



**HIDDEN
LONDON**

HOLBORN THE SECRET PLATFORMS



**PICCADILLY LINE
PLATFORM 4**

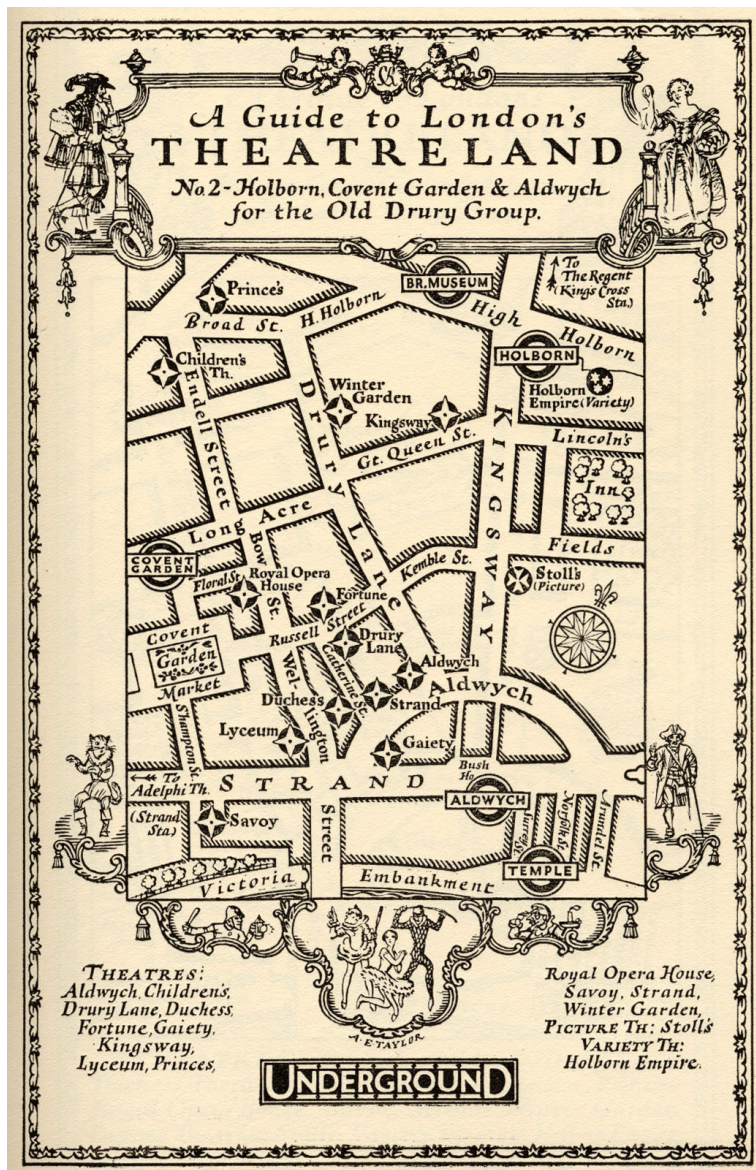
- COVENT GARDEN
- ◆ LEICESTER SQUARE
- ◆ PICCADILLY CIRCUS
- GREEN PARK

INTRODUCTION

Holborn is a busy interchange station in central London connecting the Central and Piccadilly lines on the London Underground, opened in 1906 by the Great Northern, Piccadilly and Brompton Railway (GNP&BR) after the amalgamation of two earlier Tube railway schemes. The station entrances and circulating areas were largely reconstructed in 1933 to accommodate escalators and brand-new platforms for the Central line, resulting in the nearby British Museum station closing. Holborn was also the northern terminus station for the Aldwych branch; a short, little-frequented shuttle service which survived until 1994.

The Aldwych branch opened in 1907 with two operational platforms at Holborn to run the service. One platform closed in 1917 due to lack of footfall and an awkward alignment, the other closed with the branch in 1994. These two platforms have seen many surprising uses over the years as emergency wartime accommodation, a test bed for design and scientific discoveries, a model railway club, a substation, and signalling.

Holborn is the only station on the London Underground to have two closed platforms hidden from the travelling public, who pass within inches of them without knowing.



Press advertisement from 1930 showing the Underground stations in London's theatreland

MERGING COMPANIES

Holborn station was first planned in the late 19th century as a stop on a new tube railway for the Great Northern Railway (GNR). The intention was to alleviate congestion at King's Cross mainline by building a tube railway from Wood Green to Holborn allowing suburban users of the GNR to take an alternative route into central London, freeing the GNR for passengers travelling from further afield.

At the same time in 1898, the London County Council (LCC) began work on a scheme of redevelopment of the areas known today as Aldwych and Kingsway. The scheme intended to clear the nearby slums, spark new development, and create broad boulevards. When the management of the Great Northern Railway heard of the plans of the LCC they decided to extend their railway down to the Strand to serve the newly built-up area. The scheme was named the Great Northern & Strand Railway (GN&SR) but due to insufficient funds, construction was delayed. American Tycoon Charles Tyson Yerkes took over the GN&SR and in 1902 merged it with

his own tube railway, The Brompton and Piccadilly Circus Railway, to create the Great Northern, Piccadilly and Brompton Railway (GNP&BR), known as the Piccadilly line today. Yerkes also sponsored several other tube projects across London, and he combined them all under a holding company called The Underground Electric Railways of London (UERL). Construction started on the GNP&BR line in 1903 with the two rail schemes connecting at Holborn.

Holborn station opened along with the rest of the railway on 15 December 1906 in the signature style of architect Leslie Green. The station facade was clad in polished granite stained red; different to the rest of the line due to a compromise between the LCC and the UERL to have the station conform with the architecture of neighbouring buildings on Kingsway. The ticket hall was equipped with four lifts and an emergency spiral staircase giving passengers access to the platforms. Below ground the layout was somewhat more complex than at other stations, due to two extra platforms leading to the Strand branch.



Kingsway (above) and High Holborn (below) entrances to Holborn station in 1930. Canopies were added for further visibility from the street.

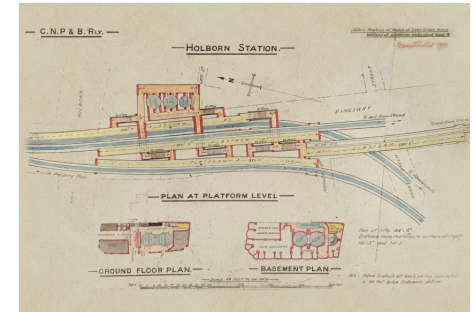
AWKWARD ALDWYCH

Construction of the Strand branch did not start until 1905 because of several delaying factors: trouble finding a suitable site for the station building on the Strand and a desire by the UERL to make the branch more useful by extending it to Waterloo. This would have proved a brilliant solution to what was becoming an impractical spur from the main line, however lack of funds resulted in plans being abandoned. Finally, the company decided that the branch would run as a shuttle service from Holborn with one through platform connecting to the Piccadilly mainline and one shorter bay platform.

The branch opened on 30 November 1907 as a two-car shuttle service between Holborn and Strand station. Service was quickly adapted to a single

car train on 3 March 1908 and by 1912 the normal service ran between the western platform at Strand and the eastern through-platform at Holborn. In May 1915, the station was officially renamed 'Aldwych' to avoid confusion with another station nearby (now Charing Cross), which took the name 'Strand' on the same day. On 16 August 1917 the terminal platform at Holborn, and the eastern platform at Aldwych were permanently closed to traffic and modified for other uses. In the 1930s, the bay platform at Holborn was used to mock-up potential station designs and later a scientific laboratory for Birkbeck College was installed in the space. Experiments in cosmic ray detection were conducted on the platform and their first findings were published in 1939.

The 'Holborn Laboratory' was operational until 1993, except during the Second World War, when the platform took on a different role.



Plan of Holborn from 1914



Design mock-up on the bay platform at Holborn in 1931

UPGRADES AND RECONSTRUCTION

Holborn became increasingly busy after the First World War and in 1930 the decision was made to rebuild the station to become an interchange for the Central line and to replace the lifts with escalators to increase passenger capacity. The works were planned with minimal disruption in mind and both lines kept running throughout the reconstruction, with the new Central line platforms constructed around the old running tunnels. Once the platforms were complete, the tunnelling rings of the running tunnels were carefully dismantled to reveal the trains passing through.

The Central line platforms at Holborn opened on 25 September 1933 causing nearby British Museum station on the Central line to close on the previous day. The platforms were finished in biscuit coloured tiling, designed by Charles Holden.

The facade of Holborn and the ticket hall was also redesigned by Charles Holden, who clad the station in Portland stone. From the ticket hall four new escalators took passengers to a lower landing and from there a further three escalators were needed to reach the depth of the Piccadilly line.

The Piccadilly line platforms were still in good condition and therefore the 1906–1907 Leslie Green tiling was kept on the walls providing a slightly odd design contrast with the Central line platforms.



Central line platforms at Holborn



Holborn's new Portland stone facade, designed by Charles Holden



Piccadilly line platforms at Holborn, with original Leslie Green tiles



Central line platforms at Holborn

HOSTEL FOR STAFF

During the Second World War, Underground stations were often used as air raid shelters for civilians, especially once the Blitz started on 7 September 1940. Initially, sheltering in the Underground had been frowned upon by the authorities, who felt that priority had to be given to running a reliable transport service. That sentiment changed once the intensity of the Blitz became clear and parts of the London Underground network opened to the public for sheltering. The Aldwych branch closed in response to the Blitz and was converted into a public air raid shelter managed by Westminster City Council. The Aldwych shelter opened 22 October 1940 and reached all the way up the running tunnel to the crossover at Holborn.

Holborn was also used as a public air raid shelter and often became quite crowded. To make use of all available space the through platform and crossover to Aldwych was briefly used for public sheltering but the area had been earmarked by London Transport for other purposes and public sheltering ceased on 26 April 1941. London Transport was desperately short of secure underground accommodation for staff on war critical work who needed to be deployed quickly.



Sheltering on the main Piccadilly line platforms in 1943

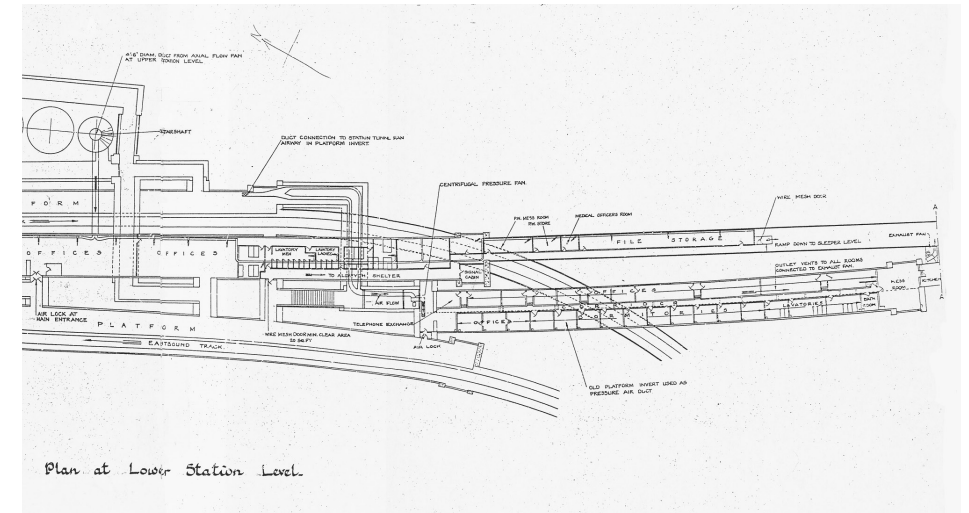


Staff in the Holborn hostel

Holborn station being so deep and having one disused platform and a non-operational platform was a perfect location to convert into a staff hostel and offices. Work began converting the two platforms in 1941 and was finished by 1942. The through platform (platform 5) was given over to office space, lavatory and washing facilities while the bay platform was fitted with 24 offices, lavatories, a bathroom, mess room, dining room, kitchen, and dormitory area. After the war, platform 5 was stripped of all evidence of wartime use and the Aldwych branch reopened in 1946. The bay platform continued to be used for staff accommodation after the War.



The kitchen facilities in the Holborn hostel



Plans of wartime platform conversion at Holborn

CLOSING THE BRANCH

Post war, new technologies were installed on the London Underground, including fluorescent lighting which improved the look and feel of platforms and station environments significantly. In 1962, Holborn became the site of London Transport's first station operations room, from where a supervisor monitored passenger traffic in the station with closed-circuit television. The room was situated in a 'bird's nest' in the intermediate concourse but has since been removed.

Between 1985 and 1988, the escalator shafts, the Central line platforms and the Piccadilly 'mainline' platforms were redecorated with new terrazzo floor tiles and vitreous enamel wall panels bearing images taken from the British Museum's collections. These effectively covered both the original 1906 tiles on the Piccadilly platforms and the 1933 tiling elsewhere on the station. For the work, the designer Alan Drummond borrowed Victorian glass plate negatives from the British Museum. Throughout the 1980s, the London Underground network was in managed decline; passenger numbers had fallen, and cuts were being sought on a regular basis.

The Holborn – Aldwych branch had been considered for closure for some time due to low revenue and passenger numbers. By the early 1990s the lifts at Aldwych needed to be replaced at an estimated cost of £3 million. In addition, the aging station needed further upgrades and maintenance to bring it up to modern standards. The full cost of upgrading the Aldwych branch came close to £7 million, which could not be justified with only about 450 passenger trips a day.

On 30 September 1994 the Aldwych branch closed to the public and the remaining branch platform, along with the cross-connection passageways at Holborn, became disused.



Enamel panels by Alan Drummond on the platform wall at Holborn, 1988

Piccadilly line



Aldwych shuttle service to close

From Friday 30 September

Following the decision of the Secretary of State for Transport to permit closure, the peak hour Holborn–Aldwych service will stop running, and Aldwych station will be closed after the last train on Friday 30 September 1994.

We regret any inconvenience. Frequent buses run between Holborn and Aldwych on routes 1, 68, X68, 91, 168, 188, 501, 505, 521.

Poster advertising the closure of the Holborn – Aldwych service, September 1994

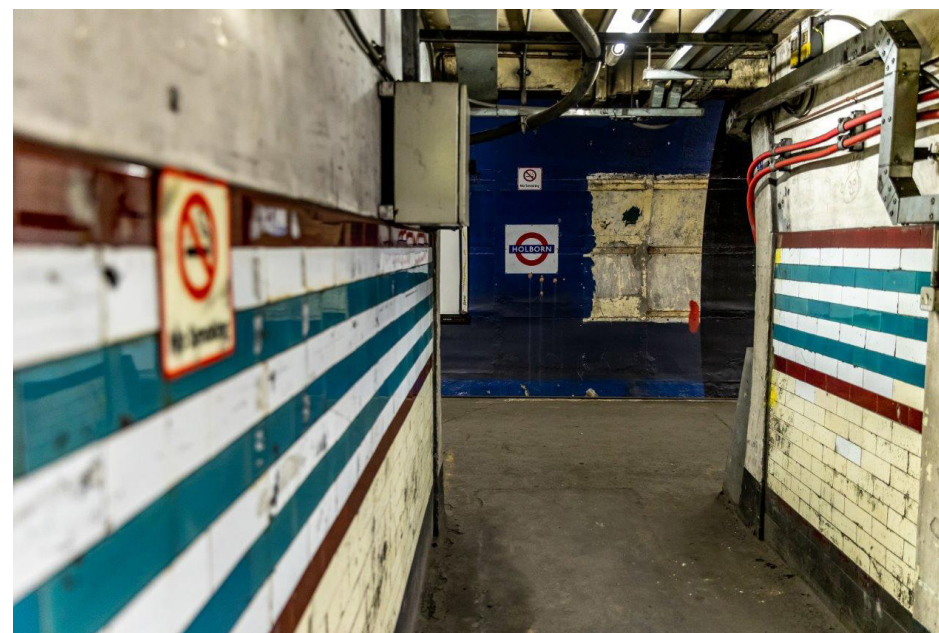
HOLBORN TODAY

After the closure of the branch, platform 5 and the disused passageways were occasionally used for filming. However, passenger numbers at Holborn kept rising and filming became impractical. Aldwych was favoured as a filming location instead. Platform 5 has also been used as a test bed of designs and in 2024 a large signalling facility for the Central line was constructed.

Holborn has been earmarked for reconstruction for years; in 1989 London Underground first announced plans to build a new booking hall and additional escalators to cope with an ever-increasing number of passengers. However, no such work was carried out. Plans were revived in the 2010s to build a new station entrance on Procter Street, north of the current entrance. This would include improvements to the Kingsway entrance, improving the interchanges between the two lines and putting in step free access. To facilitate this, the disused platforms of Holborn would be demolished to make way for new passageways. The plans were put on hold during the Covid-19 pandemic and remain so due to budgetary constraints, leaving the secret platforms of Holborn available to visit for some time yet.



Platform 5 in 2020 with station mock-ups on the wall



Entrance to platform 5

For more information about the history of the site, the context in which it was built, and other underground structures, the following publications are recommended:

Chris Nix, Sidy Holloway, David Bownes with Sam Mullins
Hidden London: Discovering the forgotten Underground
Yale University Press, 2019

David Bownes, Oliver Green and Sam Mullins
Underground: How the Tube shaped London
Allen Lane, 2012

Antony Badsey-Ellis and Mike Horne
The Aldwych branch
Capital Transport, 2009

Desmond F Croome and Alan A Jackson
Rails through the clay
Capital Transport, 1993

Titles still in print are available in the London Transport Museum shop or can be ordered from the Museum's online shop. All the publications and further information can be consulted in the Museum library by appointment. See the Museum website for details.

For an informal look behind the scenes, exclusive access and information, check out the [Hidden London Hangouts series on London Transport Museum's YouTube channel](#).

For news about other Hidden London tours please subscribe to the London Transport Museum newsletter: ltmuseum.co.uk/enews

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Paul Ross, Patron

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As an educational charity, the Museum conserves and explains the city's transport heritage, offering people an understanding of the Capital's past development and engaging them in the debate about its future.

The majority of our collections are stored at the Museum Depot at Acton in West London. It is open to the public on special weekends and for guided monthly tours.

See the Museum collections online and find out more about future events and exhibitions