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A time machine to the Tube of yesteryear

By David Gritten

If a time machine could whisk today's Tube travellers back to the 1970s, they would be astonished by how different the Underground was back then. Smoking was permitted. The escalators below ground were wooden. Passengers feeling tired (or possibly tipsy) could stretch out full-length on benches situated on platforms.



Feet up: Tired travellers on the Northern line in 1975. Photo: Mike Goldwater.



Tunnel of love: A couple kiss at Holborn in 1978. Photo: Mike Goldwater.

“And compared to today, the Underground was dark,” says Mike Goldwater, a photographer and filmmaker who lives in Fortis Green. “Since then, the lighting has been upgraded phenomenally.”

Mike began chronicling life on the Tube with his camera in 1970, when he was just 20. Over the next 10 years he returned often, visiting dozens of stations, riding trains and seeking out intriguing subjects.

“I spent a lot of time below ground,” he recalls. “I never had a fixed destination. Everyone else was going from A to B, but I’d travel on a whim, looking at people and the different spaces.”

“The darkness made it a technical challenge but I discovered I could take good pictures on the Underground by shooting black-and-white film and overdeveloping it slightly. Then it was a question of finding interesting moments and capturing them.”

Faces from the past

Earlier this year Mike was looking through his archive of photographs, came across his Tube photos and decided they stood the test of time. He visited a publisher of collectable photographic books in East London, who immediately agreed.

Now, 40 years after he completed his project, a 128-page book of his photographs is available to buy. *London Underground: 1970-1980* captures people in spontaneous, amusing or intimate moments as they navigate the Tube system.

Mike always asked travellers for their permission to be photographed, and simply

walked away if they were reluctant. Most of them agreed, enabling him to assemble an impressive portfolio.

As the book confirms, they’re a varied lot: on its cover, a charming young couple,

kissing at the foot of an escalator at Holborn in 1978; dejected young Manchester United fans at Wembley Park station after the 1979 Cup final (their team

lost to Arsenal); two City types (clearly the worse for drink) sprawling across Tube carriage seats at Bank.

So many changes

The book is also a reminder of long-gone features on the Underground: the lift operators, the little bookshop at Baker Street, the newspaper stand at Notting Hill Gate.

Today benches on platforms have dividers, so no-one can lie down on them. All

escalators are steel, after the terrible fire in 1987 at Kings Cross St. Pancras, started by a lit match dropped on a wooden escalator, caused the deaths of 31 people.

“A lot of changes were

necessary, even in 1970,” Mike recalls. “The Tube was dark. Its infrastructure was run down. But not all the changes were positive: beautiful Victorian tile work and lovely decorations around the tunnels and escalator passages were covered up behind aluminium cladding.”

Mike is delighted to have found such an enthusiastic publisher and pleased his work from that long-ago period will

now be widely seen. “Looking back at it now,” he says, “it was a wonderful experience.”

(*London Underground: 1970-1980* is available from Hoxton Mini Press at £16.95)



Pipe-smoker: A train guard at Oxford Circus in 1978. Photo: Mike Goldwater.



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