
Great Bus Journeys of the World No.12

Mike Roden takes the 337 from Clapham Junction to Richmond



It was a chilly start to my latest foray into unknown territory, courtesy of TfL. I caught the bus at the bottom of St John's Road, and the on-board clock told me it was 10.10am.

Apparently the use of the twelve hour clock has caused annoyance to those who worry that it will be misleading to foreign visitors who work to the 24 hour clock. Presumably these benighted folk also have no idea what am and pm mean!

Truffle chips

A left turn up St John's Hill takes us through territory familiar from past journeys. I read recently that there has been a pub on the corner opposite Plough Road since the eighteenth century, but the current incarnation is a world away from that early hostelry – being a 'cosmopolitan New-York inspired bar and kitchen' where the delights on offer include 'a pint and a bowl of white truffle chips'. The shops along here have a lifestyle gloss to them, too – designer furniture, lighting and so on, which leads one to suppose that this area is becoming much sought after (and presumably very expensive).

After passing St John's Therapy Centre the bus heads down over Trinity Road towards Wandsworth via East Hill. The driver stops outside South Thames College for a rather prolonged wait to make up time. There's been a college here for more than a century. Since merging with Merton College, South Thames has become one of the capital's largest further education colleges.

The closed Wandsworth Museum is a forlorn sight. The plan to move to new premises in early 2015 aims to

improve accessibility to visitors and maximise funding to best serve the community. Wandsworth Council and the Friends of Wandsworth Museum are supportive of the relocation.

However whether the press releases I've quoted from are telling the whole story remains to be seen.

On Upper Richmond Road the traffic is slow moving. A green plaque on a gatepost commemorates A V Roe, aircraft pioneer and designer of AVRO planes. In 1906 he won first prize in a Daily Mail competition to design a model aeroplane which could fly and set up a workshop behind the surgery of his GP brother (near the site of the plaque). A couple of years later he moved to Walthamstow where in 1909 his first successful flight took place. He had a long and distinguished career and died in 1958.

We head into East Putney, passing the station, which opened in 1889. Mainline train services ended in 1941, but the station remained in British Rail ownership until 1994 when it was sold to London Underground for £1. You never know when a fact like that might be useful in a pub quiz!

Theatre

Putney Arts Theatre began life in 1959 when Maurice Copus, a local teacher, was spurred by the enthusiasm of his pupils to found a theatre group. After using various venues, in 1968 the group leased the disused and very dilapidated Union Chapel from the LCC and after six months of hard work by volunteers the first performance took place. The building quickly became a thriving theatre, expanding the range of its

own productions and hosting visiting companies. By 1998 thanks to a generous legacy, vigorous fundraising and a Lottery award the group was able to purchase the freehold. It is now the borough's principal venue for non-professional community theatre.

Leaving East Putney the bus stays on Upper Richmond Road, and is now travelling through a mainly residential area, large houses mixed with private flat developments, and very few shopping arcades. Quite a few people get off as we stop outside Putney Leisure Centre, more energetic than me. I've been lulled into a rather soporific state by the less than exciting terrain we're going through.

Pilgrimage

It was nearby on Gipsy Lane, near Barnes Common, that on 16 September 1977 the 29 year old Marc Bolan died when his Mini, driven by his girlfriend, crashed, ending up against a tree. The tree (and its associated memorial) has been a place of pilgrimage for T-Rex devotees ever since.

We're on the edge of Roehampton here, and the stop near Dover House Road is a reminder of how in 1919 the LCC bought 147 acres of parkland belonging to adjacent private estates. Those in the big houses nearby expressed a 'generous' concern that the estate should not be built as transport links were inadequate for working class residents, with the rather more concerned subtext that the value of their property would fall. Worries that the project would blight the neighbourhood were unfounded. There were eventually over 600 houses on the Dover House



Estate and it was viewed as a model of building design and landscaping and in its day was an LCC showcase, though the initial lack of shopping and other facilities did cause some difficulties for the new residents.

Leaving Dover House Road behind, the road traces the southern edge of Barnes Common, one of the largest areas of common land in Greater London. Although managed by Richmond Council it's actually owned by the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral.

Priory Lane is the home of London's longest established private psychiatric hospital. As far as I could see, the Priory Hospital is not visible from the bus, so I can't report spotting any celebrity patient walking in the grounds. The very elderly gentlemen waiting at the bus stop with his dog didn't really look like a troubled pop star.

The road crosses the Beverley Brook at Priests Bridge. This river, nearly nine miles long and culverted for much of its course, enters the Thames near Barn Elms. At this point it marks the boundary between Roehampton and East Sheen. The name is apparently a reference to the beavers which used to be abundant here until the sixteenth century.

Fame

We're now heading into the long, rather straggling high street of East Sheen. Near the war memorial on the traffic island locals call the Triangle is a curious milestone dated 1751 which gives us the useful information that the distance from here to Cornhill in the City is ten miles. One of the town's claims to fame is that Sir Tim Berners-

Lee, father of the internet, grew up here and went to the local primary school.

The local shops delight in imaginatively telling you where they are, and (before I get bored) I note Sheen Sports, Sheen Tyres, Sheen Beds, Sheen Polish Deli and Sheen Living. I'd like to say there was a TV and radio shop called Sheen and Heard, but that would be less than the truth.

Almshouses

And so, as the saying goes, we say farewell to East Sheen and start the final leg of our journey along Sheen Road into Richmond. The highlight on this stretch is the rather elegant Grade II* listed Hickey's Almshouses. William Hickey died in 1727 leaving several properties on Richmond Hill in trust to provide pensions for six men and ten women. In 1834 the trust used some

Left to right: South Thames College; the pioneering aviator, A V Roe; the memorial where Marc Bolan died; an East Sheen lifestyle emporium; Tim Berners-Lee, founder of the internet; Hickey's Almshouses, Richmond

of the income to build and endow twenty almshouses, together with a chapel and two gate lodge cottages – one for a porter, the other for a nurse. Since then another 29 dwellings have been built on land behind the original almshouses.

I get a sense now that I'm approaching Richmond by the back door, away from the river, which is the historical hub of the town. It has been a long journey, and there's little to report from the one way system which takes us to the surprisingly small bus station. It is 11.17 (whether you're using the 12 or 24 hour clock) and it's starting to rain. It's time to go in search of the railway station.



Michael Pecirno's sculpture, *The Air Above*, winner of the Friends of Battersea park 2014 sculpture award.

Pecirno is a student at the Royal College of Art sculpture school.