



Life clings to a clogged artery

Our correspondent discovers an embattled community defying the plague of traffic and planners on London's Western front

by Edward Platt of the times

Share    

Save 

Friday January 24 2003, 12.00am, The Times

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN fascinated by London's arterial roads, the A routes that connect the capital to the rest of the country. Whenever I visited London as a child, I used to look at the houses that lined the pavements in the outlying suburbs. Dirty and anonymous, pinched and choked by an endless, ragged chain of cars and lorries, they looked uninhabitable, and it seemed incredible to one middle-class, provincial child, that there were people living within yards of the car in which I was sitting.

To the hundreds of thousands of people who drive on the arterial roads every day, they offer a brief but tantalising glimpse into some of London's overlooked and undiscovered districts, a city that does not conform to the fashionable image of expensive restaurants, City bonuses and celebrities.

Sooner or later, sitting in a queue of cars on the North Circular, the A3 or the A4 — in Wembley, Acton or Hammersmith — the same thought crosses many people's minds: what must it be like to live here, on the hard shoulder of an urban motorway?

It was my childhood memories coupled with a desire to explore a world that I had driven through many times, but knew nothing about, that inspired my book, *Leadville: A Journey from White City to the Hanger Lane Gyratory*. One afternoon in 1995, when I was driving along Western Avenue, the stretch of the A40 that runs from White City to Hanger Lane, I did something I had never done before. I stopped the car and walked on to the road at a busy junction called Gipsy Corner. Some of the houses were boarded up and derelict, but others were well cared for, their neat gardens and pale mesh curtains attesting to a suburban propriety maintained in the most testing circumstances.

I soon discovered that many of the houses were due to be demolished to make way for a road-widening scheme: the Department of Transport was planning to build an underpass and flyover at Gipsy Corner and another junction in an attempt to relieve some of the congestion on the road. During the next three years I went back to Western Avenue many times to talk to the people affected by the upheaval.



To the outsider, Western Avenue seems a grim and dirty place - a result of the pollution and the queues of cars that build up each morning and evening.

I assumed that no one would enjoy living on the road, but I soon discovered I was wrong. Mr and Mrs Green, an elderly couple who lived beside Gipsy Corner in one of the houses that was due to be demolished, had no desire to leave. "They will have to get the bailiffs in," Mrs Green said the first time we met. Her husband did not accept the Department of Transport's assessment that the house's proximity to the road reduced its value, and hence the compensation to which they were entitled. He saw it as a boon. "Where else can you get a house where you can step out of your front door and get a bus to Greenford?" he said. "Go around the corner and you can catch a bus to Shepherds Bush, or Hammersmith or Harlesden."

Their son, Robin, was a town planner, who still lived in the house in which he had grown up. In 1989, at the public inquiry held to consider arguments for and against the proposed reconstruction of Western Avenue, he had used his professional expertise to argue that the scheme was misconceived, and that the houses should be left intact.

Many of the elderly couples who had lived on the road for years still thought of it as it used to be: a pleasant, tree-lined suburb of West London. Shirley Buchan, who had grown up near by, remembered that they used to refer to Western Avenue as "Toffville".

SPONSORED



Why having the correct kit won't be a worry for Team GB at the Olympics



Your guide to the non-surgical treatment that could sculpt your silhouette

"I suspect we didn't know the people who lived here at all, except to think they were a bit smart," said Mrs Buchan, who had been delighted to return to live on the road as an adult, although she was well aware that the area had changed. For a start, the traffic made her house shake, and neighbours complained that the pollution rotted curtains and stained carpets.

Inevitably, the people who hadn't known the road before the traffic became unbearable had less affection for it than the older residents. The Department of Transport had been buying up houses since the road scheme was first proposed, in the 1960s, and many of these had been leased to short-term tenants, through a local housing association.

One of them, an Irishman called Trevor Dodd, lived next door to the Greens. "I'm not sorry to be leaving Acton, not at all, but I'm sorry I'll be losing my own wee flat," he told me. He had left Belfast 13 years earlier, when he was 18, and hitchhiked to London to look for work. "Everywhere in Britain, people are drawn to London. If I had known it was like this," he gestured vaguely towards the road outside his window, "I wouldn't have bothered."

Few of his fellow tenants were as relaxed as he was at the prospect of impending eviction. They did not want to leave because they had nowhere else to go. They included foreign students, Irish labourers, refugees from Africa and the former Yugoslavia, Gypsies, and a large community of squatters and New Age travellers.

In 1941 George Orwell predicted that the future of England lay along the arterial roads, and in a sense he was right. The people that I met on Western Avenue were drawn from a broad cross-section of British society, and they were testament to the variety and unpredictability of life in London today.

Leadville: A Journey from White City to the Hanger Lane Gyratory (Picador £6.99), by Edward Platt, won a Somerset Maugham Award and the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, 2001.

Share    

Save 

Comments for this article have been turned off

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

 BACK TO TOP

THE  TIMES
THE SUNDAY TIMES

GET IN TOUCH

- About us
- Contact us
- Help
- The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints
- Place an announcement
- Classified advertising
- Display advertising
- The Sunday Times corrections
- Careers

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

- The Times e-paper
- The Sunday Times e-paper
- Times Currency Services
- The Sunday Times Wine Club
- Times Print Gallery
- The Times Archive
- Times Crossword Club
- Sunday Times Driving
- Times+
- The Sunday Times Rich List
- Times Expert Traveller
- Good University Guide
- Schools Guide
- Newsletters
- Best Places to Live
- Best Places to Stay
- Sportswomen of the Year Awards
- Times Appointments
- Podcasts
- Times Money Mentor

