

The River Thames is missing!

Posted by Peter on 22 October 2009



The London Underground map - with the river! Photo by [Joe Bennett/flickr](#)

What do we mean if we say that something is missing? We mean that it has disappeared, that it has gone! Suppose I put my car keys down on the table. A few minutes later, I look for them - but they are gone. I am sure they were on the table. They were on the table only a minute ago. But now they have disappeared. They are missing.

It is not just car keys that can go missing. Your luggage can go missing at the airport; and children can go missing in a busy shopping centre. And sometimes much bigger things go missing, as we shall discover in this podcast.

But first, some history. If you have visited London, I am sure that you have travelled on the London Underground. The [earliest underground railway line](#) in London was built in the middle of the 19th century. Steam engines pulled the trains, and smoke filled the stations and tunnels. Despite this, Londoners loved their new underground trains. They were a quick and convenient way to get to work. People could work in central London but live away from their work, often in better houses than before. New underground lines were built in the late 19th and the 20th century. They helped London to grow bigger and bigger.

Both Londoners and visitors needed to know which underground lines went to which places. They needed maps. Until the 1930s, [maps of the underground](#) were simply street maps with the underground railway lines added. In the centre of London, where there are lots of Underground lines and stations, the maps were [crowded](#) and difficult to read. But if you made the map so that you could see easily what the underground system in central London was like, the map had to be very big to cover all the underground lines in the suburbs.

The problem was solved by a man called [Harry Beck](#). He drew a map which looks like an [electric circuit](#)

The River Thames is missing!

Posted by Peter on 22 October 2009

[diagram](#). He made central London big, so that you could see all the lines and stations, and the suburbs small so that the map was a reasonable size. He drew the underground lines so that they were either vertical, or horizontal, or at 45 degrees. He gave the different lines different colours. He said that people needed the map so that they could see how to get from one station - say, Victoria - to another station - say, Marylebone. People did not need to know the exact route of the railway line, or the exact distance between stations. So there were no streets on his map, and the stations are all about the same distance apart. But the river Thames was there, of course, like a blue snake through the middle of the city.

Harry Beck's map was a huge success. It made the complicated railway system easy to understand. Londoners and visitors loved it. Other cities in other countries copied the style of Harry Beck's map for their own transport systems. It became an icon - a symbol - of London.

Obviously, over the years the map has changed. New underground lines have been built, and new stations. Earlier this year, Transport for London - the body which runs the Underground - produced a new map. It looked just like the old map, but something was wrong. Something was missing. The River Thames was not there! It's OK, said Transport for London, you can't see the river when you travel on the Underground. So you don't need to know where it is! But Londoners were unhappy. The River Thames is not particularly beautiful; but it divides London into North London and South London. If you have lived in London, you will know that North London and South London are almost on different planets. South Londoners do not like going north of the Circle Line. North Londoners take their passports with them if they travel south of the river. So the river is important, and now it was missing from the Underground map.

The public outcry was so loud that Transport for London quickly decided to print a new map, with the river back where it should be. We English are deeply conservative about little things. We like Harry Beck's map the way it is, with the river, and we do not want to change it.

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=491>,