

Spiral pioneer

The world's first spiral escalator, unearthed in an Islington tube station, was extraordinary – but abandoned and forgotten. Mark Smulian reports

Imagine being able to descend from street to track level at Holloway Road station by means of something a little like an unpolished helter-skelter.

For one day only in 1906 this was possible when an experimental spiral escalator was tested at the station.

It was roughly one person's width wide and had no steps. Passengers stepped onto it and held onto the side as it curled up or down, leaping off at the top or bottom.

The spiral was shaped like a double helix, moved continuously, and must have been a startling innovation in its day. Yet it was abandoned and forgotten, and no one knows for certain why.

It had been installed in a spare lift shaft at the station and was left there in disuse until it was dismantled when a conventional lift was installed.

The lower portion of the spiral was left under the floor of the current lift shaft. It must have been deemed too difficult to move and was simply concreted over, where it remained for some 80 years before being rediscovered during a lift refurbishment.

Tim Shields, a curator at the

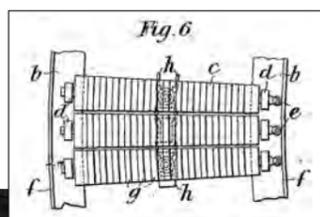
London Transport Museum's depot in Acton, has reassembled a short section of the spiral and has found the original patent. But even he is uncertain as to how exactly it worked and why it was scrapped.

He surmises: "They must have concluded it did not work and was not safe as it would have juddered and been uncomfortable to use as it had no steps.

"You can see that it was experimental as some of the pieces that were found and cut out at Holloway Road have been precision cast, but some of the wood is just joinery." Some of the metal plates are thin, and clearly not designed for long-term use.

Mr Shields knows from the patent that the spiral had a double helix shape in which a walkway moved round a central core with two helical coils running counter clockwise.

The spiral was intended to combine a traditional escalator's speed of moving people with the small space required for a lift.



The rebuilt section of the spiral escalator in the London Transport Museum's depot in Acton

The Holloway spiral stood some 35 feet high and was 22½ inches wide. The rebuilt section is about six feet long; some other components are in the depot.

"Very little is known about it, no contemporary newspaper reports have been traced and we only have one photograph of it while it was being built," Mr Shields says.

It is known that the spiral was devised by Jesse Reno, inventor of the moving escalator, and William Henry Aston held the patent.

The only other spiral escalator in London that Mr Shields has traced was an amusement attraction at Earl's Court, also in the 1900s, called "Ballooning", in which passengers ascended through scenes depicting various parts of the world.

To see the spiral escalator, join a guided tour or attend an open day at the depot near Acton Town station.

The depot houses the heritage of TfL and its predecessors that cannot be exhibited in the main museum at Covent Garden because of space. Exhibits from the depot go to Covent Garden

Moving walkway, pictures and patent: wooden treads are moved by a chain system; wheels at the end of the treads fit between rail flanges



for special events, but are not rotated there as a matter of course.

Inside the depot are horse buses, trolleybuses, trams, buses from the 1920s through to the Routemaster (including the second Routemaster built), underground trains, posters, signs, engineering components and almost every imaginable kind of memorabilia.

Heritage valued early on

"London Transport and its predecessors realised the value of heritage early on and made an effort to acquire materials, something that became a statutory obligation in the 1950s," Mr Shields explains.

There are Islington links to the exhibits. The depot boasts a number 29 bus dating from 1927, whose route sign shows it followed almost its present route, although it continued to Victoria. A 1930s number 38 shows it too running more or less its current route, though continuing to Chingford Mount.

One loving restoration is a single-decker number 236, a 1931 bus found badly rusted in a field in Buckinghamshire, having been used as a holiday chalet. It was recreated correctly, right down to the fabric and the fare table.

"That needed careful research as there would otherwise be someone contacting us who disputed what the fare was," Mr Shields says. The table shows it cost 9d to travel from Finsbury Park to Leyton, again along a longer version of a route very similar to the current one.

There are also Metropolitan Line carriages dating from 1887, which, like the 236 bus, had been left in a field, in this case used as farm sheds.

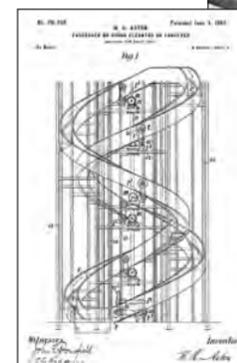
"Uses like that saved them," Mr Shields says. "Because they

Spiral memories sought

Do you remember anyone reminiscing about the spiral escalator at Holloway Road, or the one at Earl's Court?

If so, Tim Shields at the London Transport Museum would be interested to hear from you. Contact him on 020 7379 6344 or tim.shields@ltmuseum.co.uk

Right: in 1906 – note the steep slope; below: Aston's 1902 patent



were used for other purposes and not scrapped, we still have them and can restore them."

Islington's Underground lines are represented by a Victoria Line carriage of the kind that has only just gone out of service – the Queen travelled in this carriage at the line's opening in 1967.

There is also a Piccadilly Line train with single sliding door intended for a fast service from Heathrow, but which did not work well as the single door was slow to let passengers out.

The depot also houses transport memorabilia that was too small or commonplace to attract much attention

when it was in place.

Want to see an old "light box" ticket machine showing 40p destinations, maps dating from before the current line colours were settled, pre-internet travel enquiry machines or station signs with the old bull's-eye logo? Head to Acton. ■

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● Guided depot tours take place on the last Friday and Saturday of each month. The next open weekend is on 8-9 October. Book at www.ltmuseum.co.uk or call 020 7565 7298. See Events, page 26



Also at the depot: a 1930s no 38 shows Islington as a destination; this 236 bus was restored accurately, right down to the fabric and the fare table