

# 6. rhyme & reason

Look behind the inane, child-pleasing lyrics to nursery rhymes and you'll find something altogether darker. Developed in a time before mass communication, and before most people could read or write, these seemingly innocent ditties, invented and passed on by everyday people, are often a folk memory of important historical happenings; a carefully coded satire on the failings – both moral and political – of the ruling classes. London, the heartbeat of English life, reveals its face time and again in these songs, just as a journey around the older parts of the capital throws up glimpses of the centuries-old events that inspired them. With its oranges and lemons, and pudding, pie and tuppenny rice, the city offers up more than enough fodder to feed the imagination of anyone who's ever found themselves humming these timeless tunes.



**Start point:** Westminster tube

**End point:** Old Street tube

**Duration:** 3.5 hours

● Exit **Westminster tube**, cross the river and catch the northbound **159** or **453** bus from the **Westminster Bridge/County Hall** stop directly opposite the Marriott County Hall hotel. Almost immediately, you will pass the **Houses of Parliament** on the left. Though the current building is largely a 19th-century construction, the chambers within are the subject of the nursery rhyme *Remember, Remember, The Fifth of November*, which recalls the gunpowder plot of 1605. This attempt by Catholic terrorists to assassinate the Protestant King James I and his ministers by igniting gunpowder beneath the room in which they were meeting was foiled only at the last minute. The man caught trying to light the fuse – the now infamous Guy Fawkes – was hung, drawn and quartered, and had his body parts displayed throughout London to deter other would-be insurgents. His effigy continues to be burnt on pyres all over the UK on 5 November (Bonfire Night) each year.

● The bus turns right onto Whitehall, passing the Prime Minister's Downing Street home on the left on its way up to Trafalgar Square. The ghost of King Charles I hangs heavy over this area, and **Whitehall Palace**, outside which he was executed in 1645, can be seen on the right opposite the Horse Guards army headquarters. The statue of the King riding a horse at the top of Whitehall is on the spot of the original Charing Cross – one of 12 stone crosses erected by King Edward I between 1291 and 1294. It is a reminder of the nursery rhyme *As I Was Going By Charing Cross*, which recalls this act of Civil War regicide.

● When the bus turns left along Cockspur Street and Pall Mall, look out for **Carlton House Terrace** – two rows of white stucco-fronted houses on either side of the Duke of York column – on the left. These were built in the early 19th century on the site of Carlton House, which was the London residence of the Prince Regent, later King George IV. Known for his decadent lifestyle and numerous affairs, the famously fat monarch was the subject of the nursery rhyme *Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie*. And it was here that 'he kissed the girls and made them cry'; misery-struck women in his life included disowned queen Caroline of Brunswick (who George didn't even allow to attend his coronation) and unacknowledged wife Maria Anne Fitzherbert, not to mention the many unlucky ladies who were the subject of his sweaty advances.

● Get off at the **Regent Street/Charles II Street** stop, cross the road and walk for a couple of minutes up Charles II Street, emerging alongside Her Majesty's Theatre. Cross the road and catch the eastbound **15** bus from the **Haymarket** stop, which takes you past Charing Cross station on the right and a Victorian recreation of Edward I's original cross. The bus continues along the Strand and turns into Aldwych. Just after you pass the Waldorf Hotel, you'll get a glimpse of **Drury Lane** on your left. This is the home of The Muffin Man from the early 19th-century nursery rhyme. The Theatre Royal Drury Lane is also where, in 1779, King George 'Georgie Porgie' IV first set eyes on actress Mary Robinson, a woman whose reputation and career he destroyed with their very public affair. She no doubt had a good cry after that.

● After emerging from Aldwych, the bus heads along Fleet Street. As soon as you pass the griffin statue in the centre of the road (the boundary between the City

of London and Westminster), look to the right to see **Ye Olde Cock Tavern**. In the mid-18th century, the original pub was located on the other side of the road and employed a barmaid called Lucy Locket. As recounted in the nursery rhyme, she lost her 'pocket' – 18th-century slang for a wealthy and generous lover – to notorious society beauty and courtesan Kitty Fisher. It gets worse for Lucy. The final lines, 'not a penny was there in it, but a ribbon round it' are incredibly loaded; prostitutes of the time would keep their ill-gotten gains tied in a ribbon around their thigh.

● As the 15 continues along Cannon Street, look out for the coffee house on the corner of Martin Lane to the right. The church of **St Martin Orgar** can be seen further down this street. This 15th-century chapel is the home of the 'bells of St Martin's' in the nursery rhyme *Oranges and Lemons*, which traces the journey of a condemned prisoner through London's streets to their execution at Tyburn. The first death knell to toll in the rhyme comes from 'the bells of St Clement's', which are in the church of **St Clement Eastcheap** on Clement's Lane. After passing Martin Lane, look to the left up King William Street for a glimpse of this medieval building.

● Look right just before you pass Monument tube station and you'll catch sight of **London Bridge** at the end of the street. Subject of one of the world's most famous nursery rhymes, London Bridge has fallen down and been rebuilt several times since the Romans first forded the River Thames in 60AD. While the verses of the rhyme – 'build it up with wood and clay', etc – refer to the building methods used by successive generations of Londoners, it is the repetition of 'my fair lady' that is most interesting. Could this be a reference to the young woman who was supposedly sacrificed and buried in the bridge's foundations back in the 12th century?

● The second road on the right after Monument tube provides the origins of another famous nursery rhyme. It was in a bakery on **Pudding Lane** that the Great Fire of London began in 1666 – the ensuing blaze, which razed the city to the ground, is remembered in *London's Burning* – sung by schoolchildren all over the English-speaking world.

● As the bus leaves Eastcheap and continues along Great Tower Street, the **Tower of London** can be seen directly ahead. After passing this ancient fortification – upon which the head of gunpowder plotter Guy Fawkes was displayed on a spike following his grisly execution – the bus loops around Aldgate and makes its way along Commercial Road into the East End district of Stepney. Get off the bus at the **Stepney Methodist Church** stop.

● Continue walking along Commercial Road for a minute or so, then turn left up Bromley Street. Head straight up the road and bear right at Stepney City Farm onto Stepney High Street. On the right you will see the 10th-century church of **St Dunstan & All Saints**, from which ring 'the bells of Stepney' in *Oranges and Lemons*. At the top of Stepney High Street, either bear left onto White Horse Lane and

follow it for 10 minutes up to Mile End Road or take the northbound **309** from the **Stepney Green School** stop.

● Once on Mile End Road, catch the westbound **25** bus from opposite **Stepney Green tube**. On its way back into the City, the bus passes the **Whitechapel Bell Foundry**, which is on the left just after the enormous East London Mosque. Located here since 1570, the foundry cast the Liberty Bell and the bells of Big Ben, and replaced many of the medieval bells featured in *Oranges and Lemons* after the churches that held them were damaged in World War II.

● After passing the Royal Exchange on the corner of Cornhill and Threadneedle Street, the bus heads up Cheapside and passes the church of **St Mary-le-Bow** ('the great bell of Bow') on the left. Another church to be featured in *Oranges and Lemons*, **St Sepulchre Without Newgate** ('the bells of Old Bailey'), can be seen on the right. This 12th-century church, which faces the former Newgate Prison (now The Old Bailey central criminal court) would toll its bells as condemned prisoners left the jail and headed to the gallows.

● Get off the bus at the **City Thameslink Station** stop and walk back over Holborn Viaduct before turning right down Old Bailey. Walk past the courthouse to the bottom of the road and turn left onto **Ludgate Hill**. Catch the eastbound **26** bus from the stop opposite Lloyds TSB bank, and head northeast through the City past St Paul's Cathedral and Liverpool Street Station. As the bus leaves the gleaming City behind and makes its way into scuffed and arty Shoreditch, it passes the final church to feature in *Oranges and Lemons* on the right. **St Leonard's** ('the bells of Shoreditch'), now something of an island in the midst of several busy roads, has stood on this site since the Dark Ages.

● Get off the bus at the **Hoxton Station** stop and carry on walking up the street. Following signs to Hoxton Station, turn left along Cremer Street and walk for a couple of minutes, passing the station on your right, before emerging on Kingsland Road. Turn right here and catch the westbound **394** from outside the **Geffrye Museum** – one of London's quirkier exhibition spaces, which is dedicated to the history of the English domestic interior.

● There's no pretending that the 394 bus route is a pretty one. The short journey takes you through some of North London's most depressing housing estates. However, it only takes 10 minutes for the bus to emerge on Shepherdess Walk, where you get off at the **Shoreditch Police Station** stop and walk down to **The Eagle** pub. Once a Victorian music hall, the pub – set back from City Road – is immortalised in the 'up and down the City Road, in and out The Eagle' lines of *Pop Goes the Weasel*. This 19th-century song, celebrating the legendary drunkenness of the area's silk weavers, is a fitting soundtrack to the end of the journey. Enjoy a pint in The Eagle (now an upmarket gastropub) before turning left along City Road and walking for a few minutes to Old Street tube.