
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 6

Mike Roden takes the 87 from Battersea to the West End



This bus route begins at Wandsworth Plain, near the Town Hall, but the early part of its journey follows the 170 route already described in *BM* Autumn 2012, so on a bitterly cold, snow-flecked February morning, I choose to begin my trip to Aldwych from outside Clapham Junction Station.

I settle down on the top deck, and the bus carries me off up Lavender Hill, past Asda, the Magistrates Court and Battersea Arts Centre. We're quickly into uncharted (by me, anyway) territory as we enter Lambeth along Wandsworth Road. Railway lines separate this area from the ambitious large scale developments in Nine Elms. This neighbourhood is also ripe for modernisation, with swathes of municipal housing intermingled with small parades of mostly rundown shops, but one suspects it will be a long time coming.

Flamboyance

There are exceptions to this slightly shabby feel. The frontage of the Artesian Well is extravagantly decorated, but apparently the real flamboyance is found inside this popular nightclub. This traveller has no wish to experience the 'excessive, fantasy aesthetic' of its interior, so you'll have to venture there yourself if you wish to find out more...

Back to reality, we pass Wandsworth Town Station, and then the entrance to the romantic sounding Lark Hall Park, once the site of a substantial country house. Planned just after the war, it finally opened in 1974 after thirty years

of delay by Lambeth council.

Nearing Vauxhall, I catch sight of the Chelsea Guest House which is clearly contravening the trades' descriptions act. St George's Tower – like a vast upright Tower of Pisa – comes into view, as does its crane which, fog-enshrouded, probably caused the recent helicopter crash, which killed two people and closed this busy intersection for several days. No sign of any damage now as we take a brief stop at the futuristic bus station before crossing Vauxhall Bridge.

Haunting

Turning right on the embankment, we pass the Grade II listed Morpeth Arms. This was built in 1845 to help quench the thirst of warders at the nearby Millbank prison, which opened in 1816. It soon proved unfit to be the new National Penitentiary and was downgraded to a holding depot for convicts waiting for transportation. Rumour has it that one of those unlucky souls killed himself and now haunts the cellars of the Morpeth Arms.

The National Gallery of Art was built on the site, opening its doors in July 1897. It was soon better known as the Tate Gallery, after its founder Sir Henry Tate. Originally exhibiting both British and Modern collections, in 2000 it was renamed Tate Britain with the launch of Tate Modern on Bankside, and is now dedicated to the display of historical and contemporary British art.

Opposite Tate Britain is the Millbank Millennium Pier, which

provides the Tate to Tate river bus service. The original craft had a distinctive 'spotty' livery designed by Damien Hirst, but the high speed boat in question was wasted as the route has a 13mph speed limit. A less speedy boat is now used, and the spots on the first boat have now been painted over.

Protest

Next door stands Millbank Tower, 118 metres high. Labour ran its 1997 campaign here, subsequently relocating its headquarters to Millbank, but moving out when the annual rent of £1 million became unaffordable. Since 2006, the Conservatives have based their campaign headquarters here. In November 2010 the building was invaded by around 200 students protesting against increases in university fees.

We pass Lambeth Bridge and head towards Westminster. Horseferry Road commemorates the ferry which was here before the bridge, and Dean Stanley Road leads to St John's, Smith Square, now a concert venue. For those who appreciate English Baroque (which I don't) the building is regarded as a masterpiece.

A good alternative for when the queue is too long outside Westminster Abbey is a visit to St Margaret's Church, close by. Benedictine monks founded this in the 12th century to give local people their own simpler place of worship. It became the parish church of the Palace of Westminster in 1614, when the Puritans, unhappy with the



highly liturgical Abbey, chose to hold Parliamentary services in the more 'suitable' St Margaret's; a practice that has continued since that time. The bus circles round Parliament Square, passing a statue of Abraham Lincoln (a replica of one in Lincoln Park Chicago). On the other side Churchill's statue glowers towards the Commons. When the square was redeveloped in the 1950s he commented that he'd like a statue of himself in this spot.

Shivering tourists are beginning to flock across Westminster Bridge. Foreign school-parties predominate, taking more interest in each other than in the Mother of Parliaments.

We're on Whitehall now, and the Cenotaph approaches. The Great War officially ended in June 1919 with the Treaty of Versailles. A victory parade was planned and Sir Edwin Lutyens was commissioned to create a non-denominational shrine in memory of the war dead, which could be saluted by troops marching past. He dubbed this the Cenotaph: the empty tomb. The temporary wood and plaster structure captured the public imagination and Lutyens designed a stone Cenotaph, which the King would unveil on Armistice Day 1920. The ceremony was subsequently linked with a plan to bring the body of an unknown soldier to England (representing the hundreds of thousands who had no known grave) for burial at the same time.

Moving event

By all accounts it was an exceedingly moving event, as the Unknown

Warrior was brought to the Cenotaph on a gun carriage, and then after the two minutes silence, and the Last Post, taken to Westminster Abbey where 'they buried him among kings'. Over the next ten days an estimated 1.25 million mourners visited the Cenotaph engulfing it with a mountain of flowers.

Women of war

Just north of the Cenotaph, opposite the Ministry of Defence is The National Monument to the Women of World War II unveiled by the Queen in 2005. There are 17 individual sets of clothing and uniforms around the sides, symbolising the hundreds of different jobs women undertook in World War II.

The equestrian statue to Field Marshal Earl Haig (still dogged by controversy about his responsibility for the horrendous casualties at the Battle of the Somme in 1916) stands near the entrance to Horseguards, with two mounted Lifeguards from the Household Cavalry standing guard, and tourists milling around fruitlessly trying to get the cavalymen to respond.

So we pass into Trafalgar Square with Nelson keeping an eye (so to speak) on the crowds below. The fourth plinth is graced by another, non-militaristic equestrian statue of a young boy on a rocking horse.

Charing Cross Station opened in 1864. The cross in the forecourt – restored in 2010 – was based on the original 13th century Whitehall Cross that had been demolished in 1647. Distances in London are officially

Sights to see: The Artesian Well, Wandsworth Road; Tate Britain; Millbank Tower; statue Of Abraham Lincoln, Parliament Square; Monument to the Women of World War II, Whitehall; The Waldorf Hilton, Aldwych

measured from the original site of that cross in Whitehall, now the statue of Charles I, and not from this replica.

The Strand, once at the rivers' edge and studded with magnificent palaces, now replaced by theatres: the Adelphi, Vaudeville and, Savoy, and other tourist magnets like the Angus Steak House. Aldwych is a crescent joining the Strand at each end, here the bus turns and comes to a stop. After fifty interesting minutes this is journey's end – just by the Waldorf Hilton.

My expense account* will not run to a coffee in this establishment, let alone a Waldorf Salad so I make an excuse and leave.

**(Editor's note: What expense account?)*

