
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 9

Mike Roden rides the C3 from Clapham Junction to Earls Court



Clapham Junction is always at its loveliest at ten o'clock on a grey, drizzly November morning but thankfully I don't have to wait long for the C3 bus which will take me to Earls Court. Great Bus Journeys has headed up St John's Hill many times before, and I'm not expecting anything new but I see with a shock that the Windsor Castle pub has become The Junction. The enthusiastic landlord sees his biggest challenge as turning a 'dated' pub into a 'laid back, cosmopolitan space and a great place for everyone to meet.' What a novel idea!

Grade II listed

Down Plough Road we go, and then onto York Road past the new developments on Battersea Reach which seem to be never-ending. Close to Wandsworth Bridge is the grade II listed Wandsworth Bus Garage, built in 1906-8 as a tramway depot, and now the home of the 'Original Tour' buses.

Jews Row (near the bus stop) leads down to The Ship Inn which first opened its doors in 1768. It's a Young's pub now, a magnet for young people at the weekends. Nearby is Brady's Fish restaurant, which used to be on Old York Road.

Over the bridge, and the bus turns right down Townmead Road, once an area of peaceful fields and marshy water meadows (the 'Town Meads'). The tenants of the Manor of Fulham could pasture their cattle here and forage for firewood. The rural peace disappeared by the late nineteenth century with the establishment of wharves and related industries. The cement works survives, but the area

is being refashioned into 'Fulham Riverside', with a new Sainsburys superstore and luxury flats costing over £800,000 for a two bedroom box.

Fishing village

Past the derelict former home of the Fulham Electricity Generating Board, 1980s apartment blocks are already boarded up, awaiting demolition. The bus stops near Imperial Wharf station - the newest addition to the Overground system - before turning past Jurys Inn hotel, which is allegedly 'affordable'. I suppose that £90 for a double room bed and breakfast could be so described.

We're on a private road now, heading through the Chelsea Harbour complex. The upmarket marina in the centre of the development used to be the harbour for barges carrying coal for the Lots Road power station. It had access from the river via a lock approach and once had 15 lines of railway sidings. In the 1960s Lots Road was converted to use oil and traffic dwindled. Gulls and waders appreciated the mud and shingle exposed at low tide but by the 1980s the area was strewn with abandoned cars and old washing machines and poisoned by toxic waste, fit only for location shooting of the TV series *The Sweeney*.

Architect Ray Moxley (who still lives in Chelsea Harbour) saw its potential. His aim was to mirror an old town square, or fishing village, where the houses, flats, hotels, pubs and restaurants crowd round it and 'generate a sense of place'. From the bus you can't see how far he achieved this ambition, as the road circles

around the edge of the development. As you reach the exit you pass the Chelsea Design centre under its three glass domes. I gather it's regarded as the essence of cool, an interior designers' paradise with outlets for suppliers of everything they need. It has a bookshop and a designer café too. If you get a chance have a walk round and wonder.

Designer outlets

Back to reality the bus leaves the harbour behind and heads up a traffic-clogged Lots Road to Kings Road. The development of the power station site has started in earnest, and in a few years there will be two more enormous towers adding to the Chelsea skyline - it's been dubbed 'new Battersea'! Lots Road itself has plenty of designer outlets, alongside a gaggle of auction rooms. A minute or two more and we're on the A3220 which has various names along its meandering way; this stretch is called Gunter Grove. The bus trundles slowly towards Earls Court along a mainly residential road of large Edwardian villas, whose whitewashed surfaces are often grubby and neglected looking, especially on a wet day like today.

Past Fulham Road we're on Finborough Road. This is the northerly route of the one way system which takes traffic out towards the M4, and is almost entirely residential. Over to the left is Brompton Cemetery. We pass no 13 Finborough Road where in 1922 Ronald True robbed and murdered Olive Young. He was tried for murder, the jury was unconvinced by the defence of insanity and he was sentenced to death. His reprieve



caused a storm, as some thought he was being leniently treated because of his influential family, in contrast to eighteen year old Henry Jacoby, a pantry boy who had murdered a 65 year old titled lady and was hanged. True spent the rest of his life in Broadmoor Hospital, dying there in January 1951.

At the junction with Ifield Road is the award winning Finborough Theatre which presents a mix of contemporary plays and musicals, as well as revivals of neglected works from the 19th and 20th centuries. Technically a theatre above a bar, the latter has a habit of going bankrupt and closing down, and the Finborough Wine Café closed last year.

Liaison

No 121 is just across the road. In 1992 it was the home of Antonia de Sancha whose liaisons there with government minister David Mellor resulted in his resignation from office,

After Old Brompton Road the road becomes Warwick Way, still firmly residential. A couple of hundred yards to the right Earls Court road is seething with people, and full of bars, restaurants, shops, banks, and of course the C3 bus will return that way. My mistake was in starting at Clapham Junction...

For now let's reflect on Earls Court which probably takes its name from the court held here by Lords of the Manor the Earls of Oxford. It was a rural backwater until the building of the Metropolitan District Railway in the late 1860s sparked off a wave of intense development. However, much of the area near the station remained

a waste ground for many years. In the late 19th century the site was home to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

Crosshead

In 1935 the land was sold and the new owners decided to outdo the nearby Olympia exhibition hall. The Earls Court Exhibition Centre – its striking Art Deco facade facing Warwick Road – opened in September 1937 with a Chocolate and Confectionery show. The second exhibition hall, facing West Brompton station, opened in 1991. Recently plans were approved to demolish the centre to make way for a new residential and retail estate. This scheme is hotly contested by many who see it as a threat to local businesses which rely on the trade brought in by the centre.

During the late 1960s a large transient population of Australian and New Zealand travellers began to use Earls Court as a UK hub. Today, while there are still significant numbers of students or others on temporary visas, many of the antipodean visitors have moved on to now-cheaper areas further north and west.

After a long wait at the junction we cross Cromwell Road and the bus disgorges its four remaining passengers outside the massive Tesco superstore. It has taken me 45 long minutes to get here. The rain is unremitting, and I make for the café inside. The coffee and the Danish pastry are excellent, though it's a long way to come for a good cup of coffee. I have a long, miserably damp trudge back to the tube station, from where I'm whisked off to Victoria, and thence onto the trusty 170 which takes me home.

Sights to see: The Junction pub, formerly the Windsor Castle, (and unofficially for railwaymen, Platform 18); The Design Centre, Chelsea Harbour; a herring gull on Wandsworth Bridge; Lots Road Power Station when it had four chimneys; the Finborough Theatre, Earls Court Exhibition Centre

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