
Great Bus and Train Journeys of the World No 18

Mike Roden stays in London but takes a trip into the Kent countryside



This time I'm taking the slow train to Bromley South where I'll pick up the 146 bus to take me to Downe village, on the edge of the Kent countryside. And as an optional extra you could take a short walk to Down House, where Charles Darwin lived with his family from 1842 until his death in 1882. Here he wrote *Origin of Species* and conducted many botanical experiments. The house is both atmospheric and informative and well worth visiting.

Anyway it's a greyish, but warm summer day as I ride the trusty 170 to Victoria and head for platforms 1 – 8. You can get a fast train to Bromley taking just over 15 minutes, but it will whisk you through all the interesting places I'm talking about. The stopping train takes about 25 minutes.

We're riding the route of the London Chatham and Dover Railway which cut a swathe through south London and Kent. The coming of the railway changed for ever the nature of all the small towns and villages along the route.

Our first stop is Brixton. Over the years Brixton's image has gradually changed for the better, but there are side effects to this improvement. Last year more than 1,000 people took part in a 'reclaim Brixton' march protesting about the increasing gentrification of the area. The opening of new art galleries, delicatessens, bars, cafés and upmarket shops is starting an upward surge in property prices likely to drive out long-term residents and businesses.

There are three bronze sculptures on the station platforms. This work, *Platforms Piece* by Kevin Atherton, was erected in 1986 and the statues

are life casts of three people – two black, one white – who regularly commuted from Brixton

The next stop is Herne Hill which by the mid-nineteenth century had already lost much of its farmland and woodland to largely residential estates. The railways then created a demand for middle-class housing which was met by pulling down these upmarket estates and replacing them with rows of terraced streets.

Gallery

West Dulwich station is only a ten minute walk across the park from the Dulwich Picture Gallery which is always worth a visit.

Actor manager Edward Alleyn founded Dulwich College in 1619 and Sydenham Hill station stands in the grounds of the college. It was of course Alleyn's charitable foundation which bequeathed the paintings which form the permanent collection of the picture gallery.

Before our next stop we enter the Penge Tunnel (2141 yards long) which took the railway under the grounds of Crystal Palace (moved from Hyde Park after the Great Exhibition). The waste London clay extracted from the boring operation was used to manufacture bricks for the tunnel's lining.

Emerging from the tunnel we reach Penge East station. The town name derives from the Celtic word *Penceat* meaning 'head of the wood' – one of the few Celtic place names in London. In 957 King Eadwig granted the manor of Battersea to one of his faithful ministers, together with 'swine pasture' at Penge, which seems a long way to go to feed your pigs.

Anyway Penge remained a detached portion of Battersea parish for more than a thousand years until local government organisation in 1899 unfortunately moved it out of our hands and into Kent.

Kent House station gets its name from Kent House farm, supposedly the first house in Kent as you crossed the Surrey border. The house itself dated from at least 1240, and had many distinguished visitors over the centuries including Samuel Pepys and Thackeray. It was demolished in 1957, but the station name remains unchanged.

Beckenham Junction is both a railway station and a tram terminus. The settlement is referred to as Bacheham in the Domesday Book of 1086. Some years later David Bowie lived in Beckenham, during which time he developed his Ziggy Stardust creation while running the folk club at the Three Tuns every Sunday. The pub is now a branch of Zizzi.

On to Shortlands station. The medieval field pattern here consisted of sets of long and short fields, called Longelonds and Shortelonds, and the latter gave their name to a house built at the beginning of the 18th century which gave its name to the village. Shortlands House and its associated farmland was sold in 1863 allowing extensive suburban development to take place around the station.

Broom

The train draws into Bromley South station. This is where I get off. First recorded in a charter of 862 as *Bromleag* which means 'woodland clearing where broom grows', the town became an important coaching

Left to right: A statue on Brixton station; Edward Alleyn; David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust; Enid Blyton, the George and Dragon, Downe; Down House



stop, and the now defunct Royal Bell Hotel is referred to in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. It expanded very rapidly with the arrival of the railway.

Literary connections include H G Wells, born here in 1866, Captain W E Johns, creator of Biggles, David Nobbs, creator of Reggie Perrin, and Enid Blyton, creator of the Famous Five.

I walk to the bus stop and look in vain for the Green Midget Café. According to Monty Python's Flying Circus every item on the menu there was composed of spam in varying degrees.

The 146 bus to Downe is every half hour and I have to wait for ten minutes before it arrives and sets off through Bromley's extensive and rather hilly suburbs. After a few minutes we're in the small town of Hayes. The main shopping area radiates out from the station. Higher up the hill, where the bus is going, is old Hayes,

Prime Ministers

A few features in the parish church of St Mary the Virgin date back to the thirteenth century but it was subject to heavy restorations by George Gilbert Scott and his son in the late Victorian period. It contains memorials to two Prime Ministers, Pitt the Elder and Younger who were residents of Hayes.

The bus is now driving along the edge of Hayes Common. For centuries this was a place where local people could graze cattle and collect firewood. In the 1860s the individual who was Lord of both Baston and West Wickham manors began to sell off plots of nearby West Wickham Common and it was feared that Hayes

Common would go the same way.

In 1868 a campaign of organized opposition began and a year later Hayes Common became the first common to be given legal protection against enclosure under the recently passed Metropolitan Commons Act.

Saxon

We're now coming into the village of Keston. The current church, much restored in Victorian times, dates from the thirteenth century but there's evidence of a Saxon church, and burials from the fourth century have been found near the church.

Leaving Keston we come down into Downe village. The bus will wait here for a few minutes then head back to Bromley. There are two pubs here: the George and Dragon appropriately has Nigel Farage – who was born in the village – as a regular customer. The Queen's Head dates from the late sixteenth century. The name commemorates a visit to the village by Queen Elizabeth to attend the baptism of the daughter of her Knight Marshall who lived in the Manor House. There seems to be no actual evidence of such a momentous occasion but you can't keep a good story down. However, Charles Darwin and his wife Emma did stay here on the night before they moved to their new home in Down House.

The most notable feature of St Mary's Church is the ancient yew tree in the churchyard which may possibly predate the eleventh century chapel which originally stood here. The current building has of course been much restored and expanded since the thirteenth century. Some of Charles Darwin's children are buried

here – though Darwin himself has a tomb in Westminster Abbey.

The Darwins moved here because they felt the cleaner air in the countryside would be beneficial to their children. It was a vain hope, three of them died here before reaching adulthood.

Even if you don't wish to visit Down House, it's worth taking the short walk along what is little more than a country lane to take a look from a distance. There's a shop and a small tearoom at the house where you can get sandwiches and snacks. Or you could stay here and visit one of the pubs (who knows whom you might meet!). Or simply wait by the church wall for the 146 bus back to Bromley.

The choice is yours

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