

## Life on the Road by Louise Millar

There is a chair behind the counter of newsagent's in Neasden, North London, that owner Saroj Patel, 56, refuses sit on. 'A car knocked into this wall,' she says, pointing to bricks that separate her from six lanes of North Circular traffic. 'I'm scared.' It was ten years ago, but she still works standing up, just in case.

It's not an unreasonable anxiety. Two months month ago, another car ricocheted into the Patels' shop fence, after taking a bend too fast and smashing into a speed camera. In fact, there have been so many accidents on the stretch outside their shop, that Saroj has lost count, guessing 'seven or eight in the last two years.' The number of deaths are hazy too. 'Four or five?' her husband Jitu, 57, guesses. 'Maybe more. It usually happens at night. You hear that an ambulance came, and you don't know what happened to them.'

The North Circular is an ugly brute of a road. If you've driven it, you know it doesn't like to be ignored. It's nasty, fast, and hostile. A too-tight belt around London's belly. Squeezing between the rows of houses that teeter oddly at its edge, and a sprawl of industrial units and superstores, it demands your fullest attention. One hundred thousand cars travel it each day. They dive on from concealed entrances, like children jumping into skipping ropes, hoping for the best. Lane-hopping is constant as drivers spot, or reach, or avoid exits. You pass a man reversing out his driveway into this mayhem, and wonder how it will end for him. This is not a road to head onto without checking your petrol gauge. Hard shoulders are rare. Judder to a halt, and that articulated lorry behind you has nowhere else to go.

During the twenty years I've driven the North Circular, I've both dreaded and been fascinated by it. As I sat in growling packs of traffic looking into the nearby windows of family homes, two questions kept occurring. Why is the road in this state, and who lives here?

The aesthetic of the 1930s houses perched along the North Circular make as little sense as the road architecture. Sections of housing are neat and anonymous; swathes more are not. Between Brent Cross Shopping Centre and IKEA at Neasden, facades are yellowed, weedy front yards littered with road-trash. Dust hangs from PVC windows in dried-cobwebs formations, occasionally smeared into muddy arcs by a half-hearted attempt with a mop.

Further east on Bowes Road in Enfield, until 2011, hundreds of houses were derelict; rows of rotten teeth, with white fronts, black, burnt interiors, and silver shutters hammered on to keep out squatters. Only a faded Disney window sticker on a cracked upstairs pane, or an overgrown rose bed, hinted at a mysterious past existence.

As London's post-Millennial skyline transformed with glittering shards and domes; as grubby tube trains were upgraded and sleek cycle lanes appeared; the North Circular seemed to fester further. With the Olympic approaching, I began to see it through visitor's eyes. This was London's *inner ring-road*? The vital connecting route around a 21<sup>st</sup> world-class capital, polluted and clogged with stop-start traffic, lined in part with rotting houses? In Amsterdam I saw high walls and trees used to insulate residents from heavy-volume urban carriageways like this. It suggested to me that city cared about the welfare of people who lived on them, and ours didn't. Nothing about this heavy-volume, mock-motorway looked planned or coherent. We wouldn't house children or elderly people along the hard shoulder of the M25, so why here?

The idea to explore life on the road came when I saw a woman leave a house and wheel a bag towards a bus stop. The North Circular has no centre, nor visible cultural identity. As the South Circular takes up its baton at both ends, it is essentially a circle. A road with no start or end. A road to nowhere. This woman might have been catching a bus to Brent Cross Shopping Centre, two stops away, or on her way to Bosnia or Bolivia. I realised I had no idea who lived here. As a novelist, who often writes about 21<sup>st</sup> urban alienation for a living, I wanted to know more.

So in 2011, photographer Louis Quail and I parked up and began to walk. The immense scale of the task of understanding the road became apparent. For a start, it runs 25.7 miles from the western M4 intersection at Gunnersbury, east around north London, before breaking at the River Thames in Woolwich. XX different London boroughs oversee it. Understanding its history is equally daunting; it has a complex, decades-old, fractured timeline. Crack this, however, and this perplexing, inchoate road starts to make sense.

There's a *reason* why the North Circular feels alive, as if it is writhing angrily around in a hole it doesn't fit.

*It was never meant to exist in this form.*

It is, in fact, a mutant beast of a road, born out of constantly shifting plans for an inner-London radial route that was never built; the result of what the Enfield Journal labelled in 2009, 'half a century of broken promises.'

The original idea for an inner-radial route, is recorded as far back as the 1920s but only became formulated fully in the 1960s in an ambitious and visionary proposal by the Greater London Council. It was a to build a 'Ringway', an inner-arterial motorway called the M15 that would ease traffic congestion.

Yet, almost immediately, budgets were reconsidered. Cheaper ways to create the route were found. If the road doesn't feel cohesive to drive on, and makes no sense to live on, it's because of what happened next. Stretches of previously unconnected London roads were stitched together, and widened

sporadically. Communities such as South Woodford were sliced in half, the connecting road to the shops and library, slamming to a halt comically at the new North Circular, as if severed by scissors. Bends were left sharp, to avoid the expensive removal of large swathes of housing or a railway bridge. Plans to demolish the compulsorily purchased houses at Bowes Road were postponed. Shops shut. Squatters moved in. Residents who'd claimed their right to remain in their homes, woke up to a noisy motorway outside their bedroom, and their community decaying in front of their eyes.

When the Patels bought their shop in Neasden in 1980, the road was already six-lanes wide, but bore little resemblance to the monster-route it was to become. 'It was such a nice area. Like a village,' says Soraj Patel. 'The traffic was normal. Our customers walked across the road.'

Tesco, MacDonalds and IKEA moved in beside their shop. The traffic grew. 'The noise has got worse and worse,' says Jitu. 'Even six or seven years ago, we could leave the door open. Now we don't. We have to put the air-conditioning on in the summer, it gets so humid. When it rains, it's worse. It's just *boom boom boom*. We can't even speak with the customers.'

The couple claim some of their older customers from across the road stopped coming, unsure about using the new overhead bridge in heavy rain and snow. One elderly lady they know feels 'too shaky' walking alongside articulated lorries to reach them. Their long-term customer base dwindled too, as nearby social housing was increasingly used to house new arrivals to Britain, who the Patels say stay for a few months on this noisy, polluted road, before moving on.

The Patels want to leave, but believe nobody will buy their shop now. As well as the noise that wears them down, business is 'down 40-50% in five years.' For a while they clung to the news that Brent Council was considering demolishing buildings like theirs, to create a new green 'bund' which would shield other houses from noise and pollution. Yet a funding gap of tens of millions halted plans. The Compulsory Purchase Order they desperately desire never materialized.

To understand what life is like for people like the Patels, you have to spend time at ground level. Within minutes of treading the pavement, the noise of the North Circular starts to wear at your nervous system. It's a relentless, roaring whine that grates eardrums (and I will discover later, muffles parts of my taped interviews through double glazing and brick walls).

And then there's the air. In 2013, it was officially declared the most polluted road in London, with nitrogen dioxide levels that breach EU law. At ground level it is thick and dusty, and coats your throat within minutes.

The challenge to find people to speak to us was already significant. There is no centre to this road community, no meeting point, no neighbourhood

noticeboard or other point of contact. We'd known we would have to approach strangers at bus-stops, walking dogs, planting flowers, shopping, and working. Now it became clear we'd be shouting at them above traffic, pointing at cameras and voice recorders.

The first person we stopped was a Romanian man pushing a child in a buggy. He invited us into the rear kitchen of his small, roadside terraced house to meet his family. In the kitchen, we found his wife watching a wall-mounted television, sitting on a double bed, camp-beds underneath, his teenage son – who would translate for us – at a one-person table. There was a door to a toilet. This house was not their home, we realised; only the kitchen. Three more Romanian men emerged from their home in the front sitting-room. More people appeared to inhabit upstairs.

The man didn't care about the traffic outside, his son explained. The North Circular gave him quick access to the plentiful work he had found around London. The kids were in school and nursery! The family were happy to be here. At some point, they'd move. 'It is London,' the father broke in, with a shrug.

That family set a pattern for more stories we heard from people who accepted the poor quality of living conditions on the North Circular, because it offered a better option than before. A way-in to work in London, with its infamous sky-high rents. A way to upsize from a cramped flat to a family house. To get off a council housing list. To escape a tough estate.

The second woman we met, Jill, set another pattern for the people we would meet. In her sixties, she'd lived in her parents' house, her whole life. Despite increasingly disruptive environmental conditions, it was her home. She was determined to stay.

And then there were those determined to find positives. The youth workers at Trinity-at-Bowes Methodist church who set up music and film-making projects for local teenagers who have no central place to gather. The residents who have turned an allotment on the edge of the road into a friendly, community hub.

Yet some experiences were universal. Out-of-control cars had knocked down two of our subjects' garden walls and another's garage door. Most people had stories of multiple road accidents metres from their houses.

Then there was the black dust. At South Woodford, people reported seeing it on their washing lines. On Bowes Road it coated daffodils. In Neasden, we heard of people not being able to open their windows.

I asked Simon Birkett at Campaign for Clean Air, about the effects of this roadside pollution on people's health. 'It's a disgrace. We know it diesel particles are 90% responsible for xxx. causes disease. In Berlin, they cut back

on diesel fumes on a road like this in 200x. Diesel. They could force diesel vehicles to use £300 filters now. They need to ban them by 2020.'

People were also tired and mistrustful of constant rumours of more changes. During the four years, we returned to gather stories, intermittently, some of these plans came to fruition: the refurbishment of 400 derelict houses by the Notting Hill Housing Trust, and traffic-improvement schemes at Henley's Corner and Bowes Road are all highly effective. Yet for every live plan, there is an abandoned one, like the Brent Council's forgotten green 'bund', or a delayed one, such as the long-promised signals and pedestrians crossings at the notoriously dangerous Charlie Brown roundabout.

The most recent was the startling announcement from Boris Johnson's office. A task force he set up has proposed a £30billion, twenty-year road-improvement project that would move stretches of the North Circular underground. Noise and pollution would be replaced by green spaces, cycle lanes and a renewed connection between divided communities.

'Another twenty years?' Soraj Patel laughs in disbelief, when we break the news to her. She waves her hand. 'Who can wait another twenty years?'

In the meantime, Jitu tells us they go out to the countryside sometimes and that he dreams about living out there, in the peace and quiet. He points to the monster outside his door. 'The only time it goes quiet here, you know there's been an accident. That's the only time we hear the birds sing.'