
Great River Bus Journeys No1

Mike Roden sits back and enjoys the ride from Plantation Wharf to Canary Wharf



This rather different bus journey was a spur of the moment idea when we discovered that the 'Secret Rivers of London' exhibition at the Museum of London Docklands in Canary Wharf was close to finishing and we decided to travel in style on a Thames Clipper. A brisk walk takes us to Plantation Wharf Pier on Battersea Reach, to catch the 10.04 – the final commuter boat of the morning. To set off later you'll need to go to Battersea Power Station, where the service runs all day.

Our boat arrives and we get a coffee from the bar and settle back to enjoy the view. A familiar voice announces that we are approaching Chelsea Harbour Pier. It belongs to Emma Hignett, the voice of TfL since 2006, who does the announcements for the river bus as well as for London Overground and buses.

Whistler

The Harbour is a former industrial site which since the late 1990s has been an enclave of luxury flats with a central marina. We pick up a few passengers and head downstream past the Lots Road Power Station development where the new 37-storey tower will be joined in a few years by a 27-storey companion. Just before Battersea Bridge is the boatyard from where Walter Greaves used to row Whistler on his painting expeditions. The artist's statue stands near the north end of the bridge.

Now on to Cadogan pier next to Albert Bridge. This was built in 1841 to bring potential buyers to Lord Cadogan's new estate of houses in Chelsea then rebuilt in 1875 when the bridge was constructed. In the past three years, Cadogan Pier Limited together with the Chelsea Society has hosted the finish line of the Doggetts Coat and Badge river race.



We pass Battersea Park on the south side and Chelsea Royal Hospital to the north as the boat approaches Chelsea Bridge. Then we pass beneath Grosvenor Railway Bridge which carries ten lines in and out of Victoria and the boat now pulls alongside Battersea Power Station pier, opened in November 2017.

Theatre

Circus West Village towers above us. With its growing number of restaurants and the new Turbine Theatre under the arches (formerly the Village Hall) it is gaining the destination status the Power Station developers hoped for.

The Power Station development moves inexorably towards completion despite occasional rumours of impending bankruptcy. Many of the other riverside developments are now complete, the Riverlight complex, and the US Embassy of course, but there is still much building taking place along Nine Elms Lane. It will be a long time before the tangle of cranes is finally dismantled.

Heading to the St George Wharf Pier we pass the 50 storey building which is currently the tallest residential building in the UK. After a brief stop the boat moves forward under Vauxhall Bridge, turning towards the north bank as it does so. Just after Tate Britain is the Millbank Millennium Pier, opened in May 2003 – the fifth and final pier funded by the Millennium Commission as part of the Thames 2000 project. Disembark here to visit the gallery, and if you wish you can take another boat to Tate Modern. We continue under Lambeth Bridge.

Over to the right is the tower of the church of St Mary's at Lambeth, now the Garden Museum. The tomb of John Tradescant the first great English gardener and plant-hunter is



the centrepiece of the churchyard, now the Sackler Garden. Over on the Westminster side there's no hint of the sound and fury in the House of Commons as the Brexit withdrawal bill is debated. Big Ben is still shrouded in scaffolding much to the disappointment of the camera-wielding tourists.

Beyond Westminster Bridge the bronze lions' heads with open mouths that line the side of the Embankment act as a primitive flood warning system: 'When the lions drink, London will sink/When it's up to their manes, we'll go down the drains.' Once rare, it's not uncommon these days for the tide to rise high enough to touch the bronze heads. As our boat is tied up alongside the far end of Westminster Pier we notice that one of the heads is missing – hopefully just for repair and not as some kind of omen...

County Hall

Across the river is the sprawling building complex which as County Hall served as the HQ of London's local government for 64 years until the abolition of the GLC in 1986. Briefly the first home of the Saatchi Gallery it's now the site of various attractions such as the London Aquarium and the London Dungeon and a couple of hotels.

Embankment Pier is a good place to disembark for the National Gallery or the National Portrait Gallery. And you can cross one of the Golden Jubilee footbridges either side of the Hungerford Railway Bridge to the Festival Hall and Hayward Gallery, and walk to the National Theatre. Waterloo Bridge opened in 1817. A century later the fabric was crumbling, and a new design was commissioned from Giles Gilbert

Left to right: Lots Road Power Station, Battersea; The Turbine Theatre, Circus West Village; lions' heads with mooring rings on Victoria Embankment; The Golden Hinde, Southwark; Blackfriars Bridge



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



Scott of Battersea Power Station fame. Construction did not actually start until 1939, and then slowed almost to a halt both by enemy action and because most of the male labour force had been called up .

It's long been dubbed the Ladies' Bridge because of claims that mainly women construction workers finished the bridge. This was confirmed in 2015, when some photographs and a documentary interview finally provided proof. The women's work is now officially acknowledged: there are plans to erect a plaque to this effect.

Peace and quiet

On Victoria Embankment you can still see the Somerset House Watergate which marks the point of the river level before it was fully embanked in the late 19th century. The grounds of the large houses on the Strand used to back on to the river as did those of the legal district known as Temple (after the circular Templars church at its centre). It's well worth walking through there to enjoy peace and quiet quite at odds with the din of the city street outside.

We're in sight now of the 'wobbly' Millennium footbridge and there's a lot to take in with St Paul's on the north side, Tate Modern and the Globe on the other where the boat pauses at Bankside Pier. It's only 10.30, but the tourist numbers fuelled by half-term are building up.

Past Southwark Bridge now and heading to London Bridge. On the way there's the Golden Hinde, a replica of the little ship which Drake captained on the circumnavigation of the world from 1577 – 1580. It's a popular sleepover venue for children as a birthday treat. London Bridge City Pier serves as the main pier for the City and City Hall, headquarters

of the London Assembly since July 2002. This is a good place to halt for visiting Hays Galleria, HMS Belfast or Borough Market.

There's a sudden flurry of movement as passengers crowd by the windows at the front. Everyone wants the perfect shot of Tower Bridge which despite its archaic appearance only dates to 1898. Emma Hignett's dulcet tones announce that 'this bus terminates here'. Clearly someone has forgotten to add 'river' into the sentence. But the message is correct. This service goes no further than Tower Millennium Pier and the boat will now go back the way it came.

Most of those who disembark head for the nearby Tower, but a few of us join the queue for the next RB1 for Canary Wharf and Greenwich. After a brief wait we're on our way into the open water of the Pool of London. There's an announcement warning us to sit down, as the boat – restricted in its speed until now – suddenly feels like it's about to take off.

With Wapping on the north bank we're into dockland where cargo ships from around the world came and went. The shoreline is now dominated with converted warehouses and modern flat developments. The Town of Ramsgate pub dates from 1756 but was built on much earlier foundations so has been quenching the thirsts of watermen, dock workers and sailors for many centuries.

A little further on is Wapping Police Station, the headquarters of the Thames River Police. This is England's oldest police force, founded in 1798 to deal with looting from ships at anchor. The station's old carpenter's shop is the site of a fascinating little museum telling the history of river policing. Visits by appointment only.

On the south side of the river the Brunel Museum is housed in the Engine House which contained the steam-powered pumps used to extract water during the construction of the great engineer's Thames Tunnel. This is far beneath us linking Wapping and Rotherhithe stations – which, oddly, are part of the Overground system.

Just before the entrance to Shadwell Basin is the historic Prospect of Whitby pub. It claims to be the site of the oldest riverside tavern, dating from around 1520. All that remains from the building's earliest period is the 400-year-old stone floor. The site of the notorious Execution Dock is probably near here. The historian and inveterate gossip John Stow recorded in the 1590s that it was 'The usual place for hanging of pirates and sea-rovers, at the low-water mark, and there to remain till three tides had overflowed'.

Pyramid

There's another tunnel far below us, this time the busy Rotherhithe road tunnel. The boat passes the entrance to the Limehouse Basin, and we see the towers of Canary Wharf's financial district. This is dominated by One Canada Square, apparently the second tallest building in the UK, whose pyramid pinnacle contains a flashing aircraft warning light visible for miles around. Then (after about an hour's travelling) we're at journey's end. Canary Wharf takes its name from No. 32 berth of the West Wood Quay of the Import Dock built in 1936 to receive cargoes of fruit from the Mediterranean and the Canary Islands.

From the pier it's a ten-minute walk to the Docklands Museum. The exhibition didn't detain us for more than an hour. We headed in search of lunch and discovered the nearby Ledger Building, a huge Wetherspoons pub. It occupies a very grand old office building with acres of seating space, and a wonderfully mixed clientele of building workers and those who earn their living in the financial services. And tourists like us, of course. Mellowed by cheap beer, sandwiches and chips we walk briskly to Canary Wharf station and are whisked back to Clapham Junction via the Jubilee line and Waterloo.