
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 14

Mike Roden travels hopefully from Wandsworth Road in search of Kensal Rise on the 452



It's not often you get the perfect early summer day – the sun shining from a flawless blue sky with just the briefest whisper of a breeze. And of course it was not like that as I waited by the bus stop near Wandsworth Road Station for the next 452 to set off from its bus stand in search of Kensal Rise. The wind came from the Urals blowing the fitful rain into my face.

The 452 is one of the new kids on TfL's block. It was a route which came into being in 2006 to provide extra services across the newly created Western Congestion Zone extension. The extension was abolished but the route survived and the bus arrives, and sets off with just me on board.

Asalache house

Surprisingly the National Trust has had a foothold here at 575 Wandsworth Road since 2010. This was the home of Khadambi Asalache (1935-2006), a Kenyan-born poet, novelist and philosopher, who bought the house in 1981 while working as a civil servant at the Treasury. He fixed pine floorboards to the wall of the basement dining room hoping to disguise damp. Over twenty years he embellished almost every surface in the house with exquisite fretwork patterns and motifs, which he hand-carved from reclaimed pine doors and floorboards.

The house stands as he left it, and the rooms are furnished with his handmade furniture and carefully arranged collections of beautiful and functional objects. You'll need to book well in advance to see this fascinating place. Tours are limited to 54 visitors a week, with a maximum of six people at a time.

We're back in very familiar Great Bus Journey territory now as we turn up Queenstown Road, and passing Queenstown Road Station we reach Battersea Park Road. Over to the right is the vast building site that Nine Elms has become, with many of the buildings heading for completion.

We speed alongside the Park and over Chelsea Bridge. The Chelsea barracks are now little more than a deep hole waiting for Qatar City to rise to the skies, watched over (fittingly perhaps) by the Royal Hospital's Margaret Thatcher Infirmary.

Into Sloane Square, once the home territory of the Sloane Ranger. The phrase was coined in 1975 by young writer Peter York (today something of a style guru) and broadly described the wealthy young women he'd observed round here wearing Hermès or Liberty silk head scarves distinctively tied just below the mouth, masking much of the face. The bus crawls up Sloane Street towards Knightsbridge Station and Harvey Nichols. Doormen (or bouncers) stand outside the posh shops to prevent the riff-raff coming in.

Harrods

We leave the realm of impossibly expensive shopping behind and turn past Knightsbridge station – down Brompton Road we glimpse Harrods. After a long period of ownership by the Fayed brothers, the store recently became the property of (surprise surprise) a Qatari investment company.

The bus heads along Knightsbridge past the massive Hyde Park Barracks. Princes Gate is home to a group of African and Middle Eastern

embassies – Ethiopia, Tunisia, Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates and Iran which is at number 16.

Siege

It was here on the May bank holiday Monday in 1980 that the final events of a five day siege unfolded as the SAS stormed the building to end the occupation by a group demanding autonomy for the oil rich province of Khuzestan. PC Locke, the constable on embassy guard duty when the siege started was the hero of the hour, Mrs Thatcher showed that she would not falter in the face of terrorism, and it boosted the career of Kate Adie a young reporter covering the siege for the BBC. Khuzestan remains firmly under Iranian control.

It would be hard to miss the iconic shape of the Albert Hall, though reputedly German bomber pilots were instructed to leave it alone as it formed a useful wayfinder for them. Its official name is the Royal Albert Hall of Arts and Sciences, and it was opened in 1871 as a memorial to the life and work of the Prince Consort who had died ten years before. The BBC Promenade Concerts have been broadcast from there since the late 1940s, with this year's season running from July to September.

Traffic snarls to a halt as we enter the maelstrom of Kensington High Street. We get a good view of Kensington Palace from here. This is the official London residence of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Prince Harry, and other more minor royals. Visitors to the public part of the Palace (run by Historic Royal Palaces) will sometimes see one of the royal personages walking their

Sights to see: Khadambi Asalache's house, Wandsworth Road; Harrods, the Iranian Embassy; St Mary Abbott's church; the Gate Theatre, Notting Hill; antique silverware, Portobello Road market



dog (or perhaps their toddler) in the grounds.

The bus heads uphill along Kensington Church Road, once a twisting lane that joined the Roman roads from Bath and Oxford to the City of London. We're in the ancient heartland of the parish of Kensington. Settlement goes back to Saxon times, and the Domesday Book lists 18 farms and 240 inhabitants living in the rural village near St Mary Abbots church. There's been a church here since the early twelfth century but the present building dates from 1872 and was designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott. It's said to have the tallest spire in London.

There are many examples of Grade II listed Georgian and Victorian buildings along here, but for the most part the street is lined with four- or five-storey mid-19th-century terraces with exposed brick and sash windows. There is no thankfully no shortage of delicatessens, dressmakers, dry cleaners or estate agents!

Saxon

At the top we turn left along Notting Hill Gate. The origin of the name is uncertain though it was recorded in 1356 as Knottyng hull. There was long thought to be a link with Canute (Cnut), but it is now thought more likely that the name derives from the Saxon name Cnotta. Development of this once rural area got going in the early nineteenth century, with the main landowner being the Ladbroke family, a name borne – confusingly – by many streets in the area.

We pass Notting Hill Gate station which opened in 1868 and turn up

Pembridge Road. Notable here is Jamie Oliver's Recipease – a very large store and café, a world away from its small sibling which recently departed from St John's Road. Nearby is the Gate Theatre – 'a home for anarchic spirits, and restless creative ambition.' Sounds just like the Battersea Society! First launched near Covent Garden in 1925, this small 70 seat theatre has won numerous awards.

Antiques

At Elgin Crescent the mystery voice instructs us to alight here for Portobello Road Market. This began as a fresh-food market in the nineteenth century; antiques dealers arrived in the late 1940s and '50s, and there are now a substantial number of them trading mainly on Saturday mornings. It is the largest antiques market in the UK. Towards the north end the market focuses on second hand clothes as well as trendy couture.

Turning left, then quickly right, we're now heading north west on Ladbroke Grove, past Ladbroke Grove Station (currently the focus of a stallholders' campaign to have it renamed Portobello Road) and under the elevated section of the A40 known to us all as Westway and blighting the landscape since 1970. There is nothing much more to report on this stretch of road as we approach Sainsbury's massive Ladbroke Grove Store.

We're almost at journey's end now. I look at the map and consider what is left of this trip which has already taken over ninety minutes. More of the same, it seems. The terminus is

Kensal Rise station, but on the way there I see few highlights, apart from the Moberley Sports Centre and a Tesco Express. So dear reader you'll have to imagine the final stages while I get off the bus and march to Sainsbury's in search of urgently needed relief and refreshment.

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