

JUST IN CASE YOU THOUGHT  
I WAS MAKING IT ALL UP...

# Village of the Damned

Captain Sensible grew up there, so did David Bowie and Gary Glitter. But Croydon's new stars are its trams. By Peter Silverton

There are worse ways to spend a sunny afternoon than to drink beer and ride the trams of Croydon with Captain Sensible. 'It's where I used to live,' said the Captain, now a resident of Brighton but still one of the Damned – they tour whenever there's good money in it, around Japan mostly – and still something of the trainspotter he was when growing up in south London's premier half-city-half-suburb. 'I sometimes wonder if my real reason for joining a band was so I could ride public transport systems all over the world.'

As we sampled Croydon's Tramlink, he measured out his childhood in train journeys, with particular attention to the time his family was caught in a snowstorm on the long trip to Scotland. Citizen Kane had Rosebud. The Captain has Deltic – the name of the giant post-war diesel-electric freight locomotive beautifully designed and built by British Railways engineers, then modelled from cornflake packets by two generations of *Blue Peter* viewers.

'Fairfield Halls,' said the Captain, switching tracks as our tram swung past Croydon's prime temple of culture. 'That's where it all started. I was the floor cleaner there and he was the toilet cleaner.' He? Damned drummer Rat Scabies, then known as Chris Miller. He and the Captain (formerly, and still privately, Ray Burns) don't get on anymore. They really don't get on.

The Captain's tale of the great punk rock adventure continued. 'I was a guitarist, with long hair. Rat saw an ad for a drummer in the *Melody Maker*. He came back from the audition with cropped hair and told me they needed a bass player, too. So I cut my hair and took up bass. Exceptionally smooth.' What? 'The ride of the tram.' A pause. A typical, dangerous glint came into the Captain's eye. 'I wonder how easy these trams are to derail.'

Together, we examined the interior of the cabin. Croydon's trams are far finer objects than their utilitarian cousins in Manchester, and deservedly so for what is London's fourth high-rise work centre. Built in Vienna, the trams of Croydon are similar to the ones in Cologne, but with higher specifications – of power, comfort and finish. Such sophistication doesn't come cheap. The whole Tramlink system cost £200m: the projected annual ridership is a possibly pessimistic 20m: spread that over 10 years and every journey is making a one pound contribution to initial costs.

'Big windows,' I said. 'A greenhouse on wheels,' replied the Captain. The seats are comfortable and well planned. There are some nice sideways-facing ones at the joint between the unit's two sections which offer a small, cheap thrill on the sharper, steeper turns. Commuting as adventure, however modest, is a substantial addition to life.

Tramlink loops around central Croydon and has three branches and one twig reaching out to suburbs whose very names make you think of Eliot's shiny-cuffed clerks and the lad himself, Anthony Aloysius Hancock. Merton Park, Mitcham Junction, Elmers End, New Addington. 'One of the places I'd never dare go as a youngster, New Addington,' said the



Right side of the tracks: (above) Croydon's Tramlink and (below) Captain Sensible

Captain. 'It had a real reputation.' Still has, too – though the tram has put this big, brutal council estate 45 minutes closer to the temptations of central Croydon.

Having agreed that it was a little too jerky pulling away from stops, we examined the tram's colour scheme. A mix of dark and pale greys, with yellow (for clear visibility) grab handles and a speckled (so it doesn't show the dirt) floor. It was calming and confident, but a little oversafe.

'Orange,' said the man who made tutus acceptable stagewear for young men with funny names and bass guitars. 'Trams should be orange. They've gone for grey just as it's going out of fashion. Bit late on the grey thing, I'm afraid.' Next stop Elmers End. On the platform stood a German trainspotter, videoing our arrival and departure. He'd come over especially to record the movements of the Croydon tram. The Captain turned wistful. 'Ah,' he sighed, deep in his own past, 'All those hours at the end of Clapham Junction station filling in Ian Allan books.'

We then headed on out across the south London flatlands, towards the Ikea towers and Purley Way, that little bit of Croydon that was once London's main airport but is now forever an Arkansas strip mall. A much-derided place, Croydon. I've always had an affection for it, though. As well as the Captain and his crew, it's given us Kirsty MacColl, though she was more of a car girl than a tram woman – her greatest love was a huge white BMW with fuzzy dice but no power steering. She called it Bob Marley and the Wailers.

Croydon was also home to Gary Glitter, David Bowie and Jimmy 'Toad' or Johnny Moped (né Simon Fitzgerald). I learnt this and more – certainly more than you'd care to know – from *Rockin' Croydon* by Chris Groom (£11.50, Wombeat), a volume of

## Croydon city tram

Max speed	80kmh
Engine	750W DC electric motor
Seating capacity	70
Standing room	138



admirable attention to detail.

However, it doesn't venture any thoughts on why Croydon should have produced so many pop stars compared with London's other major suburban centres – Romford, say, or Hounslow. I have a notion, though: public transport. Uniquely, Croydon has always had all-night train connections to London, making it almost an outpost of Soho.

Captain, Rat and Toad were all early-hours regulars on the Victoria-East Croydon line – as were the Sex Pistols' first fan club, the Bromley Contingent.

Our drinking and journeying over, the Captain showed me his party trick. You stare at a dot matrix indicator and blow a raspberry with your lips. The two frequencies – lip rhythm and dot flashing – collide and produce weird visual patterns. 'I learnt that in the studio,' he explained. It works, too – though unless you want to look as daft as we did, it's best to try it at home with your digital alarm clock. ■

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