
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 19

Mike Roden travels from Pimlico to Hampstead on the 24



The 24 bus has the oldest unchanged route in London. It began in 1912 and cost a penny (around 45p today) to ride from Pimlico to Hampstead Heath. The bus starts at the Grosvenor Road stop opposite the Battersea Power Station development across the river. To get here I've walked through the park and over Chelsea Bridge.

The bus sets off, turning into the heart of Pimlico, with Dolphin Square over to our right. This posh housing estate was built in the thirties and has been home over the years to many famous, sometimes notorious politicians. Joining Lupus Street the bus turns past Pimlico Academy. Protests by the 20th Century Society could not prevent the original school buildings, often seen as 'sixties brutalist', being demolished in 2010.

Shelter

Not brutalist at all is the green cabmen's shelter in St George's Square. Originally there were 61 of them across London. That number is down to 13, and a few (like this one) are still fully functioning cafés where (I'm told) you can get a coffee for a pound. But, only those with The Knowledge can go inside and sit down.

From Warwick Way we turn up Wilton Road, now heading for Victoria Station.

The next stage takes us along Victoria Street, past Parliament and along Whitehall. I've covered this stretch a few times now, most notably in the previous *Battersea Matters*, so let's go to the far side of Trafalgar Square. Opposite the National Portrait Gallery is the statue of Nurse

Edith Cavell executed by German firing squad in Brussels in 1915 for 'assisting the enemy'.

Now we embark on the crawl along Charing Cross Road, created as part of a slum clearance project and opening in 1887. Leicester Square Station dates from 1906. The square itself was originally a residential area, with tenants including artists William Hogarth and Joshua Reynolds.

Most of the bookshops which once proliferated here have long gone, but I do notice a few: Henry Pordes books, the Quinto Bookshop and Koenig Books at no 80 specialising in German art books.

As you cross Shaftesbury Avenue you may find yourself looking for 84 Charing Cross Road, once the location of Marks and Co booksellers. The book with that title tells the story of the American writer Helene Hanff's 20-year correspondence with Frank Doel who worked in the store. The building is still there, but sadly it's now a branch of McDonald's.

Dominating the west side of Cambridge Circus is the Palace Theatre which opened in 1891 as the Royal English Opera House. By the 1920s it became known for musicals, a pattern which continued until very recently, with *Les Misérables* running there for nineteen years. However, the latest sell out production is a non-musical play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*.

Doomed

Foyles bookshop arrived on Charing Cross Road in 1906 and in 2014 it moved south into the former home of St Martin's school of art. There were determined but doomed attempts to

halt demolition of the historic original store. Regrettably, newly elected Mayor Khan could not be persuaded to oppose the proposals to build a new office block in its place.

On the left is Manette Street, which runs down to Greek Street. It was formerly Rose Street, home in the nineteenth century to several socialist, radical and anarchist groups. In 1895 it was renamed after Doctor Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Music

Denmark Street on the right was once part of a hospital for lepers founded in the early 12th century by Queen Matilda, first wife of Henry I. In the 20th century it found fame as Britain's 'Tin Pan Alley' housing numerous music publishers' offices.

The 34 story Centrepont building is being converted into luxury flats, and work is ongoing, but the shiny new Tottenham Court Road Station was opened to the public in February this year, and gradually the area is taking on an appearance of normality.

In the 1950s Tottenham Court Road was a mecca for those seeking cheap radio parts or other electronic goods. Eventually computer equipment came to dominate that market. The growth of online trading in this equipment means that many of the stores have disappeared.

Just after Goodge Street station is the American International Church, established after the war for US citizens living here.

Across the road Habitat and Heals sit companionably next to each other. Conran's store is the newcomer, arriving in 1966, while Heals had been there since 1840. War was

Left to right: Dolphin Square, Pimlico; statue of Edith Cavell, St Martin's Place; Goodge Street station façade; Black Cat building, Mornington Crescent; punk t-shirts, Camden Lock; The Royal Free Hospital



never declared and the two stores even share a doorway.

Crossing University Street, I'm reminded we're in UCL territory. The college was founded in 1826 ambitiously calling itself 'London University'. It took its current name ten years later when it received a Royal Charter permitting it to award degrees from the newly incorporated University of London.

Just after Warren Street Station we cross Euston Road and join Hampstead Road. This is Camden, where all railway lines and most roads lead to Euston Station. In the 1830s when the station was built, this was an area of small farms on the edge of an expanding city.

One of Camden's architectural gems comes into view as we pass the southern end of Mornington Crescent. This art deco building dates from 1928 when it opened as the factory of Carreras Tobacco who made Black Cat cigarettes. It was a striking example of early twentieth century Egyptian Revival architecture.

Art deco

Much of its decorative detail was lost during its 1990's conversion into an office block. Thankfully the whole frontage with its stylish Art Deco lettering, and colourful Egyptian capitals was restored for the millennium, and the two arresting eight-foot-high black statues of the Egyptian cat god Bastet once more guarded the front door.

We're now on Camden High Street. To begin with there is little to differentiate it from most shopping streets. But when we reach the north end around Camden Lock on the

Regent's Canal we arrive in an area dominated by Camden Market. This was originally set up in 1974 in a dilapidated canal-side timber yard and originally had just 16 traders, selling antiques, jewellery and arts and crafts.

Now it has at least six different sections, stretching up to Chalk Farm Road and selling anything from cheap t-shirts and trinkets to overpriced vintage clothing and everything in between, along with plenty of street food stalls. Viewed from the top of the bus it's busy enough midweek, but apparently at the weekend it's hell on earth, with tourists and locals vying for imagined bargains in a melee reminiscent of a middle eastern bazaar.

Market

Passing the Stables Market, we turn right and head down Ferdinand Street into a suddenly quiet, leafy residential area. A couple of minutes later in Queens Crescent another bustling market turns up. This is one of London's oldest street markets, mainly aimed at local shoppers. Camden Council handed over the running to a community association in 2013, but the costs of rubbish removal, cleaning and repairs overwhelmed the group and the market was handed back to the council in 2015. Its future seemed uncertain then, but today it's still going strong.

We're almost at journey's end now as we reach St Dominic's Priory. The church associated with this Dominican community was completed in 1883 and is now Grade II listed. It's one of the largest

Catholic churches in London. Our final stop is at the Royal Free Hospital, founded in 1828 by the surgeon William Marsden (who also founded the Royal Marsden). The story goes that Marsden found a young girl on the steps of a church dying from disease and hunger. No hospital would take her in and she died a couple of days later. He set up a small free dispensing clinic in Holborn. In 1837 this was granted a royal charter and eventually renamed the Royal Free with sites in Islington and Holborn. It moved here to Hampstead in 1974.

Splendour

Anyway, you can walk from here to the Heath, to 22 Willow Way or to Keats House. Gentlemen may also like to visit the most spectacular public convenience in the capital, lavishly restored to its Victorian splendour ten years or so ago. It was also a favourite haunt of Joe Orton, and the late George Michael was arrested here for possession of drugs.

Having nicely lowered the tone, I now walk briskly to Hampstead Heath station, where I buy a coffee and take the Overground back to Clapham Junction.