

Great Bus Journeys of the World No 5

Mike Roden takes a circuitous ride from Chelsea to Peckham on the 345



This bus actually begins its journey on Cromwell Road near the Natural History museum but as we arrived at South Kensington a 345 was approaching the stop on Harrington Road so you must imagine the early part of this route. We settle in our seats and the bus passes the statue of Béla Bartók – the Hungarian composer who lived in London briefly during 1922.

There is the usual tedious wait at the lights to turn onto Fulham Road but at last we get going, and enter medical territory. First there's the Royal Marsden Hospital, flanked by the Royal Brompton. Next to that is the Institute of Cancer Research, the Marsden's research arm, which owns the building on the corner. This was originally the Chelsea Women's Hospital and was opened in 1880 by the Princess of Wales.

Quentin Crisp

It's very Chelsea here, with upmarket antique and interior design boutiques and a cluster of fashion emporia. Then the bus turns left onto Beaufort Street. Quentin Crisp (the 'Naked Civil Servant') lived in a first floor flat at number 129 from 1940 until he moved to America in the early 1980s. English Heritage decided in 2010 not to approve a blue plaque for Quentin because he wasn't 'significant enough'. I'm sure his time will come.

As the bus crosses Battersea Bridge, to the right we can see Lots Road power station which ceased operation in 2002. Closer to us is Chelsea Wharf where the General Omnibus Company used to store food for its horses. The company

began using motor buses in 1902, and bus route numbers were introduced in 1906. Before that omnibus passengers had to make sure they read the destinations painted on the sides to ensure catching the right bus. It wasn't long before the practice of numbering London buses became universal. The 345 is a relative newcomer, having only been introduced in 1995.

While I've been telling you that, we've travelled down Battersea Bridge Road, round the one way system along Prince of Wales Drive and Albert Bridge Road, back onto Battersea Park Road and down Falcon Road. This part of the journey has been well covered in other episodes of this series. Passing the new Travelodge the bus arrives at Lavender Hill and turns left into territory so far uncharted by *Battersea Matters*.

A prominent landmark as we come up the hill is Battersea Library which opened in 1890. Further along on the left is Battersea Arts Centre, formerly the Town Hall (which opened for business in 1893).

Glimpses

The route takes us through a good mix of shops – the usual takeaways, restaurants and convenience stores – leavened by some interesting independent stores.

Through gaps in the buildings there are tantalising glimpses of London landmarks – the Eye, Westminster Cathedral, and Big Ben.

Turning onto Cedars Road brings us into Lambeth. The collection of buildings on the left used to be

stables, which hired out horses for special occasions like weddings, and then became the home of the Cedars Motor Engineering Company. When upmarket mews flats were built on the stable site, the developers decided not to demolish the original frontage, and there it still is, proudly proclaiming the place's history.

This very straight road leads to Clapham Common. This was once common land for the parishes of Battersea and Clapham, but an Act of Parliament saw it converted to parkland in 1878.

No poor relation

Clapham is the home of three tube stations on the Northern line. Of course you know that Clapham Junction is not in SW4 but there are still too many stores who can't get to grips with that simple fact! Samuel Pepys lived here for two years until his death in 1703, and other past and present famous residents include (a random selection) Kingsley Amis, Jeremy Brett, Vivienne Westwood and Heather Mills. It's still an attractive, bustling place, but Battersea need no longer feel like a poor relation. According to one estate agent, average property prices in our neighbourhood are £150,000 more than in Clapham.

Shortly after leaving Clapham we reach Stockwell, home to one of the UK's largest Portuguese communities, a fact reflected by many of the local cafés and delicatessens. We stop outside the tube station and remember 22 July 2005 when armed police in search of the previous day's London bombers



pursued Jean Carlos de Menezes, an innocent Brazilian electrician, onto a waiting train and shot him seven times. In January 2010 a permanent memorial, created by a local artist, was unveiled at the station.

Rock venue

The bus rattles on along Stockwell Road through unremarkable residential streets and small shopping arcades, past the striking art deco frontage of the world-famous Brixton Academy. This began life in 1929 as the Astoria cinema and theatre. It closed in 1972, and the building was empty for ten years. After major restoration it re-opened as a rock music venue, and in 1983 it became the Academy.

We leave Brixton behind, and head down Coldharbour Lane towards Camberwell. That rare butterfly, the Camberwell Beauty was so named after two specimens were found somewhere around here in 1748. They'd probably arrived on ships delivering timber from Scandinavia to the Surrey Docks a couple of miles away. It's a very long time since one has been spotted round here but it has become an unofficial emblem for Camberwell, appearing for instance on the gates of Burgess Park.

On Peckham Road now, we approach journey's end. Across the road from Camberwell College of Art is the Vanguard Studios, once the home of a factory which built vehicle bodies for the first London motor buses, and latterly the works of Vanguard Luggage whose attaché cases were standard issue to British forces in the Second World War.

Nearby is the South London Gallery, founded in 1891, a publicly-funded gallery of contemporary art.

We see another gallery as we near the bus station. Peckham Space is a defiantly futuristic building, which opened in 2010 and is dedicated to commissioning 'location-specific artworks.' Behind it is a striking copper-clad building whose upper section is supported on stilt-like pillars. Peckham library, which won the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2000, was designed by Alsop and Stormer.

Blake's vision

This was once a quiet rural village surrounded by fields; the last stopping point for drovers taking their cattle to market in London. In 1765 while staying in Peckham an eight year old William Blake saw his first vision: 'A tree filled with angels'.

Rural no longer, Peckham has had a troubled recent history, with high unemployment and a lack of economic opportunities leading to serious social problems, with a high crime rate on the surrounding estates. Things reached a tragic climax in November 2000 when 10-year-old Damilola Taylor was stabbed to death. I'm told things have improved somewhat since then. Let's hope so.

Apparently this is one of the most ethnically diverse communities in the UK, and the High Street reflects the vibrant mixture of nationalities. The colour, noise and bustle of the place together with the huge variety

Sights to see:

statue of Béla Bartók, South Kensington independent shops, Lavender Hill old stable frontage in Cedars Road, The Brixton Academy, The South London Gallery, Camberwell and Peckham Library

of shops remind us our recent visit to the Asian part of Istanbul.

Sea bass

We go into a noisy shop brimming with a bewildering variety of fish and meat. Fighting back the impulse to buy a kilo of goat leg, we settle for three sea bass which are on special offer. The shopkeeper cheerfully scales and guts them for us, and we head off to catch the train home. The fish accompany us all the way to Battersea Park station where we change trains for Clapham Junction. Unfortunately the fish carry on to Victoria, and have not been seen since. I hope they went to a good home.

