
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 24

Mike Roden takes the 38 from Victoria to Clapton Pond



While waiting at Victoria Station for the 170 bus, I often watch the 38 set off to Clapton Pond. I had no idea where this was, or whether there was an actual pond. So on a breezy March morning I board the 38 at Victoria.

Across Buckingham Palace Road is the first of the two patches of greenery that make up Grosvenor Gardens. The arresting sculpture in the second park, showing a lioness attacking an antelope is by Jonathan Kenworthy, and was installed in 2000.

Massive

The bus moves alongside the wall of Buckingham Palace Gardens towards Hyde Park Corner. Charles Sargeant Jagger's magnificent Artillery Memorial makes no attempt to idealise war. A massive stone howitzer towers over several life-size bronze statues including – very controversial at the time – a dead soldier anonymous under a tarpaulin. A plaque commemorates Jagger on a house in Albert Bridge Road, where he lived at the end of his life.

We're now on Piccadilly following a number 14 bus, a route I covered in the Summer 2018 edition. The odd sculpture over Fortnum and Mason's entrance (a duo with featureless flat heads) is the work of Lynn Chadwick. The piece is from the collection of Frank Cohen who has loaned other pieces of artwork displayed around the store.

The bus is now part of a slow-moving convoy, and up ahead I see a number 19 – whose fate has not yet been decided by TfL. It's probably quicker to walk along Piccadilly than sit here, but in the interests of accuracy I'll stay put!

Finally at Piccadilly Circus, we turn onto Shaftesbury Avenue. Great

Windmill Street was named after the windmill which was recorded here in 1585 and demolished in the late 1600s. The Windmill Theatre presented nude *tableaux vivants* during the 1930s and 1940s. I gather it's now a table dancing club but obviously I can't confirm that.

The London Trocadero was built in 1896 and featured a Lyons restaurant with grand opera stylings. It closed in 1965 and only in 1984 was the building reopened as a tourist-led leisure attraction. It has changed hands several times and since 2014 there have been plans for a hotel. That reminds me of Battersea Power Station's history, so let's wait and see.

Chinatown

There are at least 80 restaurants in Chinatown and numerous Chinese businesses ranging from banks to herbalists. In the early 20th century, London's Chinese population concentrated in Limehouse, which suffered heavy damage during the Blitz. After the war they gradually moved elsewhere in London. The current Chinatown became established in the 1970s.

The bus queue inches along Charing Cross Road past the Montague Pyke. This is now a Wetherspoons house but was originally one of a chain of cinemas that Pyke ran across London. They were mostly converted shops, but this one was purpose built and opened on August 26, 1911 as the Cambridge Circus Cinematograph Theatre.

It was his fourteenth and last cinema. After an employee died in a fire here he was accused of manslaughter. Although he was acquitted his fortunes declined.

The Phoenix Theatre opened on

24 September 1930 with the premiere of *Private Lives* by Noël Coward, who also appeared in the play, with Adrienne Allen, Gertrude Lawrence and Laurence Olivier. Those were the days.

Spy

Passing the revamped Tottenham Court Road station we turn onto New Oxford Street with its numerous fast food places. For those who'd rather get a walking stick or umbrella there's the shop at number 53. The business was founded by James Smith in 1830. The fittings date from around 1865 and this is seen as a perfect (and rare) example of Victorian shop front design.

The bus now carries us into Bloomsbury. You can't miss St George's Bloomsbury which was the sixth and last of Nicholas Hawksmoor's London churches and was consecrated on 28 January 1730. Improbably the crypt houses the Museum of Comedy.

Heading onward we pass the Grade II listed home of the Swedenborg Society named after the philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688 – 1772). There's a library here, together with a museum, bookshop and events space.

On the other side of Bloomsbury Way is Pushkin House, another listed building and an independent Russian cultural centre.

Opposite Bloomsbury Square Gardens is Sicilian Avenue, an ornate pedestrianised arcade which opened in 1910. It used to live up to its name with a day-long noisy bustling Mediterranean atmosphere. Today at 10.30 am there seems to be nothing open. Its recent 'restyling' might explain its soul-less look.

The bus crosses Southampton

Left to right: Artillery Memorial, Marble Arch; gateway in Chinatown, Sicilian Avenue; James Smith Umbrella shop, Holborn; Dalston Junction Overground Station, Hackney



Note: All of the Great Bus Journeys have been cleverly extracted from *Battersea Matters* and can be downloaded from www.batterseabus.co.uk



Row and we're now on Theobalds Road. It was traditionally pronounced 'Tibbalds' but it's probably best to avoid that usage if seeking directions. The poet Coleridge was born at number 15, and PM Benjamin Disraeli at number 22.

Downhill

The bus stops at Red Lion Street. Nearby is Red Lion Square, which has had a mixed career over the centuries. Early in the 18th century the new houses were highly successful in attracting 'men of quality' such as lawyers and doctors. By the 19th century things went downhill with writers and artists like Rossetti, Burne-Jones and William Morris moving in. Respectability returned when it was laid out as a public garden in 1885. On the edge of the square is Conway Hall which has a varied programme of talks and concerts and a library with the UK's largest collection of humanist works.

We're in Clerkenwell now, turning up Rosebery Avenue. The name recalls a former chairman of the LCC, Lord Rosebery, who in 1894 succeeded Gladstone as Liberal Prime Minister, was defeated at the election the following year and then resigned the Liberal leadership in 1896. Having a busy road named after him may have been some sort of consolation.

Exmouth Market is home to a large number of restaurants and bars, as well as book, record and gift shops. The street market – reinstated in 2006 – is open during the week.

The bus stops near Sadlers Wells. There's been a theatre here since 1683 when Richard Sadler opened a 'Musick House'. The name originates from the supposedly health-giving

springs on his property. Sadler enhanced ticket sales by claiming that drinking the water would be effective against pretty well all known ailments.

The theatre gradually declined in popularity as the discovery of other spas enticed away Sadler's mainly aristocratic customer base. The current building is the sixth on the site and was completed in 1998 at a cost of £54m.

We head up St John Street to the Angel. This is probably named for a historic pub of that name. The Old Red Lion Theatre is one of London's most innovative Fringe theatre venues. Many of its productions transfer to the West End. Probably the most successful one in recent years is the anarchic and hugely funny *The Play that Goes Wrong*.

On Islington High Street I spot the current incarnation of the Angel Inn which is of course a Wetherspoons pub. Nearby is Angel tube station. Waddingtons included Angel as one of the light blue properties in the first British edition of Monopoly in 1935. Rent with a hotel £500!

After Islington Green the road ahead offers little of interest. Rows of small shops mixed with private and council residential estates don't send my pencil scribbling.

Still, the Walter Sickert Community Centre catches my eye. The artist who some years ago was accused (without real evidence) of being Jack the Ripper lived in Islington, and there is a collection related to him and his family in the local museum.

Another long stretch of road with nothing much to report, and then we're in Hackney entering Dalston. Once a small rural village, this probably gets its name from Deorlaf's tun (farm). Dalston Junction station, is a reminder that the coming of the

railways changed the village for ever.

Heading towards Hackney Central Station my eye is caught by the sign 'Vegan Chips'. This is the local branch of Sutton and Sons, one of north London's most popular fish and chip shop chains – but here offering only vegan versions of fish, burgers and pies. I'm intrigued by battered Tofish (made presumably from Tofu). If you ever sample its delights, let me know.

Heading through another scatter of small shops and bars we turn up Amhurst Road. A brief pause at the stop for Hackney Central Station then the bus heads onto Dalston Lane towards journey's end. Clapton Girls' Academy is on a site where there has been a school of some sort since the early eighteenth century, including the London Orphan Asylum. It eventually became a girls' grammar school, whose most famous pupil was the singer Helen Shapiro (you may now sing a few bars of 'Walking back to Happiness' her 1961 hit).

Farmers

For centuries the land round Clapton was owned by the bishops of London, and occupied by tenant farmers who supplied the City of London. Prosperity came in the late 18th century when Clapton became fashionable as a country retreat for the wealthy. After the arrival of the railways many of the large houses and their grounds made way for the building of more modest homes.

But there was one constant, and the bus has now arrived there: my destination – Clapton Pond. It's now at the centre of a small unpretentious park – a very pleasant place to sit on a sunny day, but a touch chilly today. It's fed by a natural spring which once helped with the irrigation of surrounding farmland. Though its fortunes have waxed and waned over the years, it now has a working fountain and the fencing is intact, and it has an air of being looked after. That's down to the recent efforts of the Clapton Pond Neighbourhood Action Group.

Anyway I plant the Battersea Society flag I bring with me on these occasions [Editor's note: no he didn't!] hop on the 38 bus going in a homeward direction, and disembark at Hackney Downs station to take a nine minute train ride to Liverpool Street Station.