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# GREAT BUS JOURNEYS OF THE WORLD NO 31

Nine years after his first trip Mike Roden catches the 344 from Clapham Junction to Liverpool Street



Since I took this journey in Summer 2012 unsurprisingly there have been quite a few changes along the route so it seemed time to take another trip. The 344 is a relative newcomer to the TfL system, having only been introduced in 1991. Many of you will recall how congested and uncomfortable a journey could be 20 years ago when the route used single-deckers. Following a campaign led by the late Samantha Heath, a GLA councillor, the then Mayor Ken Livingstone undertook to replace them with a fleet of double-deckers.

## Falcon

So off we go from Clapham Junction station on a chilly winter's morning in 2021. We turn left past the long established Falcon pub, definitely here since 1733, but there was almost certainly an inn of that name long before that. The long corner site across the road - once home to a furniture dealers and in recent years the Revolution cocktail bar - was taken over by JD Wetherspoons in 2020 and is now home to The London and South Western (named after the railway).

Falcon Road hasn't changed much since 2012. No doubt some shops and take-aways have closed, but others have taken their place. The Prince's Head pub has gone, losing its licence in 2015 after popular but undeniably illegal after-hour sales of alcohol. It has been replaced by the Energie Fitness Gym on the ground floor of a five storey block of flats.

We turn right past the Asparagus – another Wetherspoons pub – whose name recalls the crop Battersea's market gardens were famous for producing during the 19th century. We're on Battersea Park Road, which

has only had that name since 1871: before that it had been Battersea Road, and then Lower Wandsworth Road.

Newcomers here since 2012 include the Battersea Flower Station which took over a strip of disused land by the railway line a few months after my first 344 trip. There's also been an upsurge in the arrival of small coffee and bakery shops. We've also gained two barbers and two sushi take-aways as well as many other changes of name and ownership. I don't see too many shuttered premises which is good, indicating that many local shops and business have survived if not prospered during lockdown.

The Latchmere (home of the award winning Theatre 503) stands on the corner of Latchmere Road, which in the Middle Ages was known as Pig Hill Lane because of the large number of piggeries here. The road formed part of Latchmoor Common, an area of common land belonging to the parish.

The bus stops outside Dovedale Cottages. These almshouses were founded in 1841 by Mrs Ann Maria Lightfoot and her daughter for 'persons in reduced circumstances professing godliness'. Improved and expanded over time this is now classified as social housing, catering for people aged from 55 to 75 years, preferably evangelical Anglicans.

## Royal laundry

Harris Academy was once a failing school but its fortunes have now turned around and in 2018 it was judged by Ofsted as 'outstanding'. The nearby St Saviour's Church was consecrated by the bishop of Winchester in October 1871. In Victorian times the Imperial Laundry across the road had a contract with Buckingham Palace. The palace

where once royal smalls were scrubbed is now home to interior design, media and creative companies.

## New tube station

After the junction with Queenstown Road we pass Battersea Park station, opposite the grade II listed Masons Arms where pianist George Shearing began his career. The bus stops near the Dogs and Cats Home (rebranded Battersea) serving the needs of the capital's abandoned animals since 1871. Back in 2012 I commented that the future of its neighbour the Power Station 'was as uncertain as ever'. The development may have its detractors (especially over the lack of affordable housing) but where once a crumbling building stood in the middle of a wasteland, Circus West has become a popular destination, and more of the riverside has been opened to everyone. What's more, there's a new tube station and a regular riverboat service.

Over the road New Covent Garden Market is also under development with promises to turn the area into an exciting new Food Quarter, alongside the new fruit, veg and flower market, with new homes, shops and commercial space, and more green space.

We speed on past the expensively exclusive Riverlight Quay development and then the exclusively expensive Embassy Gardens with its own busy shops and bars and of course the notorious Skypool: a 'unique swimming experience' available only to those with enough money to afford an apartment here. The nearby US embassy was already well established when it planned an official opening in 2018 during President Trump's visit to London. He refused to come south of the river to such an 'off' location. His loss not ours.

We pass through Vauxhall Bus Station then head quickly along the Albert Embankment. This opened in 1869 with the twin aims of protecting low-lying areas of Lambeth from flooding and providing a new road to bypass local congested streets. Like all river frontages this one is now home to large developments of luxury (or unaffordable) flats. The Norman Foster designed tower named the Corniche promises panoramic views over the Houses of Parliament and 'is perfectly placed to capture the unique beauty and personality of the London metropolis'.

There are unsurprisingly few older buildings here now but the Rose pub on the corner of Tinworth Street since 1891 survives. A glance at the menu provides no surprises – it's a traditional gastropub with predictably high prices. Ambitious plans to redevelop the London Fire Brigade HQ to include housing, a modern fire station and a new Fire Brigade museum faltered in June 2021 when the government rejected the application despite Lambeth council's approval.

### Garden museum

Before reaching Lambeth Bridge and Lambeth Palace the bus turns onto Lambeth Road past the Church of St Mary-in-Lambeth. There's been a church here since 1062, but the building is now home to the excellent Garden Museum, and to its associated café. Both worth a visit.

It's not long before the distinctive cupola of the Imperial War Museum appears. Founded in 1917, the museum now looks at all conflicts in which British or Commonwealth forces have been involved since 1914. It moved to the current site in 1930. This building was originally home to Southwark's Bethlem Hospital and while known as Bedlam was notorious for charging to view 'the freaks of Bethlehem'.

On St Georges Road we pass the massive RC Cathedral. Designed by Augustus Pugin, it opened in 1848. The cathedral was badly bombed during World War 2 and was reopened in 1958 after extensive changes to the interior inside Pugin's original structure.

### Marshy

We're heading towards Elephant and Castle now. The obelisk in St George's Circus records the distances from Palace Yard, London Bridge and Fleet

Street. (A mile or so in each case). I catch a quick glimpse of the Michael Faraday Memorial in the middle of Elephant and Castle's 'peninsula' before the bus turns onto Newington Causeway. For centuries this was the only way across the marshy land in this part of Kennington.

### Hospital

On Southwark Bridge Road the bus enters a mostly residential area. A few Victorian terraced houses survive along here, but most apartment blocks are of more recent date. Mint Street Park sits on the site of the Evelina Children's Hospital, which from 1869 to 1976 tackled the high rate of childhood diseases prevalent in the crowded streets of Bankside.

Dickensian references abound. Quilp Street which crosses the park clearly refers to the central villain in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Marshalsea Road reminds us that this was the site of the Marshalsea Debtors' prison where Charles Dickens's father was imprisoned for debt. The prison is the setting for *Little Dorrit*. And I spot Copperfield Street over to our left.

Back to modern times, the Shard is a looming presence up ahead as we turn right onto Southwark Street and pass the Menier Chocolate Factory – built in 1870 by a French company as its first outpost in Britain. The building was derelict by the 1980s, but after an expensive renovation project opened in 2004 as an arts complex incorporating an art gallery, restaurant, and the award-winning theatre.

London Bridge approaches and Borough Market is not far away. Trading on the bridge itself ended in the thirteenth century when stalls selling grain, fish, vegetables and livestock were moved to Borough High Street and there's been a market here ever since. A shiny new glass fronted market hall arrived here in 2013 and proclaims itself the gateway to the market.

Nearby Southwark Cathedral (more correctly The Cathedral and Collegiate Church of St Saviour and St Mary Overie) sits on a site occupied by a church since 606AD, (and probably a Roman temple before that) and was designated a cathedral in 1905.

The current London Bridge opened in 1973, replacing a Victorian

**Left to right: Dovedale Cottages, Battersea; Nine Elms Tube Station; the Menier Chocolate Factory theatre, Southwark**

stone-arched bridge, which in turn superseded the medieval structure. It often features in films, showing crowds of commuters heading towards their City offices. TS Eliot refers to the sight in *The Wasteland*: 'Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many.' Among other things he is drawing parallels with men marching in their thousands towards death in the trenches of WW1.

The bridge has seen its share of death in recent times. In 2017 Islamist terrorists drove into pedestrians on the bridge killing three, and five more died during their subsequent rampage through Borough Market. In 2019 a knife attack by Usman Khan at nearby Fishmongers' Hall resulted in two deaths, with the killer's escape thwarted by several people fighting back on the bridge. All the perpetrators were shot dead by the police.

### Literary

As we head off the bridge there's an excellent view of two newish London landmark buildings dubbed the Cheese-grater and the Walkie Talkie (home to the stunning Sky Garden) with a cluster of other tall buildings behind them. After Monument Station we turn up Gracechurch Street. As usual with London streets it's easy to come up with literary references. In *Pride and Prejudice* it's home to Lizzie Bennet's aunt Mrs Gardiner and in *Great Expectations* Pip has a meeting with Estella in the Swan and Two Necks.

Along Bishopsgate we're travelling through a shadowy canyon, surrounded by tall anonymous buildings either side. We pass Threadneedle Street, home to the Bank of England. Its name may derive from the threads and needles used by the Merchant Taylors whose hall has been on this street (originally part of Broad Street) since 1347.

The bus turns up Wormwood Street and then onto Broad Street. And suddenly we are stopping outside Liverpool Street Station. I head inside in search of a quicker route home than the 344 bus.

**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)**