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## Great Bus Journeys of the World No 3

Mike Roden rides the 344 from Clapham Junction to Liverpool Street (well – almost)



As I settle in my seat, Emma Hignett reassures me that I'm on the correct bus. She is the actress chosen in 2006 to be the voice of London's iBus system, providing passengers on London's 8,000 buses with information. The system has over 30,000 announcements covering 19,000 bus stops on the 700 routes managed by TfL. Anyway, while I've been boring you with statistics, we've followed the route described in the last edition of *Battersea Matters*; up Falcon Road and along Battersea Park Road, then at Latchmere Road, we head into new territory as the bus carries straight on. We stop outside Dovedale Cottages – a neat sheltered housing development which started off as two almshouses in 1841. The big hole opposite used to be a busy branch of Travis Perkins.

### Two London icons

This section of Battersea Park Road is very mixed. The Old Imperial Laundry retains a glimmer of its Victorian splendour, but now houses various interior design, media and creative companies. Otherwise it's takeaways, convenience stores and restaurants, with the odd specialist store, a fireplace shop and a printers for instance. There is a slightly grim air about the forest of council blocks which is the Doddington Estate, though a poster for a Jubilee Lunch organised by the Residents Association is a welcome sign of community effort. As we pass Queenstown Road, the chimneys of Battersea Power Station come into

view, and at the same time I catch sight of a cat staring wistfully from an upper window of the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home. Strange to have two London icons so close to each other – one still providing the same vital service it's been offering since 1860, the other just as uncertain of its future as when it was decommissioned in 1983.

As we approach Vauxhall Bridge we are surrounded by building sites. The Tideway riverside scheme is going ahead despite vigorous opposition, and the Embassy Gardens development will soon be taking shape. By 2015 we should see the US Embassy rising into the sky. With plans for part of New Covent Garden Market to be redeveloped, this new Nine Elms City looks set to rival Canary Wharf and Docklands, dominated on its edge by St George's Wharf Tower. At 181 metres high with 49 storeys, it will be the tallest residential building in the United Kingdom.

### Yellow amphibians

The 344 trundles on past the half-finished skyscraper into the chaos of Vauxhall Cross, and circles round the stainless steel bus station with its ski slope whose solar panels provide a third of the bus station's electricity. This is a major transport hub, with tube and rail stations, and a little further to the east a slipway provides access for those yellow amphibious craft of the Duck Tours, which (I'm told) were all used for the D-Day landings.

We're now in Spooks Land, as we pass the MI6 Building designed by Sir Terry Farrell in 1995, when the existence of such an organisation was never officially acknowledged.

There's a great view across the river here with Tate Britain, the Millbank Tower, and Westminster up ahead. I catch a glimpse of Lambeth Palace as the bus approaches Lambeth Bridge with its obelisks surmounted by stone pinecones - ancient symbols of hospitality. They do resemble pineapples of course, and urban legend links them to the botanist John Tradescant who probably introduced the fruit to Britain. We're near his burial place now as we turn down Lambeth Road and pass the Garden Museum (formerly the Church of St Mary-in-Lambeth).

We can now see the impressive cupola of the Imperial War Museum. The museum was founded during the First World War and moved to its current site in 1936. The building had been home to Southwark's Bethlem Hospital from 1815 to 1930. Better known to the public as Bedlam, until the early nineteenth century this was notorious for allowing visitors to pay to come and view "the freaks of Bethlehem".

Now I'm bound for another gigantic traffic circus. The bus passes London's Southbank University, and then we are in the middle of Elephant and Castle, the name of course being a corruption of Infanta de Castile. Well actually, that's nonsense. The name derives from a coaching inn



on the site, the earliest surviving record of its use dating from 1765.

The bus has suddenly got very crowded, and Emma Hignett delivers a message I've not heard before about smoking being forbidden on all London buses. No doubt the driver spotted or smelled some transgression and has pressed the correct button.

### Marshalsea

Turning toward the City, en route for Southwark Bridge, I see the London Fire Brigade Museum, based in Winchester House, which was once the residence of the Brigade's first chief officer Captain Massey Shaw. We pass Marshalsea Road near the site of the Marshalsea debtors prison where Charles Dickens's father spent some months in 1824. The author himself lived in nearby Lant Street and many of the streets round here have been given Dickensian names, though the only one I glimpse is Copperfield Street. Then I catch sight of Leigh Hunt Street, and wonder if this was named after the poet whom Dickens immortalised as the malingering Harold Skimpole in Bleak House. In fact this cul-de-sac has another claim to fame in that it is London's shortest named street at only 36ft long.

By now the bus is nearing the river. The current Southwark Bridge was built in 1921 and is generally held to be the least busy bridge in London. This may be partly because access to many of roads leading from it was cut off by the so-called Ring of Steel put in place to protect

the City from IRA terrorism, and strengthened in recent years after September 2001, and then July 2005.

If you want to walk down to Tate Modern, or the Globe Theatre you should alight at the stop just before the bridge. There's a good view of St Paul's as we wait here to allow passengers off, and then Emma Hignett tells me that the destination of my bus has changed! After a few moments worrying that I won't be able to deliver my promised article to the editor, I discover that we're going only as far as Monument Station. Since this is only two stops from my original destination that's not a problem, though when I go downstairs it's clear that most of the tourists staying put on the top deck haven't got the message. I presume they'll work it out.

### 311 steps

Wren's flame-topped Monument commemorating the Great Fire of 1666 is the tallest isolated stone column in the world – 202ft high and is positioned 202ft from the spot in Pudding Lane where the fire is supposed to have started. I haven't climbed it since the recent restoration work. I gather the lighting on the spiral staircase has improved, but there's no way to get to the top other than by climbing the 311 steps. No time to do it now.

I follow the bus route along Bishopsgate – which is a rather exhilarating mixture of modern skyward soaring office blocks apparently made entirely of glass, and old buildings like the church of

### Sights to see:

**Battersea Cats' and Dogs' Home and Battersea Power Station, Vauxhall Cross, Lambeth Palace, The Imperial War Museum, The Monument and the Shard, Bishopsgate Institute**

St Botolph without Bishopsgate, unscathed by the Fire of London but rebuilt in 1729. In the second world war it lost only one window, but in April 1993 was badly damaged by the IRA's Bishopsgate bomb. It was fully restored in 1997. St Botolph was the patron saint of wayfarers and it would probably be appropriate to pop across the road to say thanks for my safe arrival, but instead I join the seething mass of humanity around Liverpool Street Station in search of a cup of coffee, and a trip home on the Circle Line.

