

This Date in Safety History



The first section of the world's first underground urban railway opened 162 years ago on this date. The London Underground, known as the Tube, was built using the "cut-and-cover" method. The section that opened on January 10, 1863, was between Bishop's Road (now Paddington Station) and Farringdon. By 1880, the system was carrying 40 million passengers per year.

The Tube's "finest hour" occurred in 1940 when Londoners used it as a bomb shelter during the Battle of Britain. In addition to providing shelter from the Luftwaffe, the Tube became literally a center of unity and a symbol of the determined resistance of the people of London.

Today, the Tube has more than 250 miles (400 km) of track and serves 3 million riders per day. And it experiences only one fatal accident per 300 million journeys. Perhaps the most public aspect of the Tube's systematic passenger safety efforts were the ubiquitous "Mind the Gap" warnings recorded by voiceover artist Emma Clarke. The gaps to which Ms. Clarke was referring were those between the train and the platform. In 2007, the Tube terminated its contract with Clarke after humourless officials discovered several harmless spoofs of the announcements on her website.

The Tube's recent worker safety record has been less impressive than its efforts in protecting passengers. In 2002, the Tube was fined £225,000 for violating safety standards. To keep the system running, workers had been instructed to work

in dark tunnels without turning off power to the electric rails, and several workers had received electrical shocks as a result.