

The Opening of the City & South London Railway

This was a report in the Financial Times on 19 December 1890

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Although some weeks have passed since the Prince of Wales took a twopenny jaunt to Stockwell and declared the new City and South London Railway open, it was only yesterday that the declaration of His Royal Highness was homologated by the management.

The line, although open to Royalty, was hardly fit for the conveyance of the public, a conclusive proof that the electric railway is a democratic institution, which exists primarily for Tom, Dick, and Harry, and regards a Prince of the Blood as only a corpus vile to make the first experimental journey. The course adopted, however, of making the Heir Apparent inaugurate the line ever so long before it was ready for inauguration, has had the effect of increasing the mystery with which the subway was enveloped in the popular imagination, and when yesterday the doors of the various stations were thrown open, everybody hesitated to enter.

Crowds gathered outside staring at the premises as if a murder had been committed within, and the details of the crime could be ascertained by a steady perusal of the tracks. Indeed, the public interest was even more fixed and unwavering than even that. A parallel can be found only in one of those absorbed groups which stand for hours round a navy who is laying asphalt in a crowded thoroughfare.

A representative of the Financial Times was dispatched in the morning by his remorseless editor to make the perilous excursion and report how it felt to be drawn through a pipe by electricity for twopence. No time was allowed him to say farewell to his wife and to have one last look at the little ones. At a moment's notice he was dispatched into Darkest Southwark, cheered only by the knowledge that the expedition would be financed by headquarters. As he proceeded nervously towards the City station, which adjoins the Monument, he passed at the corner of King William Street — a place where the street was being taken up for the repair of electric wires, and a steadfast crowd was gazing down into the cavity, under the impression that the hole was the entrance to the new railway.

One man was vainly endeavouring to book to the Elephant and Castle in the little canvas shanty which seems an indispensable accompaniment of street repairs. At the actual station there was an equal air of non-comprehension in the crowd. Every man who entered was regarded with a sorrowful interest as if he were a prisoner surrendering to his bail; and every man who came out unscathed from the ordeal by electric traction was an object of undisguised envy and admiration. The whole thing seemed to be running on the lines of a show, for the railway was not yet understood of the people.

Our representative pulled himself together and entered. He was at once confronted by a turnstile, and had to pay his twopence before he was allowed to proceed. This made the

place more than ever like a show, but the charge would be considered moderate even for a bank holiday booth on Hampstead Heath. Once past the turnstile, however, the whole world — as far as Stockwell at least — was before him. The whole City and South London Railway was open to him like a club. From the turnstile he proceeded along a passage, and found another crowd — brave souls like himself who had faced the worst. They were staring fixedly at two vast doors, like the doors of the elephants' cage in a menagerie, on which was printed in big letters, "Caution — keep clear of those doors." "What is in this den," he asked; "the lions?" A nervous old man replied that he didn't know, but the passengers had been ordered to stop there; no doubt something would happen soon.

Presently a roaring was heard within and the doors were pushed back, disclosing an enormous lift, the accommodation of which was for forty persons. Its shape was like the Eiffel Tower lifts, but in descending it did not change the angle of its floor, as the Parisian elevator does. It is worked, of course, by hydraulics, the power being generated at the company's Stockwell works. It was consoling to hear from the attendant, while the lift was making its roaring trip down to the subway, that he had been in training for seven days and had to pass an examination before he got the job. Guiding the lift was a matter of knack, and it could be stopped with the little finger.

When the lift stopped, grated gates were opened, and the passengers were marshalled through a corridor, the impression left on the mind by the approach to the train being that the crowd was a squad of prisoners in Holloway Gaol. Arrived at the platform, the effect was a touch more pleasing than that of an ordinary underground station. The subway through which the line ran was laid on the side and top with white tiles, which had a clean appearance. The air was a trifle stuffy, owing, presumably, to the length of time during which the tunnel had been closed, but there was none of that sulphurous atmosphere with which Metropolitan Railway travellers are so familiar. For a subway, the air was sweet, thanks to the fact that there is a continuous draught in one direction, caused by the continued passage of trains along the single line. In the return tunnel there is of course, a reverse draught. Great interest was manifested in the permanent way, which had, in addition to the usual metals, an inner rail from which the electric power is drawn. An obliging porter announcing the fact that anybody touching that rail with his umbrella would receive a shock, everybody was promptly seized by a desire to do it. Until the starting of the train, our representative found ample occupation in egging various gentlemen on to the deed, but he found nobody with the requisite courage.

The engine of the electric train is small and of an unusual pattern, the driver and "stoker" standing on insulators inside and touching little knobs instead of the recognised levers and wheels. The carriages are long and narrow like a couple of tramway-cars joined, the seats running longitudinally. Entrance is obtained by a gangway in the middle of each, where a conductor stands to open and shut the gratings. On this conductor you must rely for information as to stations, since there are no windows in the carriages. There is no distinction of class, the only separation being between smoking and non-smoking compartments. Travelling in these carriages is like travelling in the saloon of a small steamer, although there is a slight jolting sometimes, which could be caused at sea only by sailing over the rocks. The electric light is certainly

a vast improvement on the dingy oil-lamps of the usual underground, and the accommodation is very satisfactory. Altogether, the journey, although it seems more like some exhibition amusement than business, is very satisfactory, since you are taken from King William Street to Stockwell in a quarter of an hour, with every comfort, for two pence.

It must, however, be admitted that even two pence is too much for a journey, say, to the Borough or to the Elephant and Castle, and, no doubt, penny fares for half the distance will be instituted. Nobody, however, has much reason to grumble, for in the two pence is included — if you prefer to avoid the lift — a climb of about 130 steps from the platform to the street. At the Monument they charge you as much for a climb, not a whit more disagreeable, and do not give you any railway travelling in the bargain. The new railway seems a little “uncanny” at first, with the electric sparks crackling behind the engine, but “it’s all right when you know it, though you’ve got to know it fust.” Yesterday the trains, running every five minutes, were crowded from morning to night, there was only one hitch in the course of the whole day, when a train stuck in a tunnel for about a quarter of an hour.

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