
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 8

Mike Roden takes the 44 from Victoria to Tooting



It is raining as the bus heads down Buckingham Palace Road. There's a thirties feel along here. The art deco façade of the nicely restored Coach Station sits opposite the National Audit Office building which opened in 1939 as the 'Empire Terminal' of Imperial Airways. The sculpture which seems to hover above the entrance is Eric Broadbent's 'Speed Wings over the world'. Along Ebury Bridge Road we pass the site of the demolished Chelsea Barracks which still awaits a decision about its future by its Qatari owners. On Chelsea Bridge Road the bus stops outside the Lister Hospital, privatised in 1985, but once named the Lister Institute of Preventive Medicine in honour of the medical pioneer.

Fears of collapse

The original Chelsea Bridge, opened by Queen Victoria in 1858, aimed to provide easy access for north Londoners to the delights of the new Battersea Park. Once a toll bridge it was originally called Victoria Bridge, but the weight of twentieth century traffic caused fears of collapse and it underwent a name change in 1926, to avoid any royal association with a potential tragedy. In 1934 demolition began, and the current structure opened in 1937.

The marble and glass curiosity called Marco Polo house was named after the satellite used by its first tenant the broadcaster BSB, though it's better known to most people as the QVC building. Last year the shopping channel moved to West London. The building's days are now numbered, and it has the uncared-for look of a property awaiting demolition.

Traffic is light and the bus hurries along Battersea Park Road. Above the Glass Shop at number 214 is the blue plaque unveiled in December 2010 commemorating John Archer, who in 1913 was elected the first black mayor of a London council, and became a key figure in the history of the Labour and Trades Union Movements in Battersea.

Flower Station

We cross the Latchmere Junction, and I start looking for changes on this familiar section of the route. I don't think I know the Sushi Café, a Japanese restaurant, though I have visited the Battersea flower Station which has imaginatively colonised a hitherto wasted narrow stretch of land alongside the railway line. The Price's candle building is now the first London store of Barker and Stonehouse. It's worth a visit to see their clever use of the space, and to marvel at the (rather pricey) furniture and furnishings on offer. There is a café there as well – and they still sell candles.

We turn down Old York Road past Wandsworth Town Station which has recently been given a swanky glass frontage, but I don't think there's a lift there yet. The Alma (commemorating the Crimean war battle) was built in 1866 and still retains its shiny green Victorian tiles. This short stretch of road has a quaint, almost country feel to it, but is starting to lose its independent shops and cafés and Pizza Express and Sainsburys have already taken up residence. On the Fairfield Street corner is Zodiac Records which claims to be open on Saturdays, but has probably been

closed for more than ten years.

Passing the town hall, the bus crosses the junction with Wandsworth High Street and there is Wandsworth Library, once the Court house, and the home of Wandsworth Museum from 1996 to 2007. We'll be on Garratt Lane for some time as it's four kilometres long (just over two and a half miles in old money). Once a country lane following the course of the Wandle, it became a major highway with the growth of industry along the river. At the Southside centre the bus fills up, and a young man who sits next to me asks why I'm scribbling. By the time I've sheepishly explained, we've reached the Old Sergeant pub, a popular local which last year was named the best community pub in Britain. It's been there since around 1785, and has sold Young's beer since 1857.

For much of this long road, there is little to catch the eye. There are a fair number of pubs, a few larger stores, and a lot of small shops, hairdressers, takeaways and every so often a launderette, and slightly less frequently a betting shop. But they're serving their small communities and since there are few boarded up shops along this stretch, I suppose they're doing a good job.

Earlsfield

At the junction of Penwith Road and Earlsfield Road, the Wandle Inn (until recently the Puzzle Inn) is a reminder of the nearness of the river, which has been cleaned up in recent years, allowing fish including the brown trout to return. There's a Carluccio's next to Earlsfield station, a sure sign that area is a magnet for young



professionals. This suburb has a very short history. The station was built in 1884 on the site of a Victorian villa called Earlsfield, its former owners stipulated as a condition of sale that the name be retained, and so it has.

Edward Thomas

A bit further on and we're in the area known as Summerstown. Writer and poet Edward Thomas cycled through here just before the first world war and describes an area of damp meadow (it often flooded round here), with a file and tool factory, and a chamois-leather mill. "On the far side a neat, white, oldish house was retiring amid blossoming fruit trees ... a mixture of the sordid and the delicate in the whole was unmistakable." It's improved quite a lot.

The Leather Bottle pub has stood here since at least 1745 and was the centre for the mock elections for the 'Mayor of Garratt' which took place at the same time as Parliamentary elections. The generally eccentric candidates took comic names and made witty speeches and most people got very drunk. But it was a chance for the unenfranchised ordinary people to air their (often radical) political views.

After Wimbledon Road we stop outside Streatham Cemetery which opened for burials in 1894. There's a reminder of Battersea here, amongst the graves is that of Jane Rose Roberts the African American wife of the first President of the independent republic in Liberia, who died in 1913 while she was staying with mayor John Archer and his wife.

Next stop is Fairlight Road – 'alight here for St George's Hospital'.

Many of my fellow passengers duly do so and set out on their walk to the hospital (ten minutes, I'm told). Founded in 1716 the hospital was situated near Hyde Park for around 250 years, until it began transferring services to Tooting in 1954, a move not completed until 1980. The Lanesborough hotel now stands on its Hyde Park site.

Totinges Broadway

Tooting appears in the Domesday book as Totinges. Like most South London suburbs it expanded hugely during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Perhaps its most famous fictional resident is Citizen Smith, leader of the Tooting Popular Front, brought to television life in the late seventies by Robert Lindsay.

We have reached the end of Garratt Lane and sit for ever waiting to cross Tooting High Street. Opposite is the grade II listed Tooting Broadway tube station which opened in 1926 and is the work of Charles Holden who set the design standard for the London Underground.

Down Mitcham Road we go until the bus stops at Amen Corner, which is definitely not named after the Welsh sixties band. I can find no satisfying answer as to why this short stretch of Southcroft Road is so called. Three minutes later I reach my destination.

It's still pouring with rain, and I trudge up the hill to Tooting Station which stands just inside the borough of Merton.

It's taken me over an hour to get here, but via Wimbledon and Clapham Junction I'm home in under half an hour.

Sights to see: Eric Broadbent's *Speed Wings Over the World*, Victoria; the Marco Polo Building, near Chelsea Bridge; John Archer's blue plaque, Battersea Park Road, Battersea Flower Station; The Alma, Wandsworth Town; 'To London' sign at Tooting Broadway

The Battersea Society

Chair Tony Tuck

tony@tonytuck.eu

Vice-chair Sue Marshall

mhc@btinternet.com

Secretary Harvey Heath

secretary@batterseasociety.org.uk

Membership Sec Maureen Larkin

membership@batterseasociety.org.uk

Committee Chairs

Community Harvey Heath

community@batterseasociety.org.uk

Planning David Lewis and Liz Walton

planning@batterseasociety.org.uk

Open Spaces

openspaces@batterseasociety.org.uk

Events Wendy Deakins

events@batterseasociety.org.uk

General enquiries

information@batterseasociety.org.uk

Website

batterseasociety.org.uk

Registered charity no.1103560