

One

It started with the Dome, the Millennium Dome. An urge to walk away from the Teflon meteorite on Bugsby's Marshes. A white thing had been dropped in the mud of the Greenwich peninsula. The ripples had to stop somewhere. The city turned inside-out. Rubbish blown against the perimeter fence. A journey, a provocation. An escape. Keep moving, I told myself, until you hit tarmac, the outer circle. The point where London loses it, gives up its ghosts.

I have to admit: I was developing an unhealthy obsession with the M25, London's orbital motorway. The dull silvertop that acts as a prophylactic between driver and landscape. Was this grim necklace, opened by Margaret Thatcher on 29 October 1986, the true perimeter fence? Did this conceptual ha-ha mark the boundary of whatever could be called London? Or was it a tourniquet, sponsored by the Department of Transport and the Highways Agency, to choke the living breath from the metropolis?

Thatcher, who never grasped the concept of 'dressing down', her range going from airfixed-in-pressurised-dimethyl-ether (with solvent abuse warning on can) to carved-out-of-funerary-basalt, decided that day, or had it put to her by style consultants, that she should treat this gig as an outside broadcast, a chat from the paddock at Cheltenham, not the full Ascot furbelow. A suit, semi-formal (like Westminster Cathedral), in a sort of Aquascutum beige.

Autumn. No hat. A war footing: mufti-awkward. Argie bashing, ranting. Cromwell-fierce, hormonally stoked, she wields her small scythe, dismissing the unseen enemy, stalkers in the bushes, eco-bandits, twitchers, penny-pinchers, lilylivered Liberal fifth-columnists, bedwetters, nay-sayers.

'I can't stand those who carp and criticise when they ought to be congratulating Britain on a magnificent achievement and beating the drum for Britain all over the world.' Rejoice. The military/industrial two-step. That old standard. Mrs Thatcher went on to rave over 'the Sainsbury's effect', the introduction of US mall-viruses, landscape consumerism, retail landfill.

YES was the word. Thatcher filtered in a perpetual green glow, like a Hammer Films spook. *Bride of Dracula*. Green meant GO. This business with ring roads had been floating around the ministries since the Thirties, since they'd noticed that cars were taking over the planet. At first, the idea had been: car as servant, parkways, elevated heaven ramps (Michael Powell's *A Matter of Life and Death*). Road-ribbons between lakes and golf courses. Orbital grooves that interconnected, working their way out from a loop around the royal bits (palaces, parliaments) to the inner suburbs, Hampstead and Holland Park. To the outer suburbs, unknowable Stanmore, Totteridge, Ponders End. To green belt nothingness, the great nowhere at the edge of Epping Forest; a territory defined by the red Italianate water towers of Victorian and Edwardian madhouses. And why stop there? Why not opt for abandoning airports and retaining huge runways that roared past Oxford, Cambridge, Winchester and Canterbury?

The snipping of the ribbon in October 1986 prefigured other ribbons, blue and white bunting that would turn the inner cities into a necrophile carnival: the spite-karma of terrorist outrages, turf wars. Irishmen, on their way home from the pub, shot, colandered, by rapid response units, for the crime of carrying unlicensed table-legs.

Newsreel paranoia is such that in the back files, even at this distance, nothing more than a face is revealed. We may know *who* is cutting the ribbon, but not where. Time has been suspended. There were, from the start, M25 myths: the woman who thought it was an oversized roundabout, the family who decided to keep going until they saw the sign for Newcastle. Archive footage doesn't let on: the location where Margaret Scissorhands, amputator of naughty thumbs, did the deed is still a secret. It wasn't at the official starting point, Junction 1, south of the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge,

near Dartford. Nor was it within range of the Esso storage tanks at Purfleet, the soapy perfume of Procter and Gamble's West Thurrock factory. Nor out in the deadlands, where the blue highway loses its nerve and turns yellow for the elevated Thames crossing. A hawk-eyed swoop at the cameras on the remote north-west frontier, not too far from South Mimms service station. So it was rumoured.

A television researcher with superhuman determination, a man called John Sergeant, spent weeks on the road, living in a rented scarlet Mondeo, checking co-ordinates, chasing whispers. He narrowed the area down to a section of straight road, somewhere between Potters Bar and Junction 21 (the M1 interchange). He would interrogate newsreel clips, freeze frame, photograph the monitor; return to the motorway. Compare and contrast. He worked the hard shoulder. He scanned soft estates. He came close, but he couldn't pin it down with absolute precision.

That was left to Tony Sangwine of the Highways Agency. The film-essayist Chris Petit and I spent a morning on the road with Sangwine. The man was a visionary, a landscaper and motorway horticulturalist. He realised that taking on the orbital loop was the contemporary equivalent of getting a Capability Brown commission. Motorways were the last great public parks. Sangwine knew every weed, every salt-resistant clump of grass. He spoke lovingly of roe deer and short-tailed voles. The Highways Agency had planted more broadleaf woodland around the M25 than anywhere else in England. 'We have introduced the woodland flora you associate with ancient, semi-natural woodlands,' Sangwine boasted. 'Bluebells, dog mercury.'

Sangwine was there for the opening party, the marquee on an old airfield, the lunch that Thatcher didn't attend. She arrived in a bullet-proof car with security outriders. She snipped the ribbon and vanished. Sangwine pointed out the exact spot, an emergency phone kiosk on the northside hard shoulder, close to where the River Colne flows under the motorway, close to the padlocked shell of Napsbury Hospital.

The opening of the road was a moment of tremendous occult significance; within minutes the first circumnavigators were on the move. Simon Calder, one of nature's folding-bike men, travel editor of the *Independent*, had his thumb out. No fear of the snipper, the scissor-madame. He found the experience 'dull'. No Kerouacian epiphany, no download of spiritual gain.

No members of the general public, the great unwashed, were allowed to

witness the ceremony. Corporate freebies. Big time blacktop sprayers and their guests. Plus vetted journalists, Murdoch's tame jackals. A guest list like the Dome bonanza. The first car breaks down at 11.16 a.m., precisely one minute after opening time. Within hours, it is perfectly clear that this unmagical orbit is the absolute contrary of the future Millennium Dome: the M25 instantly exceeds its expected quota of visitors, day trippers, casuals – where the flow to the Dome shrivels, week by week, until the promoters are forced to drag in school kids, the disadvantaged, confused tourists bribed with a ticket to ride the London Eye. Those who thought the downriver coda was compulsory, the price they had to pay for their ascent into the clouds.

Driving around the road was useless, as I discovered when I endured 250 miles in a day, with Chris Petit, clockwise and anticlockwise, coming in off my old favourite, the A13. And detouring into Lakeside, Thurrock. Into Theobalds Park and Heathrow. More was less, further was nowhere. In the morning, after we paid our pound and crossed the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge, we dragged, lurched, crawled on a three-lane conveyor belt, side-on to single-occupant, lightweight jacket-on-hook, cellphone voyagers. Soon these unfortunates would be penalised for their brief period of meditative calm: soothing tapes, landscape-format viewing screens.

This, according to one commuter interviewed for a television documentary, was the best of it, the highpoint of the day. The only contact with the changing seasons, the Surrey hills, canny roadside plantings. With England. This was the only respite from work stress, the on-line office, domestic responsibility. A car trip, Southend to Reigate, pushed up the heart rate but smoothed the soul; easily accessed reverie, a sensuous interplay of light and movement. Novelty that is only novelty because the route is so familiar.

On summer evenings, listening to a concert or radio play, one man admitted that he would go the long way home: West Byfleet, Staines, Uxbridge, Abbots Langley, Potters Bar. But regulations, imported from the States, will tax solitary motorists, those who refuse to share their pod, those who need this quiet time; they'll be shunted into the slow lane. Ostracised for the only reason that makes it worth running a gas-guzzling, money-burning machine.

Nobody can decide how long the road is, somewhere between 117 and 122 miles. By the time you've driven it, you don't care. You should be way out in another eco-system, another culture: Newport (Mon.), or Nottingham,

or Yeovil. The journey must mean something. Not a wearied return, hobbled, to the point of origin.

It was obvious, therefore, that the best way to come to terms with this beast was to walk it. To set out, counterclockwise, from Waltham Abbey, and to complete the circuit before the (official) eve of the New Millennium.