

Dangerous words

London Underground has a track record of fiddling about with station names, says Paul Finch

There is something odd going on about the way London identifies its Tube stations. Until very recently there was a simple convention: the historic roundel signified the presence of the station. Sometimes the particular Underground line was referenced (Circle, District etc), though everything has now been standardised, so you have to get inside the station before you find out what the line is, assuming you don't already know. The name of the station is prominently displayed externally in the magnificent Edwin Johnston 1916 typeface.

It has never been thought necessary to use the word 'station' to accompany the name, because the roundel and the typeface make it instantly recognizable as being just that.

However, the recent addition to the Northern Line network at Nine Elms, on the south side of the Thames close to the new US embassy, is called 'Nine Elms Station'. This is baffling. Its new sister

station, where a spur of the line now terminates, is called Battersea Power Station because it is right next to the Art Deco megastructure. Logically, if the nomenclature for Nine Elms is correct, it should be called Battersea Power Station Station!

The splendid new Elizabeth Line' central section has finally opened, between Paddington and Abbey Wood. Pleasingly, the word 'station' has not been added. However, for those with an interest in locational accuracy, there is something very odd about the way some of the stations are described. For example, for those familiar with the West End of London, it will seem bizarre that you can enter or exit a station on Hanover Square which is named 'Bond Street'. Ditto your experience if you go into a station on the Barbican edge of Smithfield and find it is called 'Farringdon'.

Locals will no doubt soon get used to these anomalies, and position themselves in parts of the Elizabeth Line rolling stock so they are at the 'right'

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part of the train when they alight. But for the unsuspecting visitor, it is going to involve a hell of a walk.

London Underground has a track record of fiddling about with names. For example Charing Cross, where several lines meet in order to collect or discharge passengers who wish to be in the Charing Cross area, or indeed switch to the main-line Charing Cross Station (correct!), was renamed 'Embankment'. The next station on the line, formerly called Trafalgar Square because it was right on Trafalgar Square, was then renamed Charing Cross.

There have been occasions in the past where the engineer's tin-ear for language has proved all too successful. For example, at the end of Nightingale Lane in south-west London is a station designed by Charles Holden, opened in 1926. On his drawings, it is named – you guessed it – Nightingale Lane. This wasn't good enough for the decision-makers, who decided it should be called Clapham South. I hope one day the name will revert.

None of this is earth-shattering, but the way words are language are used are important. Think about Butcher Putin's lies about Ukraine, which supposedly justified his illegal invasion of that country. And what about a Labour Party which cannot define what a woman is? Or a National Health Service that asks men if they are pregnant?

We have gone beyond the looking glass into an Alice in Wonderland world in which words supposedly mean what the person who utters them says they mean. This is territory that rapidly becomes dangerous. ■



Battersea Power Station station