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## Great Bus Journeys of the World No 29

Mike Roden travels from Victoria to Willesden on the 52 and encounters GK Chesterton on the way



There is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen; Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green'. I'm at an almost deserted bus stop at Grosvenor Gardens near an eerily quiet Victoria Station. Coincidentally I last took a 'real' bus journey for *Battersea Matters* in January 2020 when I waited here for the 13 to West Finchley. On a cold, miserable day, the bus stop was crowded, and over at the station the crowds seethed and surged. What a difference a pandemic makes ...

Not too long a wait, and I'm soon aboard the 52 passing Buckingham Palace Gardens on the way to Hyde Park Corner. There's more than one building site on this stretch of road with a view. Notable is a gutted building where the long Edwardian façade is supported by a complex series of girders. From 2022 this will be the home of the (very expensive and exclusive) London outpost of the US based Cleveland clinic.

The Lanesborough Hotel facing the park was once the site of St George's Hospital. This stood here from 1733 until the 1970s when it moved to Tooting. The building was eventually renovated and re-opened as a hotel in 1991.

### Lost river

The bus turns past Hyde Park – a leafy country landscape devoid of crowds, with just the occasional jogger enjoying the peace – and we head along Knightsbridge. The name probably refers to a bridge crossing the 'lost' (i.e. culverted) River Westbourne.

Sloane Street and Brompton Road are almost deserted. Presumably Harrods is missing its wealthy foreign

customers. Lockdown has just eased and the Paxtons Head is now open for business. There's been a pub here since 1632 but when it was rebuilt in 1851 it was renamed after Sir Joseph Paxton, designer of the Crystal Palace. The current building dates from 1902.

### Modernist

Knightsbridge barracks arrived in 1795 as a base for the Horse Guards, and was rebuilt in 1880. Now we have Sir Basil Spence's 1970 modernist version, dominated by its 33-story residential tower. It's now the home of the Household Cavalry which performs ceremonial duties on state and royal occasions.

On Kensington Road we pass Princes Gate, a long terrace of tall, elegant early Victorian mansions, so called because it stands opposite the Prince of Wales' Gate to Hyde Park.

On 30 April 1980, the Iranian Embassy on Princes Gate was stormed by six armed men demanding independence for Iran's Khuzestan Province. They held 26 people hostage for five days until the SAS stormed the embassy. Five of the hostage takers were killed, their captives were freed unharmed and Khuzestan remains part of Iran.

The Royal Geographical Society on the corner of Exhibition Road was founded in 1830. The Society has been here since 1911 when they purchased the current building for £100k.

This is the Royal Albert Hall's 150th anniversary year and everyone concerned is hoping that this year the Proms can have a live audience.

Prince Albert watches from atop his magnificent memorial. The

architect George Gilbert Scott succeeded in embodying the self-satisfied Victorian view of the nobility and necessity of empire in the surrounding statues.

Kensington Gardens was separated from rest of Hyde Park in 1728 at the request of George II's wife Queen Caroline. Fashionable garden designers Henry Wise and Charles Bridgeman created the Round Pond, formal avenues and a sunken Dutch garden.

After a blissfully swift journey so far, traffic suddenly slows to a crawl, as Kensington High Street has returned to the tradition of extensive roadworks.

### Hanged

Opposite Palace Avenue stands the Goat Tavern. This is the oldest remaining pub on Kensington High Street. A coffee-house when it arrived in 1695 it soon became an alehouse and was extensively altered in 1880. It's notorious as the meeting place in 1944 of John Haigh the 'Acid Bath Murderer' and the first of his victims. After battering the man to death, he dumped him in a bath of sulphuric acid. At least five more people met the same fate before the law caught up with him. He was hanged on 10 August 1949.

Following a now familiar pattern, the High Street is very quiet. A tangle of almost empty buses waits to turn up Kensington Church Street past St Mary Abbots Church. There has been a church here since the early twelfth century but this building dates from 1872 and was designed by the ubiquitous Sir George Gilbert Scott.

The poet Ezra Pound lived in nearby Kensington Church Walk

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



Left to right: Harrods, Knightsbridge; Prince Albert on his Memorial; the Goat Tavern, Kensington High Street; a mansion in Ladbrooke Grove; Kensal Green Cemetery, with a doomed gasholder



between 1909 and 1914 where he held court to visitors like Ford Madox Ford and DH Lawrence.

This long twisting lane was built to join the Roman roads from Bath and Oxford to the City of London. Leaving the more prosaic shops behind, the bus heads slowly along long stretches of upmarket residential property speckled with an overabundance of high-end antique shops, delicatessens, glitzy boutiques and art galleries.

At last we turn onto Notting Hill Gate. The Gate Cinema has been here since 1911 when it opened as the Electric Palace. A right turn onto Pembridge Road and there is the award-winning Gate Theatre. With just 75 seats, it is the smallest 'off-West End' theatre in London.

Notable on the corner of Kensington Park Road is the impressive bulk of Kensington Temple. This was built in 1849 and was the home of the Hornton Street Congregational church. It now belongs to the Elim Pentecostal Church.

Development of the once rural Notting Hill area began in the early 19th century, with the main landowner and developer being the Ladbrooke family, a name borne – confusingly – by many streets in the area.

Growth took place slowly during the 1840s to 1880s. Now white stucco terraces and large well-maintained garden squares predominate and this is clearly a high-status area. There are no shops to spoil the rather smug tranquility.

### Hippodrome

The first of the beautifully maintained areas of greenery is Ladbrooke Square, one of London's largest private

gardens. In 1837 this was briefly part of the site of the Hippodrome racecourse. It was spectacularly unsuccessful thanks to the area's heavy clay soil, which – poorly drained – often became waterlogged. Only a dozen or so meetings were held and the owner soon gave up and sold off the land for development.

The bus continues for some time through this extensive estate. And then we turn onto Ladbrooke Grove and things start to change. There are takeaways and mini-markets and I spot my first betting shop for some time. And a pub appears! The Elgin – built in the nineteenth century – was a noted music venue in the sixties and seventies.

### Pardoned

Here we encounter another serial killer! John Christie from 10 Rillington Place was an Elgin regular. He was hanged in 1953 for at least nine murders. Two of these led to the wrongful conviction of his upstairs neighbour Timothy Evans who was himself executed in 1950. Evans has since been pardoned.

Just before we pass under Westway (blighting the landscape since 1970) there's Ladbrooke Grove station. Traders on the nearby Portobello Market are campaigning to get it renamed Portobello station. On we go past Red Planet Pizza, Roosters Piri-Piri and Chicken Cottage. The housing is very mixed here, council blocks and terraces some nicely looked after, others not.

The bus crosses the railway bridge over several lines to and from Paddington. It was down there on 5 October 1999, that 31 people died when two morning rush-hour trains

collided with each other. Turning into the car park of the giant Sainsburys I see the memorial naming all the crash victims.

Leaving the superstore the bus crosses the Union Canal and passes the expanse of Kensal Green cemetery. Opened in 1833 this was inspired by the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Its Gothic atmosphere has often attracted the makers of horror movies.

My search for a Battersea connection on this trip is rewarded when I learn that this place was immortalised by local resident G.K. Chesterton in *The Rolling English Road*: 'For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen; Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green'.

### Nail bars

For some time this area continues with the same pattern we're used to on Ladbrooke Grove – mixed social and private housing, and a lot of convenience stores, takeaways, hairdressers, phone repair and vape shops, nail-bars, charity shops etc. Very few shuttered premises, an indication of how local enterprise has suffered less in lockdown than the centre of London. Near Kensal Rise overground station we begin our journey into London's outer suburbs.

Older Edwardian terraces mixed with small shopping parades give way to an endless succession of interwar semi-detached houses, occasionally mixed with some social housing blocks. Nothing noteworthy to report. On the edge of Brondesbury Park the houses get posher, and bigger before we head down into Willesden.

This was once a sacred place with a holy well which cured blindness. It's hard to get any echoes of that ancient history as we enter into a straggling high street with the usual mix of shops. It has its own air of modest prosperity which fades a bit as we head further downhill towards journey's end.

Which is a bit of an anti-climax to be honest. Willesden Bus Garage is just round the corner, but the bus stops outside a pub called the Crown which has been closed since 2008 and has defeated all attempts to re-open or demolish it. We seem a long way from Hyde Park and Harrods.