

A Quaker and the Underground

by David Burnell

Charles Holden, (1875-1960), designed many of the Underground stations built in the inter-war period and immediately afterwards and inspired or supervised the design of others. The recent exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum sketching Holden's work for the Underground Electric Railways of London Company and its successor, the London Transport Passenger Transport Board, is a mark of the growing stature and appreciation of this architect whose work, until recently, only received a low profile in architectural history. The publication in 2007 of a definitive biography by Eitan Karol, Charles Holden has helped to put Holden firmly on the architectural map and more recently the Guardian's architectural writer Jonathan Glancy, in a series of articles featuring the world's ten best modern buildings included Holden's masterpiece, Arnos Grove station. Many of the 'Holden' stations, especially those associated with the Piccadilly line extensions of the early 1930s have achieved listed status.

Holden's other outstanding contributions to London's architectural heritage is the daunting austere London University Senate House, (1932 – 1937), with its ziggurat-like tower. (One of those popular but quite unverifiable myths is that had Hitler invaded in 1940 this building was to be the HQ of the Whermacht). Holden's 55 Broadway building, (1927 -1929) the HQ of the UERL and subsequently London Transport, has just had its listing upgraded from grade II to grade I, a significant recognition of the importance of Holden's work to the fabric of London. There is an architectural similarity between the two office complexes.

My interest in Holden's work springs, in part, from attempting to understand why he adopted such a unique style for his classical Underground stations, one that remains essentially modern today and makes the building immediately, probably at an unconscious level, recognisable as an Underground station to most Londoners. This is a successful example of subliminal branding and it is exactly what Frank Pick, (1878-1941), the Underground's managing



Charles Holden

director and Holden's patron set out to achieve. But, why did Holden develop the style he did for his work for the Underground? In this short article I approach this question from the knowledge that Charles Holden attended Quaker Meetings for most of his working life in London and although he never formally joined the Religious Society of Friends nevertheless regarded himself as a fully committed Quaker. Therefore, was there a spiritual dimension or motivation in Holden's mature work and did his station design reflect the Quaker testimony to simplicity that Holden would have embraced? I think they did, but most people will pass daily through Holden's stations blissfully unaware of this possible dimension to their surroundings. Why should they? After all travelling on the Underground doesn't usually provoke meditative reflection on the experience and an attempt to seek the spiritual origin of the building they are rushing through.

Today the passenger will have to look beyond the clutter of signage and cabling and the accretions of age to appreciate a simple, straightforward, uncluttered design. Influenced in his practice by the Arts and Crafts ideal of honesty in construction, Holden's stations are characterised by strong but simple shapes, and the use of natural warm red or brown brick between exposed high quality concrete and natural-looking quarry tiles. The station

Picture: Russ Willey



Arnos Grove station

continued...

A Quaker and the Underground (cont.)



buildings are devoid of fussy decoration and when built avoided the excesses of the Art-Deco flashy styling more associated with cinemas of the same interwar period. Compare a Holden station with, say, the Southern Railway's approach to architectural style in the 1930s, a good comparative London example being Surbiton. At Surbiton, were you to think about it, you would somehow just know that you were not in an 'Underground' station. Today Holden's stations are often referred to as 'Art Deco' which, in my view, is a lazy description. Modern, yes; resonances of the classical style, perhaps. They certainly contained some limited Art-Deco decorative detailing, for example, the fluted tulip shaped up-lighters introduced on the northern extension of the Piccadilly line. But otherwise they are an almost unique idiom of British modernism. One writer, Michael Sackler, has intriguingly described Holden's style and approach as an essay in 'Medieval Modernism' reflecting on Holden's assimilation of Arts and Crafts thinking into a modern architectural idiom. The overall effect of Holden's stations remains modern, restrained, calm, and glimpses of this are still to be seen underneath the predations of upgrading and neglect.



55 Broadway, HQ of London Underground

Picture: Andrew Dunn.

His work for the Underground was commissioned by its Managing Director, the personally austere Frank Pick, who promoted good design - 'Fitness for Purpose' - to almost the level of a religious creed. Pick, whilst ensuring good design was paramount, was also interested in the station as being a functional tool to ensure the most efficient use of space and every design aspect was subordinate to the ease of passenger flow. Much of the layout and accessibility of a Holden station is thus influenced by these imperatives. The famous tour of the modern brick architecture of northern Europe undertaken by Pick and Holden in 1930 may also have influenced Holden's approach although architectural historians are not united on quite how much.

Eitan Karol in his biography suggests Holden searched for the 'elemental' in architecture. He sought to create in his work the principles of 'truth, order and clarity'. His belief, inspired by the social reformer Edward Carpenter, (1844 – 1929) in the 'simple life', influenced his desire to make his buildings simple and in relation to decoration, embellishment and ornament, he strove to, in his own words, 'when in doubt, leave it out'. Eitan Karol suggests that the most formative influence on Holden's work was the 'rough hewn, honest naked and unashamed' poetry of Walt Whitman seen by the young Holden and his associates as a manifesto for a spiritually creative life. Holden spoke of his Quakerism in terms of 'simplicity', 'restraint', and 'sincerity', terms that can be applied to his Underground stations. The parallel between this and the Quaker values of simplicity, and seeking honesty in living an uncluttered life are clear.

Christian Barman in his biography of Frank Pick, *The Man Who Built London Transport*, offers a first hand picture of Charles Holden, "...a man of short stature with a calm earnest face enlivened by reflections from the gold round-rimmed spectacles which he was never seen without. From each side of a lofty forehead...the hair hung down vertically; the little beard meticulously trimmed, suggested an unimpressive chin. Somehow when you got to know him a little you were not surprised to discover he was a Quaker; that he was a craftsman who knew how to use his hands; that he neither smoked nor drank; or that his home was in Welwyn Garden City. He spoke little, in a soft colourless voice; it was as though he distrusted speech and used only the barest necessity".



Painting by Damon Poole

Contemporary watercolour of Northfields Station, a typical Charles Holden 'brick box with a concrete lid' design

continued...

A Quaker and the Underground (cont.)

It can be argued that the success of London Transport's design policy was rooted in the successful professional relationship between Holden and Frank Pick, underpinned by their spiritual beliefs. Pick was a self-effacing man whose religious origins were a fusion of Wesleyism and Congregationalism. It is likely that the underlying success in their collaboration lay in the shared, but not stated, deeply spiritual approach to their task. Their continuing artistic and business association lasted nearly 20 years, leading the architectural press to refer to them as the 'Puritan and Quaker'. In 1942 Holden wrote, "...I was born in an industrial age; ...that I was urged by a passion for building and for service... and that I have an invincible belief in the power of the human soul, the God in man, to rise above, and master ugliness and desolating conditions." Pick, in

his quest for 'Fitness for Purpose' in the designs he commissioned from Holden for the Underground, wrote, "Fitness for purpose must transcend the merely practical and serve a moral and spiritual order as well". Pick suggested saw the building of a modern transport system as the equivalent of the construction of a medieval cathedral, 'an integrated work of art that would be a joy to both maker and users'. In Holden, Pick found his master mason.

This is an amended article that first appeared in 'the Friend' vol 169, No 4 January 28th 2011, and is reproduced with the kind permission of the editor.

References

- Eitan Karol, *Charles Holden*, 2009
Oliver Green, Jeremy Rewse-Davies, *Designed for London, 150 Years of Transport Design* 1995.
Christian Barman, *The Man Who Built London Transport*, 1979
Alan A Jackson, Desmond Croome, *Rails Through the Clay*, 1993
Michael Sackler *The Avant-garde in Inter-war England; Medieval Modernism and the London Underground*, 1999
The Friend, vol.128, No 28, 1960

Original watercolour of Northfields Station by Damon Poole, damonepoole@aol.com, and reproduced courtesy of the artist.