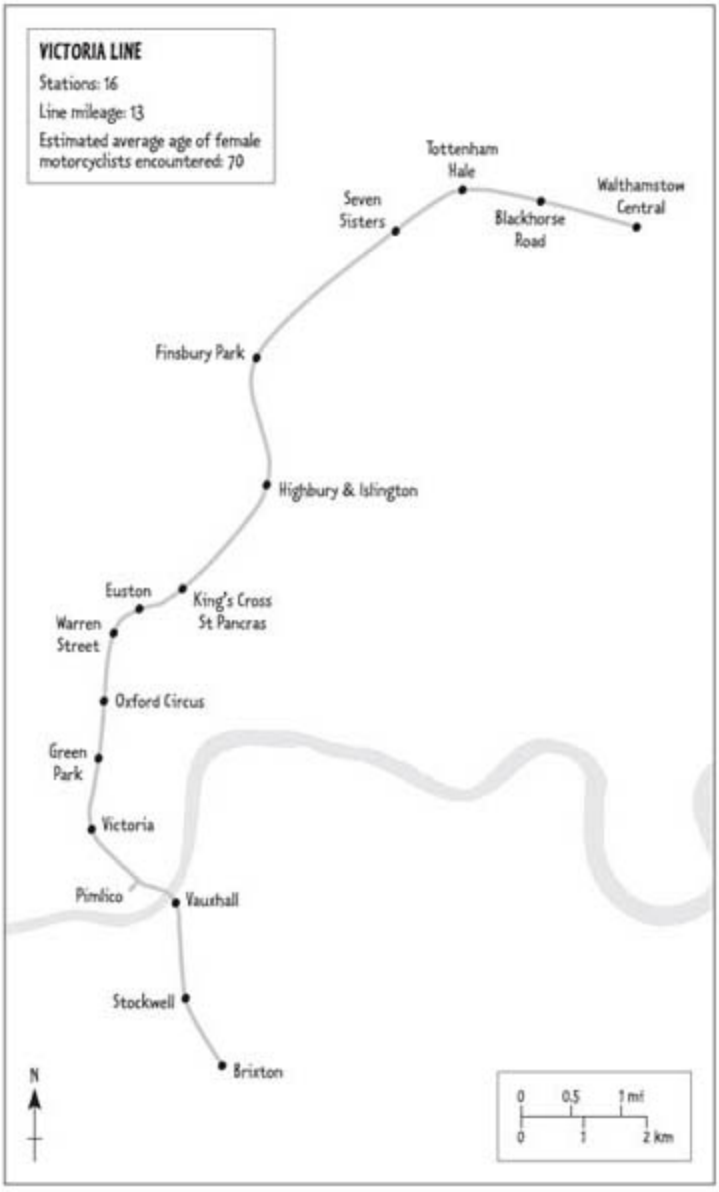
BRIXTON TUBE STATION, 11.30 on a Wednesday morning. The end of the line. Or, as far as my feet are concerned, the start of it.

There are a number of reasons for choosing the Victoria Line as my maiden voyage. At 13 miles it's a decent length (the Waterloo and City is a mere 1.5 – don't know how it's got the cheek to call itself a line at all), but walkable in a day, so it can act as a sighter, allow me to draw a bead on the beast that is the London Underground. All but one of its stations connect with other Tube lines or mainline services, giving that feeling of linkage, of tying up London, that's at the heart of the project. And while it starts in a place I know relatively well (Jo used to live in Brixton), it ends in Tottenham and Walthamstow, places I barely know at all, making this literally a journey into the unknown. One of the few things I do know about Walthamstow is that it nearly gave part of its name to the line. Hoping to ape the success of 'Bakerloo' (Baker Street to Waterloo), Tube bosses toyed with 'Walvic' (Walthamstow to Victoria) as well as 'Viking' (Victoria to King's Cross) before plumping, rather boringly you have to say, for what must surely be the commonest place name in the world.[1]

Having said I know Brixton, I'm surprised to find that in the few years since I've been here it's changed noticeably.

At least the bit outside the station has. A wise man once commented that no one ever arranged to meet anyone outside Brixton station twice. An entrance *that* narrow trying to cope with *that* many passengers, with several bus stops *that* nearby, made the arrival of each train look like an emergency evacuation. But not only has the entrance now been widened, the area around it has also lost the air of intimidation that used to hang over it, even at this time on a weekday morning. The phone box-like 'iPlus Point', which would surely once have been a vandal magnet, works perfectly. The touch-screen options include 'Local History', where you learn about race riots and 'Guns of Brixton' by The Clash. 'Since then,' the text adds quickly, 'things have got calmer.' And you know what? It really feels like they have.

The air of relaxed tolerance threatens to spill over into cliché, however, when a Frenchman and his boyfriend emerge from the Tube and start unpacking their folding bicycles, so I decide to start walking. But for a moment or two the feet won't obey. This puzzles me, until I realise what's going on. The journey of a thousand miles, we're told, starts with a single step, an instruction designed to counter lethargy, apathy, disinclination. But my worry is the opposite one. Instead of Lao Tzu my guru is Magnus Magnusson: if I start, I'll have to finish. I've got too *much* inclination. One step north-east from here and I'll be committed. The project will have started, and good old-fashioned male thoroughness (what's that you're whispering? 'Obsessiveness'? Don't be silly) will demand that it's finished. This is my last chance to be normal, to shun thoroughness, to get round the Tube system by taking the Tube.



Sod it – who wants to be normal? The right foot moves forward, and I'm off. Instead of taking 34 minutes to get to Walthamstow (as I would on the train), I'm going to take several hours. I'm moving along the Brixton Road, once a Roman route to the south coast, later traversed by such local luminaries as John Major, David Bowie and Jeeves.[2] Soon I'm turning left past the O_2 Academy, whose proscenium arch was based on the Rialto Bridge in Venice.

Back in 1929, when it opened as the Astoria, the first act was a variety show starring operatic tenors Heddle Nash and Derek Oldham. Today the billboard advertises the forthcoming appearance of Them Crooked Vultures.

Now I'm on Stockwell Road. Passing buildings that exhibit every architectural style of the last 150 years (Victorian, Edwardian, 1960s brutalist concrete), I'm reminded of a fact about London that most of the time lurks dimly in the depths of your consciousness without ever really surfacing. Namely that the city isn't a city, it's a collection of villages. Go back further than those 150 years and you'd find a place called Brixton and a place called Stockwell, with this road linking them. It's hard to believe as you walk past a shop selling T-shirts saying 'American Gangster' and 'Got Swagger Like Me?', but all this really was once fields. Brixton Windmill still stands a mile or so south of here, physical proof that the landscape was open enough to let the sails turn. Then along came the railways, and suburban expansion, and all the new houses blocked the wind. As if to really rub the mill's nose in it, Brixton became home to the first UK street lit by electricity, which in 1880 adopted the name that Eddy Grant made famous a century later: Electric Avenue. The windmill gets the last laugh, though: it's soon to reopen, powered by electricity.

The blackboard outside Brixton Cycles informs the world that Albert Einstein thought of the theory of relativity while riding his bike. Further along towards Stockwell appear the restaurants that have given this area the nickname 'Little Portugal'. The Portuguese population here is the largest outside the mother country, though today's *sardinhas assadas* are being consumed a little sombrely, owing to last night's exit from the World Cup. (This would have been bad enough in itself – but at the hands of *Spain*?) Soon I'm approaching Stockwell Tube station itself. 'Two down,' says a voice in my head. 'Two hundred and sixty-seven to go.' Then I realise this would be true only if I were visiting each

station just the once. But many are served by several lines. Stockwell itself, for instance, will be revisited on my Northern Line walk. I tell the voice in my head to shut up.[3]

Nipping into the ticket hall, I look for the plaque marking Stockwell's place in Underground history, namely that it was one end of the first-ever Tube line. 'What?!' you shriek, preparing to hurl this book into the nearest waste receptacle. 'Everyone knows that the first line was between Paddington and Farringdon Street in 1863!' Well, yes, that was the first line. But lots of it was overground, with only 'cut and cover' tunnels giving it a subterranean veneer (if indeed a veneer can go under something). The first proper 'tube' railway – i.e. with no surface disruption, cut completely underground, à la *Great Escape* – was the City and South London Railway, opened in 1890. The sign marking the centenary of this date isn't, however, immediately apparent.

'Do you know where the plaque is?' I ask the guard at the ticket barrier.

'Eh?'

Maybe my assumption that Stockwell had only a limited role in Tube history was mistaken. Maybe there are dozens of plaques – albeit very well-hidden ones – and the guard needs more specific instructions. 'The one about this being on the first Tube line. The first proper Tube line, I mean.'

A blank look, a shake of the head. He works here for a living and he doesn't know it was part of the first-ever proper Tube line.

'It was in the 1800s,' I explain. 'Stockwell was one end of the line. The other was somewhere up in the City, I think.'

Another shake. 'Sorry, sir. No idea.'

'Oh, well, not to worry.' I'm turning to leave when I notice the plaque. It's directly behind the guard, about two feet above the spot where he stands day in, day out. To give him his due, once it's pointed out he does actually show some

interest. Together we read that the City and South London Railway went up through Kennington and Borough, finishing at King William Street (very handy for the Bank of England). It formed the basis of what was to become the Northern Line, but we shouldn't hold that against it.

As I step back out into the sunshine, I think of the Victoria Line drivers far beneath me. (The line's depth varies between 65 and 85 feet.) Opened in the late 1960s, the Victoria was the first line to employ the Automatic Train Operation system, whereby the train, reading coded signals transmitted through the track, drives itself. Another innovation was the hump-backed design of the line's stations. These allow the trains to store gravitational energy as they pull in, then release it as they pull out, making their operation quicker and more efficient. Today, as I think of those trains, and their role in inspiring my steps across London, they seem like diffident sherpas, willing to show me the way but only if they themselves stay hidden.

Over the road to Stockwell Memorial Park, a modest triangle whose capacity to deliver peace is compromised somewhat by the several lanes of Clapham Road and South Lambeth Road traffic thundering past. Nonetheless a brightly painted mural does what it can to lift the spirits by depicting people with local connections. There's Vincent van Gogh, who lived for a year in nearby Hackford Road. There's the 'taking aim' image used in the opening credits of every Bond film, in tribute to the actor born in what he calls 'Saint Ockwell', Roger Moore. There's Violette Szabo, who went over to France during the Second World War to act as a secret agent and bomb Nazi bridges. Executed by the Germans in 1945, she became the first woman ever to earn the George Cross. The mural originally showed her with a pistol pointing at her head, which even in Stockwell was seen as insensitive, so it was repainted. The latest addition to the mural would have raised the pistol's cringe-

factor even further: it's of Jean Charles de Menezes, controversially shot at Stockwell station in 2005. Perhaps in future years two other local residents might find their way on to the brickwork: Will Self, whom you might expect, given the area's boho-grunge coolness, and Joanna Lumley, whom perhaps you wouldn't. She lives in Albert Square (the real one, though wouldn't it be good to see her in Walford's?), and according to one local blogger is often to be seen buying cat food in the Nine Elms Sainsbury's.[4]

From here my trek continues up South Lambeth Road. The streetscape is still messy, an architectural pick 'n' mix that reminds you of the shelf in a second-hand bookshop where they put all the random, dusty old books that don't fit anywhere else, but once again London's rural past is hidden just beneath the surface. Tradescant Road, on the right, marks the site of the noted botanical garden lovingly constructed by the seventeenth-century naturalist (and gardener to Charles I) John Tradescant. The street itself is pretty inoffensive, and to claim that no attractive patch of greenery should ever be developed would be to reject the existence of cities at all. But still, marking Tradescant's achievement by sticking a road over it and giving that road his name reminds me eerily of the line from *Jeffrey Bernard is Unwell*: 'My father designed the entrance to the Strand Palace Hotel, which was so brilliant it's now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. In any other country it would still be outside the Strand Palace Hotel.'

Stockwell is fading now, morphing into the area that gives its name to the third station on the Victoria Line. That name originated with Falkes de Breauté, a thirteenth-century sidekick of King John, to whom the monarch awarded the Manorship of Luton. Falkes later increased his property portfolio, by marriage this time, when he gained the rights to an area just south of the Thames. With the sort of disregard for spelling you only got in the Middle Ages he

built Faulke's Hall, which became Vauxhall. Six hundred years later the Vauxhall Motor Company started here (on the site where Ms Lumley now buys her cat food), and to this day Vauxhall cars bear de Breauté's griffin as their emblem. By 1905 the company had become so successful that it had to move out of London. The site of its new premises? Luton. The griffin had flown back home.

Vauxhall as a name travelled even further, though only by mistake. A Russian delegation visiting London in 1840 to learn about the city's successful new railways (those were the days) were shown the London and South Western Railway's terminus at Vauxhall. Believing the name to be the general word for that sort of building they copied it, which is why the Russian word for a train station is 'вокзал', pronounced 'vokzal'. Nowadays Vauxhall station is hemmed in on every side by major roads, making the going for pedestrians round here cumbersome-to-suicidal. Most people hop straight on a Tube, or take a bus from the state-of-the-art station next door, powered by photoelectric cells on two huge ramps leading pointlessly into the sky. The last time this many double-deckers stood beneath ramps this big, Evil Knievel was involved.

On the other side of the railway arches from the bus station stands the pleasant(ish) park known as Spring Gardens, in tribute to an early title for the attraction that for 200 years defined this area: Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. Dating from the 1660s, this 12-acre site became *the* place to come in order to commune with nature and be fed and entertained, a sort of Center Parcs of its day. Some of the music played there was composed by Handel, who since 1712 had lived in London, and of whom there was a statue in the gardens during his lifetime.[5]

In 1837 the gardens received some unfortunate publicity when they were the launch site for the first-ever fatal parachute jump. Hot-air balloon displays had long been

held here, but on this occasion the basket contained one Robert Cocking. You'd think with a name like that he'd have tried to lead as quiet a life as possible, but no, Mr C. decided that the successful parachute jumps already made by other people hadn't been successful enough. He wanted to prove the superiority of his new 'improved' design, so after taking off from Vauxhall and rising to 5,000 feet he jumped out somewhere over Lee, between Lewisham and Blackheath. Whatever his improvements were, they didn't stop him arriving at Burnt Ash Farm somewhat sooner than he'd expected, and in the afterlife a very short time later.

My route now lies across Vauxhall Bridge. But before leaving South London I pause, and realise that the bridge itself, with the train station next to it, is bringing the whole of my walk so far into focus. It was the bridge's arrival in 1816 that opened up the whole of this area, turning Vauxhall and Stockwell and Brixton from settlements in their own right to parts of this ever-expanding thing called 'London'. Even though the bridge was tolled – a penny for pedestrians, 6d for a score of cattle – nothing could put the brakes on suburban sprawl once the railways arrived, and Vauxhall Bridge became the first to carry a tram over the Thames. This section of the Victoria Line wouldn't open until 1971 (the rest predating it by a couple of years), but nevertheless, as I stand here now, contemplating the lead that the line is giving me, things are starting to make sense.

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It just says 'Government Offices' in the *A to Z*. A small blue square nestling against the south-east corner of the bridge, as though it was an outpost of the Department of Paperclips. But we all know exactly whose offices these are: M16. It's hard to see why the *A to Z* is so coy; the Intelligence Service even advertises jobs in *The Times* now. The head of the service is still called 'C', in tribute to the

first incumbent, Mansfield Cumming, whose Christian name gave Ian Fleming the ‘M’ for his fictional equivalent. Though when the producers of *Die Another Day* tried filming the building – reputedly as deep below ground as it is high above – they were banned. Eventually Foreign Secretary Robin Cook relented, saying that ‘after all Bond has done for Britain, it was the least we could do for Bond’.[6]

Looking back from halfway over the bridge, what holds my attention today isn’t the razor wire or the security cameras, but a gated arch just below the building, from which a tiny trickle of water emerges and runs down the shingle and sand into the Thames. This is one of London’s *other* rivers, the underground minnows that make their way unobtrusively through the suburbs in order to feed their more famous cousin. The Effra, in this case, which has followed me from Brixton. On the north bank, just west of the bridge, you can see the outfall of the Tyburn. Further down the river’s south bank, towards Westminster, is Alembic House, whose penthouse flat is owned by Jeffrey Archer – who, when you ask for directions to the bathroom, reportedly says, ‘Past the Picasso and left at the Matisse,’ as if that will make you like him.

Once over the bridge I’m into Pimlico, which even though it was on the ‘correct’ side of the river remained undeveloped until the early nineteenth century because the land was so marshy. Even when the buildings did go up the area remained unfashionable, and when the goodly Reverend Gerard Olivier moved here in 1912 it was to convert the residents of the ‘slums’. Things were different by 1989, both for Pimlico and the vicar’s son Laurence, whose ashes were that year interred in Poets’ Corner just up the road at Westminster Abbey.

Bessborough Street curves round to reveal Pimlico station, the fourth of my walk, and the only one on the line

not to connect with other Underground or mainline services. Knowing this makes me feel sorry for it, but I wipe away my tears and carry on towards the area's grandest square, St George's. At the far end of the square, in Pimlico Gardens, is a statue of William Huskisson MP, who would no doubt like to be remembered for his stunning parliamentary oratory, but is actually famous as the first person in Britain ever to be killed by a train, when George Stephenson's *Rocket* hit him on the opening day of the Liverpool to Manchester railway in 1830.

Virtually every one of Belgrave Road's white stucco mansions is now a backpacker-level hotel. The slightly grubby feel is heightened by the phone boxes full of tarts' cards. British Telecom's struggle to rid their London street furniture of these adverts has been going on for almost as long as superpowers have been trying to conquer Afghanistan, and with similar degrees of success. The cards reappear as quickly as they're removed; one even tries to cash in on World Cup and Wimbledon fever with 'Match Fit? Let's play *my* game!' I notice that all of these small business ventures use mobile rather than landline numbers. That must *really* wind BT up.

Past the Passport Office, outside which groups of people wait in the glazed hopelessness known only to those who are about to deal with a British civil servant, and then I'm bearing down on the back entrance of the transport hub that combines trains, coaches, buses and Tubes in one almighty temple to Travel known simply as Victoria. The teeming mass of humanity sucks you in like a spider too near the plughole in an emptying bath, and before you know it you're heading through the retail mall towards the main concourse. From here you can access the busiest Underground station on the network.[7] Of course that's not on my agenda today, but I do allow myself a small detour over to platform 8. If you ever want a sense of peace at

Victoria, this is the place to come. Not because it's especially quiet, but rather because a plaque at the ticket barrier commemorates the arrival of the station's most famous (though nameless) visitor. At 8.32 p.m. on 10 November 1920, this was the end of the journey from Dover for the train carrying the Unknown Warrior.

Outside, on the pedestrian island between Vauxhall Bridge Road and Victoria Street, stands Little Ben, a replica of the famous clock tower just down the road. The thing is 30 feet tall and I've walked past it hundreds of times; yet only in my advance reading for today's walk did I learn of its existence. Gazing up at its hands I feel guilty for what I said about the guard at Stockwell.

We 're now in the land where phone numbers begin 0207 222, the prefix dating from the days when telephone dials bore letters on each digit. The inspiration for Westminster's code was 'ABBey'. Working my way round to Lower Grosvenor Place, I find myself outside the Queen's garden wall, looking along it to the junction where the road becomes Hobart Place. It was here, in 1823, that London saw its last-ever burial of a suicide at a crossroads. This was how they punished you back then if you took the ultimate decision.[8]

Heading along the wall the other way brings me to the Royal Mews shop, part of the programme whereby the Firm are opening up their most famous home. The souvenirs are as obvious as you'd expect – teddy bears, tea towels, DVDs – though occasionally a touch of subtlety is allowed, for instance the girls' pink T-shirts saying nothing but 'Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?' The textbook about British monarchs is refreshingly modern in its openness, even going so far as to mention that Edward I 'preferred the Queen's brother to the Queen'.

Back out into the sunshine. On the other side of the road is a huge wooden hoarding disguising some building works.

The boards spread right across several four-storey frontages and out over the pavement, forming a tunnel through which pedestrians can pass. It's all painted dark green, and studded with artificial shrubbery. 'I have no idea what that is,' says an American tourist to her friend, 'but I love it.' She turns her back on London's premier tourist attraction to take a photo of what is essentially some posh scaffolding. But then even the royals themselves have never been completely sold on the palace. In Victoria's time the drains used to stink the whole place out, and as recently as the 1990s Prince Philip complained that his quarters were so far from the kitchen that his food was cold by the time it arrived.

Right at the moment, though, my thoughts have turned to the only other man we know (for sure) to have shared the Queen's bedroom. When Michael Fagan ended up sitting on Her Majesty's mattress one early March morning in 1982, it wasn't part of a stunt, let alone a mission of murder. He hadn't planned to break in at all. He was going through a difficult period in his life, and had been out walking all night when, sometime in the pre-dawn hours, he found himself heading along the Mall towards the Palace. 'What would happen,' he asked himself, 'if I just kept going?' Security guard in the wrong place, wall a touch too easy to scale, and there he was, strolling the corridors. Standing here, I know how he felt – not about popping in for pillow talk with the Queen, just about how hypnotic it can be to keep walking in a straight line. My straight line isn't *quite* as literal as Fagan's, though it looks it on the Tube map thanks to the sublime insight by cartographer Harry Beck that the lines don't have to be geographically accurate. But still, the knowledge that this light blue streak is guiding me unveeringly across London gives me a sense of power, as though I'm laying waste to the city with a Zorro-like swish.