

# JONATHAN BRAY



## Frank Pick honoured at last

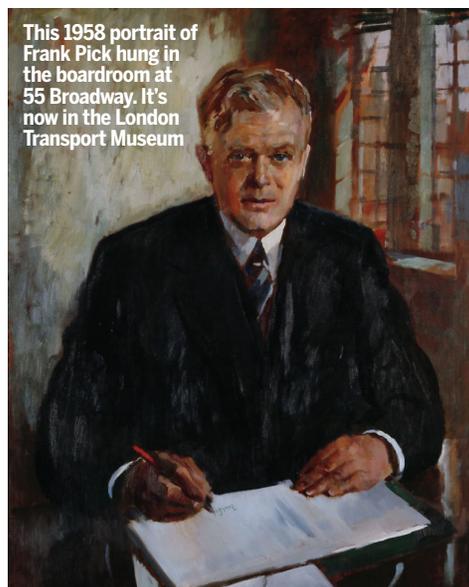
Londoners are never too far from the physical manifestations of Frank Pick's influence, and yet his legacy is underappreciated

► It was an honour to be at the unveiling before Christmas of an artwork at Piccadilly Circus to commemorate Frank Pick, London Transport's first chief executive in the 1930s. Always a hero of mine. Indeed I would argue Pick is by far the most significant public transport leader we've had in this country. He didn't just make London Transport the best designed and most progressive urban transport system in the world - he evolved the notion that public transport should be well designed and progressive in the first place. Something that in turn has insinuated itself into the city's very conception of itself. And as for legacies, the idea that London transport shouldn't just be good, but that it should be the best and most pleasing to use, is still there. Indeed I'm not sure I would be doing what I'm doing now if it wasn't for what he showed is possible.

So who was he and why was he so significant? It's almost impossible to imagine the essential identity of London's transport system looking and feeling any different to the way it does today. But before Pick, London's transport system was a bit of a mess and lacking in identity. The way it looked and operated reflected the ebbing and falling of entrepreneurial energies and dreams, as well as the primacy of stolid engineering, operational and accounting virtues. The system was a mish-mash of providers and technologies. It added to the cacophony, the patch and mend, the chaos of London rather than making sense of it.

So if you were traveling on the Underground,

platform walls were a seething mass of advertising of all types and typefaces. Finding the name of the station the train stopped at, amidst the riot of shouty advertising could be a challenge. Fast forward to the Pick era and he had turned the walls of that same underground platform into an orderly art gallery of posters commissioned from the brightest and best talents of the era. Posters that celebrated the idea of London and all its potential to which its transport network could provide you with access to. However, this was an art gallery that never took precedence over clear signage - with the bullseye roundel guiding the eye to the station name.



This 1958 portrait of Frank Pick hung in the boardroom at 55 Broadway. It's now in the London Transport Museum

Under his watch the system also gained a map that made sense of what had been an intimidating subterranean realm - Harry Beck's famous tube map. A map that abandoned geographical realism in favour of a diagram that was easy to assimilate. And to make the system even easier to use there was a clear and calm typeface devised over a period of three years by the country's leading practitioner and teacher of lettering and calligraphy, Edward Johnston. A typeface of bold simplicity which was hand-crafted but applied on an industrial scale to become 'London's handwriting'.

This ethos extended above ground to station designs like those of Charles Holden which epitomise Pick's taste for a high-minded blend of classicism, craft and the best of European modernism. It extended too to industrial and engineering design which gave London some of the best and most enduring public transport vehicles in the world.

And why did he take such pains to ensure that nothing was ever too good for London Transport? Because, in his words "art should come down from its pedestal and work for a living". Working in this case both to attract patronage to the system (Pick was still a businessman) but also to contribute to something bigger than that. Here is what he told the Royal Society of Arts in December 1935 less than two years after the creation of London Transport: "Underneath all the commercial activities of the board, underneath all its engineering and operations there is the revelation and realisation of something which is in the nature of a work of art ... it is in fact, a conception of a metropolis as a centre of life, of civilisation, more intense, more eager, more vitalising than has ever so far been obtained."

What gave Pick such convictions? The origins can be found in his background and his early years outside the capital. He was the son of a shopkeeper who kept the non-conformist faith of his parents. He studied law before switching to a career on the relatively progressive North Eastern Railway. He was from the provinces (Spalding, then York). And with this background he brought to unruly London his belief in the virtues of order, of sound business, hard work, attention to detail, his enduring interest in railway operations and a sense of civic duty and the potential for spiritual transformation.

His wider interest in design, in art, and

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Frank Pick has been honoured with a new memorial at Piccadilly Circus

in the contribution that public transport could make to the city as a “fine flowering of civilisation” meant that rail industry colleagues saw him as an oddball. But although there was no doubting his sincerity about his ‘city of dreams’, the initial interest in posters and design was strongly informed by the commercial necessity of getting more people to use the new Underground lines when he was made traffic officer (with responsibilities for publicity and advertising) of the UERL or ‘Underground Group’ in 1909, which was then in a financial crisis.

More widely, good design also meant kit worked better and lasted longer. Pick was also fortunate that the virtues he lacked (he was not a people person) were those that his chairman (Lord Ashfield) had in abundance. This formidable team were also fortunate to enjoy a long period of control and influence with the UERL becoming the largest private operator (Pick became its MD in 1928) before being put in charge of the new unified and publicly-owned London Transport in 1933. He was the right man at the right time.

In St Paul’s cathedral there is an epitaph to its builder, Sir Christopher Wren, which reads: “If you seek his monument, look around you.” The same is true of Frank Pick in that you are never too far from the physical manifestations of his influence (such as the LT roundel). However, unlike Wren, Pick is far less well known. That’s partly because he was

self effacing there are very few photographs of him and he turned down a knighthood. Which makes it all the more remarkable that his restless ideals have never been stilled. For in what other world city is that city’s identity and sense of itself so tightly bound to that of its transit system? In what other world city would the design of a bus become one of the biggest things in a city’s politics? The Routemaster bus was a direct descendent of Pick’s attention to detail and for good design that is fit for purpose. The battle over the nature of its replacement was one of the defining features of the battle for the mayoralty in 2008, and a new mayor’s first term.

Even the darkest years of Sir Keith Bright, the Kings Cross fire, the sell offs and cutbacks in the 1980s could not eradicate those ideals. And now, in recent years, following on from the unshackling of London’s transport from Whitehall, there is a sense that the legacy of London Transport’s golden age of the 1920s and ‘30s is less of a burden and more of an inspiration. The ambition and originality of the stations on the Jubilee line extension, and those soon to be in everyday use on the new Elizabeth line, make the point.

Pick left London Transport in 1940, worn out by the pursuit of perfection and with the pressure of his role in helping prepare the capital for aerial bombing (which at the time it was feared to be even worse than it was). A subsequent position at the wartime Ministry

of Information lasted only four months before Churchill demanded the sacking of that “impeccable busman”. The following year he died suddenly on November 7, 1941, of a brain haemorrhage. It’s never seemed right, especially with such a sad coda to his career, that his achievements have been so poorly attributed and celebrated. But this wrong has now been righted with the memorial artwork which can now be found at the epicentre of both London and its transit system, Piccadilly Circus.

The artists Langland and Bell found in Pick’s personal archive at the London Transport museum, some rough notes he had written for a speech in 1917. There were eight words: beauty, immortality, utility, perfection, goodness, righteousness, truth, wisdom. Whether he would have liked to see his own name in a roundel next to these words is open to conjecture. But he would perhaps be pleased that it now can be said, as Oliver Green does in his recent book on Pick (‘art design and the modern city’) that ‘Frank Pick’s London is back’. ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.