
Great Bus Journeys of the World No 28

Mike Roden travels safely (and virtually) on the 188 from North Greenwich to Russell Square



I've long intended to take this bus trip again. I last travelled this route back in 2001 when we were merely tourists staying in London. I was astonished to discover you could take a bus all the way into central London, for just £1. I suspect that was when the Man on the Bus was born! This time I could relive the journey in a safe, virtual way thanks to a YouTube video of the entire route filmed last August from the front of the top deck.

North Greenwich is the Jubilee line's largest station – designed to cope with the large number of visitors expected to the Millennium Dome exhibition. This once marshland area was rapidly industrialised during the nineteenth century. From the 1980s a relentless programme of re-development took place on this peninsula. This continues today as can be seen as we head along Millennium Way. Blackwall Lane is more settled taking us from industrial estates, into a more residential area, blocks of flats to the right with small shops at ground level, lower rise family housing on the left.

Shuttered

On Trafalgar Road smaller shops mingle with the occasional supermarket, takeaways and restaurants, and a brace of betting shops. The shops gradually become more downmarket, many of them shuttered. Suddenly there on the right is the University of Greenwich and the complex of historic buildings related to the town's naval and royal history and on the left the paths through the park leading to the Queens House and the National Maritime Museum.

We're on Romney Road a name dating from 1713 so it can't be related to the artist George Romney,

born in 1742. He had a lucrative line in painting admirals, but also produced over 60 portraits of Horatio Nelson's beloved Emma Hamilton. Fittingly now on Nelson Road we head into the centre of Greenwich dominated by the impressive spire of St Alfege's church.

Cutty Sark

A left turn at the church takes us onto Creek Road and past the Cutty Sark DLR station. If you're quick you'll spot the ship itself down a side-street. In the thirties the 188 started from here (like the tram it replaced) following roughly the same route but carrying on to Chalk Farm.

Passing the unlovely bulk of the Elmix Concrete works, we cross Deptford Creek – once lined with heavy industries, but now home to luxury developments where you can enjoy living in 'Creekside' with wall to wall wifi, 24 hrs gym, and a relaxing waterside location. And for long stretches of road we pass modern apartment blocks or sites waiting for something similar.

Into a predominantly residential district, where post-war housing is mixed with Edwardian terraces, we miss out on the pleasures of Deptford High Street. Evelyn Street offers much the same until we enter a meandering straggle of betting shops, estate agents, a post office, and some beauty salons and nailbars. A couple of barbers bear witness to the recent rise of millennial men's obsession with grooming.

Sayes Court Park is nearby. This was the site of Sayes Court an early home of the diarist John Evelyn – explaining the name of the road mentioned above. The house was demolished in 1729 and replaced

by a workhouse, later converted to almshouses. That building did not survive the Second World War and the park was created in 1952.

The bus stops outside Deptford fire station which was opened in 1904. Reminding me of our own Old Battersea House, the style is clearly inspired by domestic buildings of the seventeenth century, in tribute perhaps to John Evelyn.

Frustrating

We head into Rotherhithe along another residential stretch. It's frustrating to be in an area with such a long maritime history and not to be able to see the river. There were shipyards and docks here from Elizabethan times. The dock closures saw widespread redevelopment along the Thames intensified by the arrival of the Jubilee Line in 1999, and the Overground in 2010 though this particular stretch of Rotherhithe Old Road has a dilapidated, unloved look.

The bus turns into the Surrey Quays shopping centre which in normal times offers shops plus entertainment with a cinema, bowling alley and bingo hall. The centre was built on much of the Surrey Docks site and the nearby Surrey Docks station was renamed Surrey Quays when it became part of the Overground. The change of name has never quite been explained.

Canada Water bus station doubles as a Jubilee line and Overground station and we wait there briefly, before heading off past King George's Fields. This was one of many such recreation grounds created 'for the use and enjoyment of the people' by a Foundation set up after the death of George V in 1936. All the playing fields are managed locally with strict

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



If you wish to take the virtual journey yourself you'll find the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTY8nkd1iGE>
 Left to right: University of Greenwich; the Cutty Sark; Surrey Quays station; the Jabez West drinking fountain; Bermondsey Arts Cocktail Club



covenants and conditions to prevent strapped for cash local councils selling them off.

Southwark Park opened in 1869. Here you'll find London's first public memorial to a working class man – a drinking fountain commemorates Jabez West, campaigner and temperance advocate who died in 1874. A local paper observed 'He was content to do lowly work ... so long as progress, social or political, was the watchword'. A lesson for us all, maybe.

Rotherhithe's docklands and Southwark's factories made this area a major target for Luftwaffe bombing raids. Most of the buildings around here date from the 1950s onwards when redevelopment got under way to make good the considerable wartime destruction.

Narrow

After Bermondsey underground station we're on Jamaica Road which was created in the second half of the 18th century. Its name recalls the arrival of goods from Jamaica at the nearby docks. A short trip along Tanner Street takes us to Druid Street which runs along railway arches which have been there since 1836 when the London to Greenwich railway was built. Now we turn left under the railway bridge onto Tower Bridge Road.

It's quite narrow here with trees in full leaf overhanging either side of the road. A woman was killed here in May 2008 when she was hit by branches torn from a tree by a passing 188 bus. Though few pre-20th century buildings survive, we pass one notable exception. The church of St Mary Magdalen was completed in 1690 (though there's been a church on this site since the late 1200s). This

church survived nineteenth-century redevelopment and the Blitz.

At the junction with Bermondsey Street and Grange Lane I spot the entrance to one of those increasingly rare underground public conveniences. In fact this is the Bermondsey Arts Club & Cocktail Bar which is apparently popular in fashionable circles. 'On descending the iron railing clad stairwell, an elegant 1930's style cocktail bar awaits your arrival.' The place to go, clearly.

At the busy Bricklayers Arms roundabout you can look in vain for a pub though for centuries there was an inn with that name. This was where coaches travelling along the Old Kent Road set down or picked up passengers. The land was owned by the City of London, whose sign was the coat of arms of the Worshipful Company of Tylers and Bricklayers, giving the pub its name.

On we go and after passing South Bank University's halls of residence, we arrive at Elephant and Castle. This junction was notorious for London's worst cyclist mortality rate. However, it's now a 'peninsula' called Elephant Square providing safe access to the shopping centre (after years of protest and indecision this closed in September 2020). The futuristic stainless steel box in the centre dates from 1961 and houses a London Underground electrical substation. It is a memorial to locally born electricity pioneer Michael Faraday.

Leaving Elephant and Castle we're soon at St George's Circus which was built in 1771. On the base of the obelisk in the centre is etched the distances from Palace Yard, London Bridge and Fleet Street. (A mile or so in each case).

Onto a very leafy stretch of

Waterloo Road, and there's a boringly average parade of shops, with something different for a change – a fossil and crystal shop. After the HQ of the London Ambulance service we pass Waterloo Millennium Green. This area was once part of the ancient Lambeth Marsh. The park, created on derelict land, was opened in 2001 and is community owned and managed.

And so we arrive alongside the Old Vic. Originally this was the Coburg Theatre but became the Royal Victoria theatre in 1833. By 1871 it had become familiarly known as the 'Old Vic' and when Lilian Bayliss took on the management in 1913, she changed its name officially and it has been The Old Vic ever since.

Three lions

The normally busy bus stops serving Waterloo Station are almost deserted today. Then onto Waterloo Bridge which is 370 metres long (around 1200 feet in old money) and was originally called the Strand Bridge. Over the river and we're on Lancaster Place. No 1 is the headquarters of the Duchy of Lancaster. The Queen is the Duke of Lancaster which is why the duchy flag has the three lions of England on it (not a lot of people know that). We speed along a very leafy Strand, merging into Aldwych and passing the forlornly shuttered Novello and Aldwych theatres which are both hoping to reopen at the end of June.

Kingsway came into being as part of a massive slum clearance programme in the 1900s. At 100ft wide it's one of the broadest streets in central London. The name honours King Edward VII, who opened the street in 1905.

A brief stop at Holborn station then the bus crosses High Holborn and onto Southampton Row. We get a quick glimpse of Bloomsbury Square just before we turn onto Russell Square. This was laid out in 1801 by Humphry Repton and quickly became fashionable. Notable residents have included the poets Cowper and Thomas Gray, the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst and the theatrical impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte.

The bus comes to a stop and this is journey's end. As this has been a virtual journey I don't even have to move to start researching and writing!