
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 4

Mike Roden travels from Victoria to Roehampton on the 170 bus



If you wait long enough for a bus from the stop on the cramped and narrow pavement on Buckingham Palace Road, just outside Victoria Station, the whole world will eventually drag their wheeled suitcases over your feet. One day it will be different perhaps, once the station refurbishment is complete, but for now this is where you need to catch the 170 bus to Roehampton, Danebury Avenue.

Art deco

Thankfully the single-decker bus arrives promptly, and we're off, past the Art Deco frontage of Victoria Coach Station opened in 1932 by London Coastal Coaches Ltd, before turning right onto Ebury Bridge Road and into Pimlico the home of expensive antique dealers, and Lord Linley's upmarket version of Habitat. Today is not Saturday so the stalls of the weekly farmers' market are not obscuring the elegant statue of a youthful violin-playing Mozart. He lived with his family on nearby Ebury Street.

Just beyond Chelsea Bridge Road is the Chelsea Royal Hospital, commissioned by Charles II in 1681 to provide 'for the succour and relief of veterans broken by Age and War'. It was completed in 1692 in the reign of William and Mary. Well worth a visit – especially the Chapel, and the little museum.

At the next bus stop a couple of Chelsea Pensioners get on, wearing their normal day uniform. We're close to the National Army Museum which concentrates very much

on the life of the ordinary soldier. Nearby is the Chelsea Physic Garden which was established in 1673; only Oxford's botanical garden is older. It's open to paying visitors most afternoons, apart from Monday and Saturday. Now the bus heads onto the embankment and towards Albert Bridge, with a good view of Battersea Park's Peace Pagoda over the river.

Medieval building

Sir Thomas More's statue sits outside Chelsea Old Church. His house near Beaufort Street has long gone, but what remains of his private chapel can still be seen in the church. This is not the original building, which suffered catastrophic damage during the Blitz, and was completely rebuilt after the war. Crosby Hall, at the end of Danvers Street is apparently the most important surviving secular domestic medieval building in London. It was moved from its Bishopsgate location in 1910 and since 1988 it has belonged to the financier Christopher Moran who has added a handsome neo-Elizabethan mansion fronting onto the Embankment. For many years it has been caged in with scruffy, rusting security fencing.

The bus crosses the river via Battersea Bridge, and turns down Battersea Church Road, once the home of the Morgan Crucible works. The inhabitants of Morgan's Walk, the estate built on its site are reputedly those who asked for this part of north Battersea to be designated New Chelsea. A flour mill once stood on the site of Richard

Rogers' Montevetro building – right next door to St Mary's Church, which needs no introduction to most members of the Battersea Society.

Oldest bridge

The name of Battersea Square – once the historic village centre – vanished from maps sometime during the twentieth century. In 1990 Wandsworth council set about restoring the square, and revived the name. On Vicarage Crescent we pass Old Battersea House which dates from the late seventeenth century and was until recently the UK home of the Forbes family. The building has recently been sold. A few moments later we pass under London's oldest railway bridge – the height of which is the reason that this route is served by a single decker. Nearby is the Hotel Rafayel which styles itself as being on 'London's left bank', a marketing idea whose time has apparently not yet quite arrived.

On York Road we pass the site of Price's Candle factory, the subject of a planning application which will add more flats to the Candlemakers' development behind it, and then we turn down Plough Road, past York Gardens, on our way to the new Grant Road entrance to Clapham Junction station.

We're soon passing the recently revealed new Travelodge on Falcon Road, and after a short wait at the much improved junction, the bus turns onto St John's Hill. At the stop opposite the station the two Chelsea Pensioners (you probably



thought I'd forgotten about them) disembark. I daresay they find the shopping opportunities here more congenial (and affordable) than on the King's Road.

Continuing up the hill past the new station entrance on Brighton Yard we reach the other end of Plough Road, and here take a quick look at the Grade II * listed Transformation House, opened in 1937 as the Granada Cinema, and now a very upmarket conference centre which includes an auditorium capable of seating 2,500 people. An ideal place for a Battersea Society meeting perhaps, except that daily hire costs £14,000 (plus VAT). Just beyond the St John's Therapy Centre is the site of the old Union Workhouse, now a residential estate. After crossing Trinity Way, the bus trundles down East Hill into Wandsworth.

Huguenots

There are several references here to the Huguenots in street and building names. Many of them fled here from persecution in 17th century France, and their old burial place (known as Nod Hill) which closed in 1854 is nearby.

The Town Hall was opened by Queen Mary in 1937 – across its whole façade is an ornate frieze depicting events from the town's history. Along Wandsworth High Street we avert our eyes from the blue and white Lego structure which is the Southside Shopping Centre and continue up West Hill past Wandsworth Museum which

shares its home with the De Morgan Centre (whose treasures were once housed in Old Battersea House).

The most impressive sight as we turn left onto this part of the busy A3 is the Royal Hospital for Neuro-Disability which was established in Carshalton in 1854 by philanthropist Andrew Reed as 'The Hospital for Incurables'. With aid from supporters like Charles Dickens and Florence Nightingale it eventually moved in 1863 to its current site, formerly part of Lord Spencer's estate. It's now the oldest independent hospital and medical charity in the UK.

Duels

The bus reaches Tibbet's Corner, and begins the steep climb up Putney Hill to Putney Heath and the Green Man. This inn (which probably dates back to 1700) featured in War of the Worlds by H G Wells when the narrator – fleeing the Martian invaders – breaks in looking for food. It's said that the pub was often a refuge for those who had taken part in the duels which were fairly commonplace on the heath, including one (bloodless) 1798 encounter between Prime Minister William Pitt and William Tierney MP. Thomas Cromwell – the nemesis of Sir Thomas More whom we met earlier on the trip – was born nearby.

Sights to see:

Victoria Coach Station, The Royal Hospital and statue of Sir Thomas More, Chelsea, Mount Nod cemetery, Wandsworth, The Green Man pub, Putney and former LCC housing in Roehampton

And that's nearly it. We ride alongside Putney Heath for a few minutes, and then head down into Roehampton. As we approach there are faint traces of the country village it once was – a few small cottages – but the rest is a far cry from the wealthy neighbourhood we passed through at the start of our travels. Journey's end is at Minstead Gardens on Danbury Avenue. It's spitting with rain, but we take the ten minute walk to Richmond Park via the Roehampton Gate, and enjoy a well-deserved coffee and muffin to fortify us for the trip home on the 170.

