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# Great Bus Journeys of the World No 10

Mike Roden takes a trip on the 319 from Chelsea to Streatham Hill



The driver of the 319 bus folds his paper, and sets off to pick up the handful of passengers waiting in Sloane Square near the station. We're whisked away from the Royal Court Theatre, the spiritual home of new playwriting for over sixty years. During that time it saw the debuts of John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Athol Fugard and Howard Brenton and others too numerous to mention.

The bus heads down the King's Road, which started life as Charles II's private pathway to Kew. There are, as you know a lot of shops here. Anyway we stop at Duke of York Square. Charles Saatchi has had a bad press recently, but his contemporary art gallery, open freely to all, continues to host a range of thought provoking exhibitions, show-casing the work of artists from round the world. The current exhibition is called Pangaea, bringing together the work of artists from Africa and Latin America.

## Trendy

The bus stop near Carlyle Square is a reminder that a quick walk down side-streets to Cheyne Walk will take you to Thomas Carlyle's Chelsea home. This lovingly preserved mid-Victorian house is worth a visit especially if you know nothing about Carlyle. The literati of London sat at his feet and marvelled at his intellect. His work is rarely read now – largely because most of it is unreadable.

And so we leave trendy King's Road behind, and Beaufort Street takes us to Battersea Bridge. The main change to report on this stretch of road is the closure of the Prince of Wales, probably destined to become the home of a new Tesco Express.

The one way system goes past Sir Jules Thorn Court (a care home named after the philanthropic founder of Thorn Electrical Industries) occupying the former site of the Battersea General Hospital. Founded in 1896 by the Anti-Vivisection Society it initially refused to employ anyone with any connection to animal research but dropped that stance in the 1930s when its funding dried up. It became part of the new NHS in 1948 and by 1974 it had been closed and demolished.

## Blue plaque

We join the queue on Albert Bridge Road waiting to turn right. The Battersea Society's first blue plaque can be seen at no.13 commemorating the musician and composer Donald Swann. Eventually the lights change and we turn past the Lighthouse pub, still very much open for business, unlike the Latchmere, which is closed for refurbishment until May. In the meantime Theatre 503 remains open upstairs.

Along Battersea Park Road I spot a couple of new estate agents, doubtless eager to reap the rewards of our inflated housing market. But the child-friendly café Eat Play Love has closed. It always seemed very busy, but perhaps it wasn't busy enough.

Turning left down Falcon Road we're now following the course of the Falconbrook (one of London's culverted lost rivers). I hear that developers have their beady eyes on the Princes Head but it still survives, while the Peacock Arms (formerly the run-to-seed Meyrick Arms) is now closed and to let. Travelodge, the new kid on the block, seems to have settled in and the café on

its ground floor is always bustling. There's the usual bus gridlock at the junction with Lavender Hill, but eventually we negotiate St John's Road and cross Battersea Rise. I'm rather shocked to see a garishly fronted pawnbroker on Northcote Road. Perhaps things aren't quite so happy in Nappy Valley!

We're still following the invisible Falconbrook back to its source. Long ago this was just a farmland track, but the arrival of the railways from 1838 saw the population treble in ten years. The original plans had been for Northcote Road to stretch as far as Nightingale Lane but in the end circumstances meant it could only be taken as far as Broomwood Road which is where we turn right towards Wandsworth Common.

## Grazing rights

The common dates back to the eleventh century but as London expanded from the mid-1800s long established rights of cutting wood and grazing stock disappeared as parts of the common were sold off or were buried under road and railway lines. In 1887 when the municipal authority took charge the land was bare, muddy and treeless. Things have improved a lot since and its 175 acres now include two lakes, woodland and meadow which are a haven for a wide variety of urban wildlife

Along Bolingbroke Grove we have the common on our right, and respectable broad-shouldered Victorian villas on the other. Nightingale Lane leads us past the road leading to Wandsworth Common station, then by the Hope pub which claims to have

**Sights to see: The Royal Court Theatre;  
plants galore in the Northcote Road;  
Tooting Bec Lido**

Britain's biggest beer garden (though only by including the common as part of its territory!)

Trinity Road was planned as part of the London Ringways, a scheme abandoned in 1973. After turning left through a straggling parade of shops and much residential property, we pass the grade II listed Holy Trinity Church built in 1855. We're in Tooting Bec now, named after the Bec Abbey in Normandy which was given land round here after 1066. There's an air of neglect in the shopping area round the tube station, with a lot of shuttered shops, betting shops or grubby convenience stores and takeaways.

A straight stretch of residential road brings us to the remains of the common land which once stretched to Mitcham. Doctor Johnson's Avenue, separating Tooting Bec and Tooting Graveney Commons marks the boundary between Tooting

and Streatham, and follows the culverted course of our old friend the Falconbrook, known here as the York Ditch. Doctor Johnson is said to have strolled here when he was staying with the Thrale family at nearby Streatham Place.

**Lido**

Tooting Bathing Lake opened in July 1906, but did not become Tooting Bec Lido until the late 1930s when the term became widely used. Wandsworth Council cutbacks in the early 1990s saw closure of the King George's Park lido, but Tooting Bec was spared, and in recent years money has been spent on making improvements here.

St Leonard's church standing on the edge of Streatham was largely rebuilt in 1778 with further substantial changes about fifty years later, but the original fourteenth century flint tower still stands. In 1975 an electrical fire fanned by a strong east wind destroyed much of the interior of the church and the roof, taking the bells

with it. Strenuous restoration efforts saw the church reopened for worship in just two years. On the other side of the road is the Grade I listed Roman Catholic English Martyrs Church built in 1892 by Alfred Purdie, a pupil of Pugin.

After the inevitable wait at the junction we head up Streatham Hill. This is one of the oldest routes in and out of London, and just before the station we pass the Horse and Groom Pub – now surrounded by more modern buildings – but clearly an old coaching in.

To be honest, for the most part this hasn't been the most exciting journey I've taken, and after over an hour it's a relief to reach Telford Avenue and journey's end, opposite the Arriva Bus Garage. Normally I would go for a coffee and then head back homeward. However this time I wait for the 137 which will take me from here on another circuitous tour, this time to Oxford Circus.

More of that next time....

**AUTHOR SEEKS HELP WITH  
LOVE STORY**

Historical novelist Tania Crosse is looking to members of the Battersea Society for input for her next book. She writes, 'I lived in Battersea in the 1950s as a child. I'm planning on setting my next novel in the area probably in the 1930s.

I've read everything available online and at the library's heritage centre, but wonder if any of your members might know any more details about working at Price's. Also, about the houses on the side of Banbury Street that was demolished.

'The book will be a gritty backstreet saga with much drama and intrigue – and a love story or two thrown in!'

To help, contact Tania via her website [www.tania-crosse.co.uk](http://www.tania-crosse.co.uk)



**Well done, Thrive!**

It nearly beat Wisley! The Old English Garden, that romantic haven in Battersea Park, was voted second only to Wisley by the public in BBC *Countryfile's* Garden of the Year awards. Bodnant in Wales was third. Both are much bigger and grander than Battersea's garden.

**Therapy**

The garden is cared for, beautifully, by the horticultural therapy charity Thrive.

In mid-April perennials were in leaf, purple and white honesty was flowering and a wren bustled among the stems. In summer, the garden is fragrant with roses and herbs in misty tones of lilac, pink and white.

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