
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 27:

Mike Roden takes a virtual bus trip from the West End to the East End on the number 15



Note: I had already planned that this route should be next on the list. Not wishing to ignore government advice and use public transport I decided to see how the journey could be taken virtually, using Google Street View to take me along the exact bus route. This is the result.

When the Routemaster was removed from service, TfL started two daily 'heritage' services using the old buses. The no 9 initially ran between Aldwych and the Royal Albert Hall, though just before it was axed in 2014 the route was heavily reduced. The 15 has continued to run between Trafalgar Square and Tower Hill though last year the service using Routemaster buses was cut to weekends only. But this route goes well beyond its heritage boundaries and continues through Stepney and Poplar all the way to Blackwall.

We start on the edge of Trafalgar Square looking towards Charing Cross station. The ornate cross in the forecourt is a restored Victorian copy of the last of twelve monuments which mark the journey back to London of the body of Queen Eleanor of Castile from where she died in Lincoln in 1290.

We set off along the Strand and into theatreland. Since 1806 the Adelphi has been rebuilt several times. The theatre was once famous for lurid melodrama and there's a touch of *grand guignol* in its history. The actor William Terriss was stabbed to death in December 1897 whilst coming in through the stage door. Unsurprisingly he's rumoured to haunt the place, though he'll be rather a lonely ghost at the moment. Like every theatre as I write (May 2020) the Adelphi is closed.

The Savoy Theatre was once the site of the palace built in the 1240s

by Peter of Savoy, uncle of Henry III. Richard D'Oyly Carte opened the theatre to showcase the work of Gilbert and Sullivan. The profits from these satiric operas provided the finance for the Savoy, London's first luxury hotel, whose entrance is next door.

Simpsons-in-the-Strand is a near neighbour. In *Psmith in the City*, P G Wodehouse noted that this restaurant offered two great advantages: 'namely, that you need not dress, and, secondly, that you paid your half-crown, and were then at liberty to eat till you were helpless, if you felt so disposed, without extra charge.'

It's true that Simpsons still offers the traditional English food which they've been serving since 1850. But a glance at their 'Bill of Fare' tells me that half a crown would be unlikely to cover the cost of even a toothpick.

Village

We pass the Lyceum Theatre which was heading for its twenty-first anniversary of showing *The Lion King* when it was forced to close, and begin a short detour along Aldwych. Once the site of a village called Lundenwic (London trading town) it was eventually abandoned and became known as Ealdwic (old trading town). By 1211 its name was recorded as Aldewich.

Leaving Aldwych, the road loops past St Clement Danes. This Wren church was severely damaged during the blitz. After restoration in 1958 it was adopted as the central church of the RAF.

The Royal Courts of Justice dominates the Strand here. One of the last great Victorian Gothic buildings, it was opened by Queen Victoria in 1882. Passing the winged dragon memorial at Temple Bar we

join Fleet Street and enter the City of London. Wren's arched gateway was moved from here in 1878 to ease traffic congestion. It's now in Paternoster Square by St Paul's.

Atmospheric

The lane to the right leads down to Temple Church and the Inner and Middle Temple Inns of court. If you're in search of peace and quiet take a stroll through this complex of atmospheric quadrangles and buildings.

The black and white fronted building was built as a tavern in 1610, survived the great fire of 1666 and today is known – for reasons which are obscure – as Prince Henry's Room. It now belongs to the City of London and is rarely open to the public.

St Dunstan-in-the-West is famous for its chiming clock, with figures of two giants, perhaps representing Gog and Magog, striking the bells with their clubs. The church shares its building with the Romanian Orthodox community. The chapel to the left of the main altar is closed off by a beautiful altar screen – an iconostasis – which came from a monastery in Bucharest.

Next door is a reminder of the area's newspaper heyday, the London outpost of D C Thomson, Dundee publishers. In the seventies and eighties I was a prolific supplier of short stories to some of their magazines. Even more excitingly it's also the site of the shop belonging to the murderous barber Sweeney Todd whose victims were baked into meat pies by his sidekick Mrs Lovett. The entrance was accessed from Hen and Chicken Court which is still there.

Across the road is El Vino's where hard-bitten journalists enjoyed their

Left to right: the Eleanor Cross, Charing Cross; Simpsons in the Strand; the Daily Express Building, Fleet Street; the stairs in the Monument; Whitechapel Art Gallery



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



legendary liquid lunches. Women journalists could not drink at the bar until 1982. Nearby is another Fleet Street favourite Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese. The hacks have long gone and now these places are filled with tourists vainly seeking atmosphere. Approaching Ludgate circus we pass the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Express* buildings. The latter is an art deco gem which opened in 1932.

The Old Bell stands on the site of an earlier tavern – the Swan – where in 1500 Wynkyn de Worde ran Fleet Street's first printing workshop. The current pub was built by Sir Christopher Wren for the benefit of his masons working on nearby St Bride's church.

St Paul's

We approach St Paul's. Wren's masterpiece was completed in 1712 replacing the cathedral destroyed in the Great Fire. The architect himself was the first person to be buried here. The bus now heads down Cannon Street. The name apparently is a corruption of its original name Candelwrichstrete (Candlemakers Street).

Leaving Mansion House and Monument tube stations behind, we move onto Eastcheap. 'Cheap' is broadly an Old English word for market, with the prefix 'East' distinguishing it from Westcheap, which today is known as Cheapside.

The bus passes the end of Pudding Lane where the Great Fire started. The Monument itself is not far away. Built between 1671 and 1677 to commemorate the fire it is 202 feet high and has 311 steps. Apparently it shouldn't take more than six or seven minutes to climb if you're fit...

On Great Tower Street, we pass Mincing Lane now. This became the

world's leading centre for tea and spice trading after 1799 when the British East India Company took over all trading ports from the Dutch East India company.

Alight here for the Tower of London. Look elsewhere for the history of this venerable fortress. I can't resist one small snippet, though. Many famous and notorious people were imprisoned here, but among the last to be locked up in 1952 were the Kray brothers for the heinous crime of dodging National Service!

After passing Tower Gateway DLR station we arrive at Whitechapel High Street. A few hundred yards further along is the Whitechapel Art Gallery founded in 1901 to bring art into east London. In 1939 Picasso's *Guernica* had its first and only British showing; and in 1958 Jackson Pollock's first major show was staged here. No time for a visit though as the route leads onto Commercial Road.

This was constructed in 1802 – 6 to link the City directly to docklands. By the 1830s it was almost entirely lined with houses. The majority of these were destroyed or badly damaged during the Blitz. Post-war slum clearance, and the building of modern housing means that most of the rest of this journey we pass through one set of fifties or sixties developments mixed with older buildings, and small shops and take-aways followed by another. It's hard to tell them apart.

So it's something of a relief to find the George Tavern, on a site which may have hosted an inn for many centuries. Under its former name of the Halfway House it is mentioned by Chaucer, Pepys and Dickens. Dating from around 1824 the current building was grade II listed in 1973. Around the same time a nightclub, Stepneys,

famous for its illuminated dance floor was added in a building at the back. Since 2002 the venue has been owned and operated by artist Pauline Forster.

Nearby Albert Gardens was laid out in the early nineteenth century, and survives remarkably largely intact. Fronted by Commercial Road it's bordered on the other three sides by three-storey houses from the 1840s. The land was purchased by the LCC in 1899 to prevent development and became a public park in 1906.

The road crosses the Regents Canal as it heads for the end of its 8 mile journey to the Limehouse Basin. This opened in 1820 and was used by seagoing vessels and lighters to offload cargoes to canal barges, and later in the century was vital for supplying coal to the numerous gasworks which had sprung up in London and beyond.

We're heading into Poplar now via East India Dock Road. The name derives from the Black Poplar trees which flourished once in the then prevailing marshy conditions. This is very much a residential area with flats and houses from the sixties onwards, and not much high rise building in evidence.

Bomb

In the Poplar Recreation ground there's a memorial to the eighteen children killed at Upper North Street School in an air-raid during the first world war. On 13 June 1917 a bomb went through the roof and two floors before exploding in the infants' classroom on the ground-floor. Sixteen of the children who died were aged four to six years old. Altogether 104 people died in the East End that day, in the first fixed-wing aircraft raid over London.

Poplar Baths was saved thanks to the efforts of a community campaign which in 2014 persuaded Tower Hamlets Council to work with a developer to restore and reopen the grade II listed building which had been derelict since the 1990s.

Passing the shopping area of Poplar High Street the bus arrives at journey's end at Blackwall DLR station. One day I'll take the journey again – this time on a real rather than virtual bus. At least it's very quick to get home!