
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 11

From Streatham Hill to Selfridges: Mike Roden takes a ride on the 137 bus



And so it came to pass that a few months ago I travelled from Sloane Square to Telford Avenue, Streatham, on the 319 bus, and was faced with the choice of crossing the road and doing the whole journey backwards, or forging onward by waiting five minutes for the 137 to Oxford Circus, passing en route through Battersea (an essential component of one of these epic trips). I forged.

One of the last services to dispense with the old Routemaster bus, the 137 has had a rather chequered history, covering a variety of routes – in the 1930s running from Hyde Park Corner to Bromley - but it finally settled down to its current route in 1998.

Mansion

Off we go up Streatham Hill, turning into Streatham Place, where we pass the Crown and Sceptre – now one of the Wetherspoons empire – which was built in the 1830s. Once upon a time it was all fields round here, as the saying goes. In the eighteenth century there was a nearby country mansion called Streatham Park. This belonged to the Thrale brewing family, and Henry and Hester Thrale entertained the leading literary and artistic characters of the day, including Doctor Johnson. The house was demolished in 1863.

As with all the rural areas surrounding London, it was the coming of the railways which spurred development and population growth, and we're passing through a range of different styles and ages of housing estates, private and municipal, punctuated by a few small shopping centres. I struggle to find

any landmark worth noting, as we halt at every bus stop to take on more passengers.

As the bus heads along Clapham Park road and people get ready to disembark it's clear that the main destination of most of them is Clapham Common Station. The Great Bus Journey to Peckham on the 345 took me this way, and I observed then that Clapham had changed since the days when Battersea's main station had to be named after it to gain any credibility.

Will Self on his blog (www.will-self.com) recorded passing through here on a late night bus on his way home to Stockwell:

'...who the hell were all these people? And what the devil were they doing – many of them half-naked – on Clapham High Street at 12.30am on a Sunday morning in January?... where there used to be a brace of hostelryes, there are now scores of them ... pretty much a continuous strip of tapas bars, pizza parlours, Belgian mussel shacks and Brazilian steakhouses...'

As I sit waiting for the bus to set off again, it is eleven o'clock on a chilly early spring morning, and if there was any half-naked Bacchanalian romping in Clapham that day it escaped my attention.

Hospice

We're off again, on a now almost empty bus, passing Trinity Hospice. This was the first hospice in England, founded in 1891 by the banker William Hoare to provide a home 'for the man who is neither curable nor incurable, but simply dying'. Trinity still follows those same rules which were there in

the beginning – focusing on symptom relief and enhancing a patient's quality of life to the end.

Cedars Road takes us to Lavender Hill and then along Queenstown Road. The station here was opened in 1877 and was known as Queens Road until 1980. Its official name is Queenstown Road (Battersea) though the important last word is usually missed off official signs and timetables. I expect the Love Battersea campaign, are working on that one! Across Battersea Park Road and we're near to Battersea Park station – a grade 2 listed building opened in 1867. It was in April 1937, following a mistake by a signalman that two passenger trains collided just south of this station; ten people died and seventeen were seriously injured. It's well worth taking a look at the station's restored booking hall and building façade (*Battersea Matters* Autumn 2013).

Arts and crafts

The bus is now on the way to Chelsea Bridge, passing alongside Battersea Park. Since I travelled to Tooting on the 44 for Battersea Matters, the demolition of the Marco Polo Building (once the home of the QVC shopping channel) has begun. And across the river, work is just beginning on the skyscraper city which will replace the Chelsea Barracks. We reach Sloane Square and stop outside the ornate frontage of Holy Trinity church. The official name by the way is The Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity with Saint Jude, Upper Chelsea. (Not a lot of people know that!) Completed in 1890 it was built by John Dando Sedding to a striking



Arts and Crafts design. Apparently at the time it was the widest church in London, exceeding St Paul's Cathedral by 9 inches (23 cm). I can't really do justice to the interior in this article, but if you have time do go in and marvel at the interior fittings and the stained glass. The bus moves quickly on, through the impossibly expensive emporia which line Sloane Street. No prices in the windows here (if you need to ask how much then you certainly can't afford it).

Notorious

At the junction by Knightsbridge station we come face to face with the notorious development called One Hyde Park, blocking any view of the greenery behind. The alleged asking price for these luxury flats is more than £100m though there is scant evidence that these prices have been paid or that anyone is actually living there, and it seems that the foreign owners of those flats that have been purchased are getting away with paying little or no council tax to Westminster Council. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark methinks...

We sail round Hyde Park corner, past the Hard Rock café, and the towering Hilton Hotel, then along Park Lane with other expensive hotels such as the Dorchester and the Grosvenor House towards Marble Arch. This was planned by John Nash in 1827 to be the gateway to Buckingham Palace, but eventually ended up being stranded on this unlovely traffic island.

And so we near journey's end and we join the queue of slow-moving buses along Oxford Street which

(I know it's hard to believe) follows the line of a Roman road, the Via Trinobantina, which linked Hampshire with Colchester. It once had a black reputation as the route taken by prisoners on their final journey from Newgate Prison to the gallows at Tyburn. By about 1729, the road had become known as Oxford Street and was a popular entertainment centre – bear-baiting and masquerades among the main attractions. As the nineteenth century progressed it became known for its shops, and so it has continued, with around three hundred of them now tempting those who want to spend their money. At sale times, and especially at Christmas, you need courage to brave the crowds surging on the pavements.

Tragedy

It was only a few weeks ago that tragedy struck when an elderly woman set off to cross Oxford Street near Selfridges and was knocked down by a 137 bus. She died later in St Mary's Hospital Paddington from head injuries.

Today the 137 has arrived safely here at Oxford Circus. From Streatham Hill to Selfridges, it has been a journey of real contrast. It's taken me more than hour to get here, and after a full morning on the bus, I go in search of a quicker way home.

Sights to see: The Crown & Sceptre, Streatham Hill; a Streatham restaurant; Battersea Park Station; embellishment to a choir stall in Holy Trinity Church, Sloane Street; One Hyde Park; the entrance to Selfridges in Oxford Street

