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## Great Bus Journeys of the World No 25

Mike Roden travels to Battersea Bridge from Finsbury Park on the 19



TfL's very welcome reprieve of the 19 bus led to several suggestions that my next bus journey should be a tribute to Battersea's favourite bus. Jenny Sheridan covered this route for the first Great Bus Journey in Autumn 2011 so to ring the changes I've decided to start at Finsbury Park. Just before 11am on a sunny May morning I emerge from the station after a quick trip on the Victoria Line. Near the bus stop stands Rowans Tenpin Bowling establishment. A century ago this was a cinema where 'disgraceful scenes' were reported to the police. Its time as a bowling alley is about to come to an end with plans to demolish it and open up access to the park behind and build a very tall tower block.

The bus heads off down Blackstock Road. This is the land of the quick eaterie: kebabs, falafel, curry, Turkish cuisine. Everywhere there are references to the local football club, there's the Arsenal Café across the road from City and Islington College, then Arsenal Fruit and Veg, Arsenal Barbers and Arsenal Food and Wine.

The stadium is no longer in this neck of the woods. Unable to expand in their Highbury location, in 2006 the club relocated to nearby Holloway. Blackstock Road becomes Highbury Park and we pass Conewood Road which leads down to the former site of Arsenal's stadium, now a luxury development called Highbury Square.

Here on the edge of Islington there's a different atmosphere, a prosperity summed up by the shop Ink & 84 which 'sells stories, dreams, drink & conviviality'. It's an independent bookshop which serves coffee in the day and craft beer, wine and artisan gin in the evenings.

The modernist Joan of Arc Catholic

Church was designed by Stanley Kerr Bate and opened for business in 1962 replacing a 'temporary church' which had occupied the site since 1920. It was the first church in the world to be named after St Joan who had been consecrated just two years earlier.

It's mainly residential round here. The large Anglican church – Christ Church Highbury – dating from 1848 stands next door to Highbury Fields which is Islington's largest open space and teeming with young families enjoying the sunshine.

At a T-junction the bus turns right onto St Paul's Road towards Highbury Corner. We crawl down Upper Street through Islington's eclectic mix of shops, bars and restaurants. To the left on Canonbury Square is the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art. It's the place to go to see art and sculpture dating from 1890 to the 1950s.

### Protests

Nearby William Tyndale Primary school was at the centre of a row in the early 1970s. Parental protests over its 'radically progressive' education methods led ultimately to an increase in government authority over education at the expense of local authority control.

Almeida Street is of course the home of the Almeida Theatre which opened in 1980. In 1837 the building housed the Islington Literary and Scientific Society. The Salvation Army took up residence from 1890 until 1955. After that the building fell into disuse. In 1972 the campaign began to turn it into a theatre.

Further down Upper Street there's the King's Head pub. In 1970 a room at the back which had been used for boxing, then for pool was transformed into the first pub theatre in London

since Shakespeare's day.

Islington Green is a rare surviving patch of a large area of common land. The sun shines down on the statue of Sir Hugh Myddelton at one end. He was the driving force behind an ambitious project to bring clean water to London from the River Lea. The scheme cost Myddelton a fortune, although in 1612 he persuaded King James I to lend a financial hand. The so-called New River was officially opened in September 1613.

We're on Rosebery Avenue now passing the Lilian Baylis Studio and Sadlers Wells Theatre. In the late nineteen twenties it was Baylis (who had already restored the fortunes of the Old Vic) who took on the task of reviving the then derelict Sadlers Wells theatre. In 1931 it reopened with *Twelfth Night* starring John Gielgud as Malvolio and Ralph Richardson as Sir Toby Belch.

The Post Office's mail centre on Mount Pleasant is on the site of the Middlesex House of Correction which was built in 1794. With 1800 prisoners it was the largest British jail of its time. In 1887 (ten years after the prison closed) the Post Office adapted its former treadmill houses for use as a parcel depot, subsequently extending operations here to create the largest sorting office in Europe.

### Gardens

The bus is now heading down Theobalds Road, alongside the walled gardens of Grays Inn. They're known as 'the Walks' and this is one of the largest privately owned gardens in London. The gardens are open to the public on weekday lunchtimes and are a great place to enjoy an alfresco lunch on a sunny day.

Sicilian Avenue is as empty as the

Left to right: Rowans Bowling Alley, Finsbury Park; The Almeida Theatre, Camden; statue of Sir Hugh Myddelton, Islington Green, the Bloomsbury Tavern, a striking window display in Harvey Nichols, Knightsbridge



Note: All of the Great Bus Journeys have been cleverly extracted from *Battersea Matters* and can be downloaded from [www.batterseabus.co.uk](http://www.batterseabus.co.uk)



last time I passed on the 38 bus. By contrast the benches in Bloomsbury Square Garden are full of people enjoying the sunshine. This was one of the earliest London squares and in the seventeenth century was known as Southampton Square. The name Bloomsbury dates from 1201 when William de Blemond, a Norman landowner, acquired the land – thus Blemondisberi – the bury, or manor, of Blemond.

My attention is caught by the Bloomsbury Tavern, a striking corner pub. Legend has it that the Tavern was the last drinking spot for condemned criminals between Newgate Prison and Tyburn. In the interests of accuracy I should say that several other pubs make the same claim.

### Dogleg

We then take a rather complicated dogleg off the main thoroughfare behind Tottenham Court station and reach Charing Cross Road via St Giles High Street and Denmark Street. As usual the going is slow here with a convoy of buses crossing the junction with Shaftesbury Avenue known as Cambridge Circus. This of course is the home of 'The Circus' John le Carré's fictionalised location of the British intelligence service.

We head down Shaftesbury Avenue. Since I've written several times about this area you must forgive me for sitting back until we pass Piccadilly Circus.

Like so many buildings along here St James Piccadilly was severely damaged by wartime bombing. In Graham Greene's 1943 novel *The Ministry of Fear* the main character takes a number 19 from Piccadilly to Battersea during the Blitz and reflects how the bombs have struck some areas and spared others. 'After the

ruins of St James one passed ... into peaceful country. Knightsbridge and Sloane Street were not at war but Chelsea was, and Battersea was in the front line'.

### Jazz legends

Passing Green Park we turn onto Knightsbridge. The area is said to be named after a bridge across the River Westbourne (now culverted underground) which flows into the Thames. The Wellesley 'boutique' hotel occupies the site of the original entrance to Hyde Park Corner tube station, whose dark red tiles can be seen above the hotel entrance. Latterly it was home to Pizza on the Park which hosted performances by numerous jazz legends. It was demolished in 2010.

The wealth and ostentation of Knightsbridge is exemplified by the Ferrari showroom – magnificent but unattainable for most people. As a welcome change there used to be a row of rundown, shabby shops just before Sloane Street. No more. Everything behind the 1902 façade of this block has now been demolished, wiped away. The projected design for 55 – 91 Knightsbridge has shops and offices on ground and first floors with the upper floors containing fifteen large luxury apartments which will 'reflect the Edwardian heritage of the original building [with] intricate detailing and bespoke joinery'. Details on request ...

We turn past Harvey Nichols onto Sloane Street. Benjamin Harvey opened a shop in a terraced house on this site in 1831 and continued to expand the business into neighbouring properties. In 1850 when he died his wife went into partnership with James Nichols the husband of Harvey's niece. There are now a couple of dozen stores

in the UK and elsewhere in the world.

Every famous name in designer fashion has an outlet on this street but relief from the retail experience arrives as we pass the Danish Embassy, which is shared with the Embassy of Iceland. The building was designed by Danish architect Arne Jacobsen and opened in 1977.

The very large private garden square at Cadogan Place was developed by Henry Holland for Lord Cadogan at the end of the eighteenth century. Charles Dickens commented that 'Cadogan Place is the one slight bond that joins two great extremes; it is the connecting link between the aristocratic pavements of Belgrave Square, and the barbarism of Chelsea ...'

Chelsea is more colourful than barbaric today. The Chelsea in Bloom competition, in conjunction with the Flower Show which is taking place the week of my journey means that many of the shops are bedecked with ambitious floral creations.

### Nostalgic

The displays continue as we travel along Kings Road. The restaurant on Duke of York's Square with its rooftop terrace has looked close to completion for a long time but it's not finished yet. The hoardings around the temporarily closed-down Curzon Cinema are covered with nostalgic photographs of Kings Road as it once was. The Cineworld on the edge of Old Church Street known to sixties teenagers as the Essoldo has gone too. On the plus side we've gained a pink-hued outpost of Peggy Porschen (see last issue).

Almost at journey's end we turn onto Beaufort Street towards the Embankment. Halfway down we pass Allen Hall, the seminary for the diocese of Westminster (which lets out its rooms during the summer). And then we cross the river and arrive at Battersea Bridge southside. It took me about 35 minutes to get to Finsbury Park by bus and tube. Returning home by bus has taken around 90 minutes. *Note: Much of the area of London covered by this route – particularly Kings Road, Sloane Street, Piccadilly, Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road has featured in several of the Great Bus Journeys and thus I have kept detail about those areas to a minimum.*