

# Future Today

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## HOW A MAP BECAME AN ICON

Graham Jones was a classic example of the English bourgeoisie who, with persistence and luck, became rich in the British Empire and now enjoyed his prosperity in the idyllic county of Devon. And like many of his kind and survivors of the WW I, he felt an almost obsessive affection for his English garden and an equally great aversion to the bustling streets of London. It was only with great reluctance that twice a year he left his rose bushes to meet his banker and to visit his younger sister in London.

He never liked London, which was full of smog, arrogant people and confined by chaotic infrastructure. But what he really hated was the underground.

His patience was already considerably stretched by the time he left the train at Paddington station to cover the last part of his journey by underground, because to his greatest regret, both his bank and his sister were situated on the eastern side of the ever-growing city. So, he had to ask his way several times but he still got lost. **Even in the jungles of Sumatra where Graham spent many years of his life, he managed to find his way around, but London?** This city was hopeless and every time he returned to the city it seemed to him that Londoners took pleasure in constantly putting new holes and tracks in the ground just to confuse him!

However, on his last visit, something remarkable happened. When he finally reached his destination, a friendly underground employee gave him an **official map** that showed all of London's underground lines. *"But this still doesn't help me,"* he growled, nevertheless he put the map in his pocket and hurried to his bank. He was late yet again!

Later that evening, he complained bitterly to his sister, but she was amused by her big brother's moaning. Secretly she was glad about his whinging, because it made frequent visits from her elderly brother more unlikely. She just grinned and said: *"Stay calm Graham, this happens to almost all "foreigners" coming from outside London..."*

On the way back, Graham carefully studied the underground map he received the day before, but even when he tried hard, he still wasn't able to "read" this map. Deep in thought, Graham was suddenly startled when a man approached him. *"Can I help you, Sir?"* the polite young man asked, and only at this moment did Graham realise that it was the same underground employee who had handed him the map yesterday.

Graham was grateful for the help and complained to him about the completely incomprehensible route plan. He knew that the young man could neither do something about the confusing map, nor would it be of any use, but he had to share his anger with someone.

This young man was **Harry Beck**, a technical draftsman in the Signal Engineer Department of the London Underground. Just before he left the office that day, Harry received bad news; he had been temporarily laid off. With gloomy thoughts, he made his way home. If this was not enough, he also had to help a grumpy customer, who made him responsible for the route map, for which he could do nothing. He himself had always found it completely incomprehensible and he did not know anyone who could cope with it.

When Harry arrived at home, he tried to suppress his problems and not to think about the Underground. Nevertheless, the conversation would not leave his mind.

Perhaps he could convince his manager to reconsider his redundancy if he made suggestions for improvements to the route network plan?

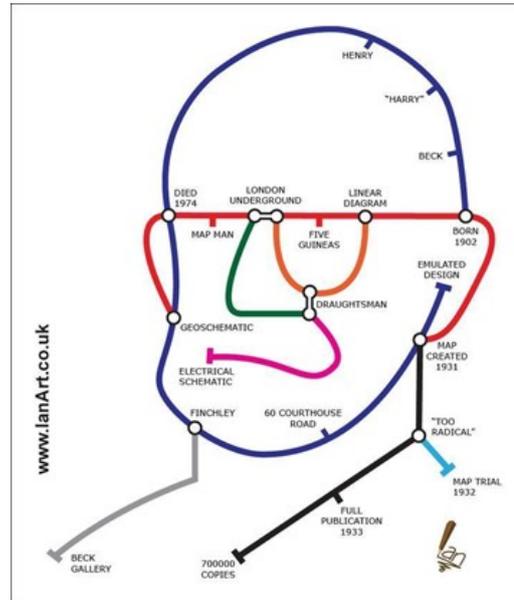
He took an exercise book with checkered sheets, put it on the table in front of him and began to draw his initial ideas on paper. Slowly but surely, a solution began to emerge in his head: How about moving to a **schematic representation** instead of the previous geographical representation? What, if it didn't matter how the individual subway line actually runs but only the **rough direction** was indicated? What, if the distances between the stations did not matter, but **only their sequence**? He began to develop a schematic line network plan on which all railway lines were depicted in **horizontal, vertical or 45-degree diagonal lines in different colors**. All stations were marked at equal intervals, transfer stations were particularly highlighted.

On the very next day, he proudly presented his work to his manager of the Underground. "What's that supposed to be?" his manager asked. "Have I asked you to spend your time on painting pictures or have we launched a competition for revolutionary representations!"

Beck was unsettled, after all, no one had commissioned him to revise the underground network plan. It had been his own initiative and he wondered if it had been such a good idea to act on his own. He showed his design to his colleagues, who unanimously supported him and together they gradually succeeded in convincing their manager. However, it was not until January 1933 that Beck's new route network plan was distributed on a trial basis in an edition of 700,000 copies.

The success was overwhelming and **due to its easy comprehensibility**, this mode of representation was soon adopted by subways of other major cities around the world, e.g., in Berlin, Paris and Tokyo.

Harry Beck died in 1974. Unfortunately, he did not witness that in 2006 his track representation was voted into the British top 10 design icons of the 20th century.



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**Beat H. Haering**

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