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## Great Bus Journeys of the World No 20

Mike Roden takes the 156 from Vauxhall



Vauxhall Bus Station is a very useful transport hub where travellers can transfer from one bus to another with relative ease and safety. Unfortunately, the plan to close it has recently been approved by Lambeth council. One of the main results from a passenger point of view is that the bus stops will be moved away from the centre and redistributed round the edges. This will provide an excellent exercise in survival for travellers who arrive on one bus and then must quickly negotiate a major road to jump on another.

Anyway the 156 arrives on time, and I climb the stairs and begin my first trip along Nine Elms Lane since I took the 344 back in spring 2012. The twin tower development of One Nine Elms is well advanced. The tallest tower is (you won't be surprised to hear) 'an exclusive 56-storey building offering stunning apartments for sale'.

The US Embassy is now open for business. President Tweet has (wrongly) blamed Barack Obama for choosing this 'off' location and did not come for the opening ceremony, and shows no signs yet that he may be heading our way. His loss is our gain...

Those running the large Waitrose store presumably hope that embassy staff will arrive en masse. But it will probably be more useful to those moving into the new Riverlight complex on the other side. The walk along the river is much improved from the days when you had to weave your way through a crumbling industrial estate and there are now a couple of pubs there as well to add to the attraction.

It's all change at New Covent Garden Market, and much of the area

seems to be a building site. For your benefit I visited their website to find out what they're doing. Apparently they've 'kept the best bits about the market - that's the remarkable people and the exquisite products - and restyled the environment.' So now you know.

There is no mystery about the new underground station. The Northern line extension will form a continuation of the Charing Cross branch of the line with two new stations here at Battersea Power Station and up at Nine Elms. The main tunnelling started in April last year and was completed on 8 November. There is a faint chance that this extension will eventually continue to Clapham Junction. Watch this space around 2025 for more news on that.

### New pier

The Power Station's four restored chimneys gleam off-white against a wintry blue sky. If you haven't visited the Circus West development starting just beyond the Grosvenor Railway Bridge I'd recommend you take a look at the transformation. And the new pier is a welcome addition giving daily and frequent access to the whole riverbus network.

Back to Battersea Park Road and we find the Duchess pub. Until relatively recently it was called the Duchess of York, the name it took in 1791 to commemorate the marriage of the Duke of York and Princess Frederica Charlotte of Prussia. The current building dates from 1883.

Opposite the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home is Flanagans - a popular local pub which was originally called the Old Red House in tribute to the

notorious Red House on the edge of Battersea Fields where the clientele were no better than they should be.

This is turning into something of a pub crawl. The next one is the Masons Arms, a grade II listed building, with an attractive medieval stone mason wielding his mallet high up on the face. Its other claim to fame is that George Shearing the legendary blind jazz pianist played there at the age of 16.

So we turn left under one of the many railway bridges in this area and head up Queenstown Road. We soon arrive at another bridge and another station. Above the entrance you can see the name 'Queen's Road', its name when it opened on 1 November 1877. The station changed its name to Queenstown Road in 1980.

Much of this road is residential on one side, and industrial on the other. One long low blue tiled building does stand out. This announces itself in large letters as Loaf. I look up their website, and learn that they have 'oodles of squishy goodness available for you to try out' Disappointingly this is not a cream cake emporium but a furniture shop.

Turning right onto Lavender Hill we pass Battersea Arts Centre. I have been this way many times before on behalf of Great Bus Journeys so won't bore you with too much detail.

### Garish

At the junction with Falcon Road and St Johns Road there is a newcomer since my last visit.

While other banks shed branches left right and centre Metro Banks are turning up all over London. The garish frontage always reminds me

Left to right: The US Embassy, Nine Elms; the Duchess pub, Battersea Park Road; George Shearing; a 'ghost sign', St John's Hill; King George's Park, Wandsworth; Wimbledon Mosque



of an amusement arcade, and the multitude of video screens and coin counting machines inside rather reinforce that image. But if it matters to you I can confirm that they have a dog friendly policy – offering free dog biscuits and water.

The traffic is very slow here as we head up St Johns Hill but eventually we reach the junction with Plough road and pass Transformation House (formerly the Granada cinema) on one side and the Plough Bar and Kitchen on the other where 'the Anglo-American menu is all about small plates. Inspired by New York eateries famous for their tasting plates and little bites, we believe that the best things come in small packages.'

### Wholesome

Further along, in a row of shops, bars, delis and artisan bakeries, above one doorway you can see the classic 'ghost sign' for Peterkin Custard, Self-Raising Flour and Corn Flour. To cut a very long story short, the Peterkin Mill was run by J Arthur Rank (yes the man behind the films with the gong). It was part of his father's much larger milling business which eventually became Rank Hovis McDougall. J Arthur wasn't cut out to be a miller and gave it up when he went into the film-making business, hoping to counter the pernicious influence of American movies with something more wholesome.

Passing the St John's Therapy Centre, built on the site of the union workhouse, the bus heads down East Hill forging into Wandsworth, past the Brewers Arms, South Thames college and Wandsworth Town Hall, opened in 1937.

And then as we take a left turn onto Buckhold Road we at last enter uncharted territory. On the edge of Southfields we pass King George's Park which was laid out in 1922, though King George VI didn't officially open it till 1938. The River Wandle forms the eastern boundary of the park.

It was all farmland round here once upon a time, and many of the roads – including this one - were once little more than pathways through fields. Like so many London communities Southfields developed with the coming of the railway.

We pass the Park Tavern which (according to the pub's website) 'is a beautifully restored Coaching Inn ... steeped in history and is rumoured to have been a favourite rendezvous for the Highwaymen and Footpads of the early 1800s'.

We approach Southfields Academy. Most of the students here are from different minority ethnic groups, speaking more than seventy different languages. Interior scenes for the movie *About a Boy* were filmed at the school.

### 'Tin tabernacle'

This is a very long, mainly residential road and there isn't much to report on, But then I spot St Barnabas Church which started out life in 1889 as a temporary 'tin tabernacle' on the edge of a couple of streets being built on fields which once contained watercress beds. The rather bulkier current building was dedicated in 1908 and back then had up to 800 regular worshippers. I suspect that number has diminished a bit.

The recently grade II listed Wimbledon Mosque is of more recent

vintage – opened in 1977. Like many of the mosques round here it is home to members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. This minority sect – founded in India in 1889 – rejects the concept of a violent jihad and aims to lead a peaceful revival of Islam. They are committed to helping others and working for the common good. (Information from the website of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community UK).

### Appalled

The bus turns right at Plough Lane, once the site of Wimbledon FC's ground. Much water has flowed under the bridge since 2002 when (for reasons that scarcely matter now) the once mighty club was relocated 56 miles away in Milton Keynes. Most supporters were appalled by the move, and founded their own club AFC Wimbledon which with amazing rapidity climbed the football league ladder and is now in League One. The club is currently based in Kingston, but plans have just been approved for a new stadium just 250 yards away from the original site on Plough Lane. The stadium should be ready sometime in 2019.

There has been a settlement in Wimbledon since at least the Iron Age. The village is referred to in a charter signed by King Edgar the Peaceful in 967. The town's expansion began in earnest in 1838 when the London and South Western Railway opened a station.

And after trundling through yet more suburban streets we arrive at Wimbledon Station. It's taken me the best part of ninety minutes to get here, and it will take me just a few minutes to get home on the train.