The tube map almost never made it out of its creator's notebook. The designer was Harry Beck, a young draughtsman who drew electrical circuits for the Underground. Beck's biographer, Ken Garland, befriended him in the 1950s, and before his designer's death in 1974 he uncovered the story behind the creation of what Beck called “the diagram”.

“As a native of a small village in Devon and moving to London to study art, I found the metropolis impossible to navigate,” Garland recalls. “I would get on the tube and see Harry’s diagram. London suddenly made sense, and so I asked people at the college if they knew who the designer was.”
Garland was told that HC Beck could be found at the London College of Printing, where he taught part-time, and he paid him a visit. They soon became friends.

Beck first drew his diagram in 1931 – a difficult time to be working for the newly established London Transport Passenger Board. With money tight, the board’s employees could be laid off at short notice. Beck, then 29, had been employed as a “temporary” since he first started in 1925. While at work drawing an electrical circuit diagram, he had an idea: a new map that would raise the profile of the tube and attract much-needed new passengers, and that would make the system seem modern, quick, efficient – and, above all, easier to navigate.

At the time, the maps of the network showed individual lines run by different railway companies. It was geographically correct, but impossible to understand. The lines snaked all over the place. The first map, published in 1908, had an idea: a new map that would be a circuit board, and could not agree where companies. It was geographically correct, but impossible to understand why it wasn’t geographically accurate – and later he was laid off. Beck’s dismissal made him suspicious of London Underground. He chose to sell the idea to them as a freelancer (for just ten guineas), giving him control over the future integrity of his design. But as work in his old office began to pick up, his former colleagues remembered him: they had appreciated his help in the tube workers’ orchestra and, in 1933, he was back on board and pitching his idea again.

Garland continues: “Beck would not take no for an answer. He went back with a revised copy, and finally they agreed to produce a small print run of 1,000 fold-out versions, put them in central London train stations and ask passengers for comments. One of the publicity team went to Piccadilly Circus and asked staff if anyone had been interested in the diagram. The maps had gone within an hour. Beck had been proved correct, and the publicity department arranged for a print run of 750,000.”

“Harry Beck was good news for the tube. Passenger numbers had leveled off, and they needed a bright idea to sell the Underground. “Beck’s map was the catalyst,” says Garland.

More than a million were in circulation within six months of being commissioned. Wall maps were next: Beck was paid a further five guineas to produce one. But for something that is so recognizable as a piece of “trademark” art, Harry Beck was not, according to Garland, part of the modernist movement that was sweeping through the psyche of painters, sculptors, other designers and filmmakers of the period. “He was not influenced by contemporary art,” says Garland. “He knew little or nothing about it.”

Garland. “He’d quietly taken the diagram to them and said: ‘You may be interested in this.’ The publicity chiefs replied: ‘You can’t do it like this – the public will be really confused by the idea, no one will understand it.’”

His idea was dismissed as ridiculous – people couldn’t understand why it wasn’t geographically accurate – and later he was laid off. Beck’s dismissal made him suspicious of London.