

## **Once Round King's Cross in a Time Machine**

But actually, we'll discover, we're in a time machine, a submarine in the Mariana trench, a very gentle rollercoaster ride. King's Cross as it was, is, and will be. Keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle. The tour is leaving now.

We set off. Along choked main roads, through forecourts, through tunnels, carried along on a tidal wave of rush hour human beings. We walk down blind alleys, private courtyards, past the service doors of Tesco's, past the smoking staff. We pick our way past café tables that have colonised the edges of canals.

We walk through a city designed and built by geniuses. A hundred levels of train tracks, a million buses, soaring warehouses, Victorian station buildings cleaned up, preening, singing. The beautiful, incredible, dirty machine of the underground, funnelling, disgorging, a billion humans a second.

We walk through a city full to bursting. That London kind of full that you don't get anywhere else, of people on top of people on top of people, of a thousand rooftop extensions, of new residential developments in every possible space. New flats in old schools, old factories, old churches. New flats squatting in the middle of old gasholders, like pigeons building nests in bridges. In the offices at the bottom of the flats, architects are hard at work designing even more.

We wade through a city of litter. Packets, wrappers, bottles, plastic bags, blowing, laying everywhere. Two-thirds empty Pepsi bottles, left standing. Robinsons' Fruit Shoots leaking onto the pavement. Brown stains of indeterminate origin (BBQ sauce?). Actual shit, hopefully a dog's. And the fag ends. Millions of fag ends, in huge banks at the side of the road, like a fag end flood has only just receded. A woman throws half a sandwich onto the floor in front of her, for the rats.

We walk through the new King's Cross, euphemistic 'squares' which are actually little strips of nice paving and plants, surrounded on all sides by pumped-up, steroid-ed office blocks; like suburban front gardens, paved over, and crowded with four by fours. The squares are patrolled by private security guards, in red hats and radios, ready to pounce on anyone who isn't rich, or successful, or beautiful or eating Pret sandwiches, and cart them off to wherever those non-London people are allowed to be these days (Luton?).

We cross the road, between the traffic. Buses hiss. Taxis inch. Cyclists edge. A truck driver shouts 'YOU FUCKING WANKER' at another car, his eyeballs bulging, his face screwed up.

And by this point I've got the regular question in my head: What am I doing here? Why did I move to this mean, awful, divided city? Why did I move to this bankers paradise, this unnatural, oversized, stinking, stressful Babylon? I want to get off. I want to get off.

And immediately, as if sensing it, the walk changes gear. We head down, away from the city, along the canal. It's quiet. The weeds are growing. Leaves are unfurling on plane trees. A Moorcock is mounting a moorhen, on a nest made of litter, on the

other side of the water. The plants wave in the water, and the sunlight dances. We leave the towpath, walk up a ramp, and suddenly we're in any other city in the country. The street is empty, apart from a woman walking her dog in the waste-high grass behind a plumbers' merchants. This King's Cross has weeds, and cars that haven't been moved in a year. The railway arches are fenced off. The bones of a gasholder lie on the ground, still unpolished, still sleeping. No people, no street-food, no reclamation, no re-use.

We keep on walking. Up, over a forgotten footbridge, covered in un-ironic rust, and down into a housing estate. The streets here were designed for people to walk in, and made too narrow for cars. Windows are propped open, doors are ajar, and through the gaps you can hear laughter, and radio, and singing. And I realise this is what London must have been like, must have sounded like, in the 70s, in the social democratic Land That Time Forgot. Normal people, living normal lives.

And we head up, up a ramp, switch back, climb a staircase, and find ourselves on a roof, a publically accessible roof, above the estate. It feels like we're flying, and the view is sweeping. The playgrounds that surround the estate are enormous, for real children to actually play in, and anyone can come up here. It feels like a high note, like a lark ascending, like the top of the rollercoaster.

I'm reeling. The rest of the walks flashes past in images that I can't take in. A woman carries an injured bee on a piece of newspaper. A security guard turns to look at the bare legs of a woman. Another green square in the middle of a soft and beautiful and human estate. The seventies security glass in the balconies, woven with wire. The students lolling outside the beautiful art school, skin and bones and cigarette smoke. A posh square, fenced off, in the middle of the richer houses, all being done up.

And suddenly it lurches up on me, and I see it all at the same time. I'm walking, being led, through time and space and ideology and economics, through a tectonic shift between us and them, public and private, mine and everybody's.

There's a billboard for the new King's Cross, opposite Central Saint Martins, which simply states 'King's Cross is amazing'. And it is amazing. It's also filthy, peaceful, young and old, moneyed, crowded, empty, public and generous and mean. And, right now, it's changing. The balance is swinging, the pendulum is moving, away from 'us' and towards 'them'. But don't worry too much. The pendulum has been swinging for a hundred years. It can always swing back.

Tom James is a writer, urbanist and artist, who lives in 21st century London by mistake.