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# Great Bus-less Journeys No 1 : From Clapham Junction to Clapham Junction

Mike Roden and friends ride the Overground (with the odd diversion on the way)



Dangling high above the river, we swayed as the wind caught our frail craft. Two of my companions had their eyes shut tight – one might have been praying or was perhaps cursing his folly on joining this expedition, the third smiled back at me, enjoying the experience to the full.

(Don't worry, all will be revealed later). In the spirit of explorers we board the Overground at Clapham Junction just before ten. This merging of different sections of line into an orbital whole has proved remarkably efficient – it's still too crowded during rush hours, but new and longer trains are in the pipeline.

## Industrial

The bench style seating means that my view is somewhat blocked by the heads of those seated opposite, and picking out interesting landmarks is difficult. However, much of the Overground passes through industrial and development areas, and close to the line there isn't a lot to see.

We cross the river over the Grade II listed Battersea Railway Bridge. This is the old West London line which goes via Imperial Wharf (opened in 2009) West Brompton and Shepherd's Bush to Willesden Junction. This sprawling, unprepossessing station has been here since 1866, but it's hard to find much to say about it. It was called Tenway Junction – the site of the suicide of Ferdinand Lopez in Anthony Trollope's *The Prime Minister*. And in 1910 a collision between two passenger trains killed three people and injured forty.

We forge onwards into north-west London. The built-up area round West Hampstead station was once

a tiny rural hamlet with a scattering of houses known as West End. The coming of the railway changed all that.

Our short stop at Finchley Road and Frognal station reminds me that although Mrs Thatcher was the local MP, she preferred to live in Chelsea and then Dulwich. However, the area has its fair share of famous residents. Charles Dickens wrote Martin Chuzzlewit while staying in Finchley, and Spike Milligan and George Michael were born here. And General De Gaulle spent two years in Frognal during the war.

At weekends and on bank holidays Hampstead Heath station was used by up to 100,000 people per day. It's just a ten minute walk to Hampstead Ponds and Keats House is nearby. You can see the tree under which the poet is said to have written *Ode to a Nightingale*. While staying here he fell in love with Fanny Brawne, the girl next door. Soon afterwards he took himself off to Rome to die tragically, but romantically, from tuberculosis.

## John Wesley

The name Gospel Oak derives from a local oak tree, under which John Wesley is reputed to have preached some of his outdoor sermons. The oak is recorded on an 1801 map, but vanished sometime after that. Local celebrity Michael Palin organised the planting of a new oak in the late nineties but the tree did not survive.

A couple more stops and then we disembark at Highbury and Islington and stroll up Holloway Road, which contains more than its share of small cafés full of builders eating breakfast, and there are a number of fascinating

junk shops. We reach the elegant church of St Mary Magdalene which was built in 1814 and then head back towards the station in search of a coffee shop.

Refreshed, we get on our way, and head south through Canonbury and Dalston Junction. The Domesday Book records Haggerston as Hergotestane, possibly of Viking origin. Nowadays foreign newcomers are more commonly from South East Asia than Scandinavia, and this area is noted for its Vietnamese restaurants. At Hoxton we disembark once more. It was on Hogsden (sic) Fields in September 1598 that Ben Jonson killed an actor called Gabriel Spenser in a duel. At the Old Bailey the playwright proved his ability to read a bible verse. This allowed him to be tried in a church court, and thus avoid the death penalty. His thumb was branded instead!

We've left the train to visit The Cornershop in Bethnal Green, a short walk away. Artist Lucy Sparrow works mainly with felt and wool, often creating over-sized soft versions of existing objects. In this case she's taken over an empty shop for a month, and stocked it with felt replicas of all the goods usually on sale in a local convenience store. It's engaging and funny and everything – from sweets, sandwiches, soup cans, detergent to newspapers is weirdly convincing. [Note: *The shop closed at the end of August*]

It's lunchtime, and we walk back to the Geffrye Museum, just a short walk from Hoxton station. The main body of the museum, which opened in 1914 is housed in the almshouses of the Ironmongers' Company, built



in 1714. The museum itself shows the changing style of the English middle-class domestic interior in a series of eleven displayed period rooms from 1600 to the present day. During December the rooms are decorated as they would have been at Christmas. There is an excellent café here which is where we spend the next hour.

### Docklands

Another short trip on the Overground through Shoreditch and Whitechapel brings us to Shadwell and into Docklands. We're now going off-piste for a while, and we transfer to the Docklands Light Railway for the next stage of our journey. Many of the station names recall London's maritime history, real or imagined. Limehouse, for example, where a large Chinese community was established. The area was notorious for opium dens in the 19th century – at least according to writers like Dickens, Conan Doyle and Sax Rohmer.

Poplar was the location in 1921, of the Poplar Rates Rebellion, led by the Mayor, George Lansbury, who was later elected as leader of the Labour Party. In the first daylight bombing raid of World War II in June 1917, a squadron of Gotha bombers targeted the East End. A direct hit on a Poplar primary school killed eighteen children, sixteen of them aged between four and six.

Blackwall was an important centre for shipbuilding and repairs until the 1980s, with a long seafaring history. Walter Raleigh had a house here, as did Horatio Nelson.

East India station recalls the dock

which was once the landing place for commodities such as tea, spices, indigo, silk and Persian carpets. These were the first London docks to close, in 1967. By the mid-eighties as containerisation took hold and traffic moved downstream to Tilbury, London's once thriving docks were part of history.

We disembark at Royal Victoria and walk to the Emirates Air Line (the Thames cable car). Since it opened two years ago there has been a steady decline in use and the queue is very small here, despite being the middle of the holiday season. During the rush hour this kilometre long journey takes five minutes, today it's a more leisurely ten, and we're soon 90 metres above the river, with great views of Canary Wharf and the O2.

### Swaying

There is a certain, slightly unsettling swaying in the wind as we reach the top, but two of us keep taking pictures while the other two keep their eyes closed. We make it safe to *terra firma*, and stride past the rather longer queues here on the Greenwich side of the river, safe in the knowledge that we will never have to do that again!

The Jubilee line whisks us back to Canada Water and the Overground. Our diversion has missed out two stations – Wapping and Rotherhithe, and we don't get to travel through Brunel's tunnel under the Thames, but you can't have everything! Our stop at Surrey Quays once known as Surrey Docks, reminds me that when Battersea Park was being laid out, a vast amount of material excavated from here was used to raise the level of the site.

**Left to right: The Overground roundel; Mr Pecksniff from Martin Chuzzlewit, by Charles Dickens, illustrated by Solomon Eytinge Jr; Ridley Road Market, Dalston Junction; Sir Walter Raleigh by Nicholas Hilliard; the Emirates Air Line; the Falcon, Clapham Junction**

We're now on the homeward stretch, through Peckham Rye, Denmark Hill and Clapham. I travelled this way on the bus in 2012, just before this stretch of line opened. You can read all about that 345 journey in *Battersea Matters* Winter 2012. That trip took nearly an hour, today we're back in Clapham Junction in about 15 minutes.

That's progress, I think, and sufficient reason to pop into the Falcon for a celebratory drink. Cheers!

### COMING UP THIS AUTUMN

- 20 – 21 September: London Open House weekend. Katherine Low Settlement, Battersea Arts Centre and the Pump House Gallery will be open
- 20 September: St Mary's Church fair
- 4 – 5 and 11 – 12 October: Wandsworth Artists Open House
- 23 October: Battersea's Big Society of the First World War. Battersea Society talk at St Mary's church.