

# 3. babylon by bus

The arrival of the ship *MV Empire Windrush* at Essex's Tilbury Docks in 1948 is generally considered to be the start of modern multicultural London. On board were 492 Caribbean immigrants, who had responded to adverts in Jamaica that offered cheap transport to the UK for anyone wanting work. Once in London, many of these passengers stayed and settled with their families. And, over the following decades, these pioneers were joined by thousands of other black immigrants from all over the Commonwealth, lured by the promise of better-paid jobs. It wasn't easy for these newcomers. They had to confront racism and prejudice – an issue that still regularly rears its head today – but, despite these problems, they adopted London as their home and gradually made certain districts their own. Thanks to them, the capital is a far more vibrant and exciting place.



**Start point:** Clapham South tube

**End point:** Ladbroke Grove tube

**Duration:** 4.5 hours

● **Clapham South tube** is home to one of London's eight deep-level air-raid shelters, which were built to protect locals from bombs during World War II. And, once the war ended, one more use was found for it. It was here that passengers from the *MV Empire Windrush* were housed by the Colonial Office when they first arrived in London from Jamaica. The first significant wave of Caribbean immigrants to arrive in the capital, they used the shelter as a base while they found jobs at the nearest labour exchange – situated on Coldharbour Lane in Brixton. This quirk of geography is the sole reason why Brixton became London's most recognisable West Indian district. Come out of the tube, cross the road and catch the eastbound **355** from the **Clapham South Station** stop.

● Get off the bus at the **Brixton Station** stop. For a taste of the area's unique Caribbean flavour, walk back on yourself and turn left into **Electric Avenue** to wander through the market, passing vegetable stalls, piles of household goods and the whole carcasses of dead chickens dangling at the front of butchers. It was outside the Iceland supermarket here that neo-Nazi David Copeland, who terrorised the capital in April 1999, left one of his three nailbombs – hoping the explosion would stimulate a race war.

● Turn right onto **Atlantic Road** from Electric Avenue. On the left-hand side is an entrance to the new **Brixton Market**, which is full of restaurants, coffee joints and quirky shops. At the end of Atlantic Road, turn right down **Coldharbour Lane**. You will emerge alongside the **Tate Library** (ironically bequeathed to a pre-West Indian Brixton by Caribbean sugar magnate and slave owner Henry Tate in 1892).

● This area has a history of rioting in modern times – behind you lies **Railton Road**, which was the frontline in the 1981 Brixton race riots, while the Dogstar pub on Coldharbour Lane was burnt out and looted as part of the 1995 riots (locals resented the fact it had been changed from a traditional, black-owned pub into a trendy hangout for the white middle classes who were starting to move to the area). Turn right up Brixton Road from Coldharbour Lane and in five minutes you will pass **Brixton Police Station** on the right – this was the focus of the community's anger in 1995 after a 26-year-old black man died in police custody there.

● Walk back down Brixton Road and take the left-hand fork into Effra Road. Catch the eastbound **37** from the **St Matthew's Church** bus stop – which is situated in front of **Windrush Square**, renamed in 1998 in tribute to the original 492 Caribbean immigrants who arrived in London 50 years before. The bus passes by Brockwell Park, one of London's hidden gems, and then through the well-to-do tree-lined

suburbs of Herne Hill and East Dulwich before reaching the bustle of Peckham's Rye Lane, lined with hairdressers and stores selling cassava and yam.

- Get off the bus at the **Peckham Rye Station** stop and continue along Rye Lane. **Rye Lane Market**, a little bit further up on the left, is an indoor market that serves the West African community in this part of southeast London. Look out for the booths selling racily titled Nigerian DVDs, such as *Clash of the Lesbians 2*.

- Return to the **Peckham Rye Station** stop and catch the northbound **63** through Peckham's estates, the jaded flats of Elephant & Castle, over the River Thames (with views of St Paul's to your right) and into the business district of Farringdon. Get off the bus at the **Calthorpe Street** stop by a huge Royal Mail depot, carry on for a few metres up Farringdon Road, then turn left into Calthorpe Street. Continue straight ahead at all junctions and in around 15 minutes, after passing Goodenough College and along the back of Great Ormond Street Hospital, you will reach Russell Square. Turn left, walk around the bottom end of the square and across on to Montagu Place. Turn right up **Malet Street** and you will see a plaque dedicated to Mary Prince, the Bermudian abolitionist, whose unflinching autobiography *The History of Mary Prince* (published in 1831) did much to change 19th-century attitudes towards slavery in the West Indies. She lived in the vicinity of this street after running away from her master while in London.

- At the end of Malet Street, turn left on to Torrington Place and then right up Gower Street. At the end, cross over Euston Road and catch the northbound **30** from the **Euston Square Station** bus stop, directly opposite the entrance to University College Hospital. The bus passes the red-brick slabs of the British Library and glorious facade of St Pancras Station, then goes through Angel and along stylish Upper Street, before reaching Dalston. Get off the bus at the **Dalston Junction Station** stop. Carry on along the road for a few metres, then turn left. After 100 metres or so, you will see **Ridley Road Market** on your right, opposite Dalston Kingsland Station. The market is well-known in north London for its impressive selection of Caribbean and African goods. Expect to see barracuda, outlandish duvet sets and extravagantly named hairdressing salons.

- Return to Dalston Junction crossroads and continue walking down Kingsland Road. Catch the southbound **242** from the **Kingsland Road/Forest Road** stop. This takes you through trendy Shoreditch and back into London's financial

district, where City workers scuttle into glass skyscrapers, clutching takeaway coffees.

- After turning right along Threadneedle Street and Cheapside, the bus passes St Paul's Cathedral and eventually reaches the West End and Oxford Street. Get off at the **Tottenham Court Road Station** stop and continue along St Giles High Street until it meets New Oxford Street. Turn left here and continue along Oxford Street, then turn left into Soho Street just after Tottenham Court Road tube. This leads into **Soho Square**, where Mary Seacole – recently voted the greatest-ever black Briton – lived at number 14. She was a Jamaican nurse who, in her lifetime, was as equally feted as Florence Nightingale for her medical achievements in the Crimean War. A blue plaque commemorates her on the front of the house.

- Return to Oxford Street, turn right and catch the westbound **7** from the **Oxford Street/Soho Street** bus stop. This takes you all the way to **Ladbroke Grove Station**, centre of the Notting Hill district that was London's other major centre of Caribbean immigration in the post-Windrush era. It was in this area that white landlord Peter Rachman became notorious for exploiting his new black tenants, charging them extortionate rates for tiny, squalid properties they had to accept, as racism prevented them from finding anything else locally. Like Brixton, Notting Hill has been the backdrop to major race riots – in 1958, when racist teddy boys attacked the homes and businesses of the fledgling community; and in 1976 following a skirmish at the Notting Hill Carnival. The world-famous carnival began as an attempt to improve race relations following the 1958 riots.

