

**RIGHT** Leah Pattison contracted leprosy while helping sufferers in India; she returns to England about once a year.  
**BELOW** After arriving in the UK with nothing, Lata Patel now lives in a mansion; as Mayor, she met the Queen

### FROM REFUGEE TO MILLIONAIRESS

**Lata Patel fled Uganda penniless and homeless at the age of 16. Now a millionairess, 43-year-old Lata lives with her husband Kantilal, 60, and their 20-year-old daughter Krishna, in a mansion in North London.**

'When I first arrived in London, in 1972, I only had the clothes I stood in. I had to work all the hours of the day just to pay the rent and put food on the table. My family had been forced out of our home in Uganda by the dictator Idi Amin. We were Asian, and Amin had decided he didn't want us in the country. It was quite a shock. We had to leave practically overnight and were only allowed to take £300 with us. My mother had died three years before and my father wanted us to go back to his native India, but I had just met my future husband, Kantilal. My father didn't approve of the match because I am a higher Hindu caste than Kantilal, but KD, as I call him, worked hard and was doing well in business. It was so hard leaving my father and brothers, but we'd heard about opportunities in Britain and I decided to join KD and come here. He had to leave his assets behind and start all over again. At first, we shared a tiny, two-bedroom house with another family in a poor area. The furniture was threadbare and sometimes I'd worry about how I was going to get money for the gas, electricity and water meters.

'We had nothing, so we never went out. Instead, I'd work all day as an insurance clerk and evenings and weekends as a petrol-pump attendant. I used to get home after midnight, so exhausted that all I could do was collapse into bed. The next morning I'd get up at the crack of dawn and do it all over again. I was only 16, hardly spoke English and was terrified of answering the phones at work because I couldn't understand what the callers were saying. In Uganda, the weather was warm and sunny and our neighbours were friendly. But in London, I remember how cold it was. I couldn't afford warm clothes and had to rely on handouts of jumpers and coats. My wages were £16 a week, but half of that went on my bus fare to and from work. A year later, I gave up my insurance job and worked full-time on the petrol pumps, where my husband also had a job. It was a gruelling routine, from 6am to midnight. While other girls my age bought fashionable clothes and partied, I could only dream of a better life. Gradually, our constant toil paid off. KD was appointed to run several service stations, while I trained the cashiers. And all that time we saved and saved.



'Then, in 1977, KD and I had enough money to invest in our own petrol station in Southall, Middlesex. Over the next 15 years, we bought nine more stations. In 1985, we purchased the beautiful home we live in now. From worrying where our next meal was coming from, I now live in a fabulous six-bedroom house with an indoor swimming pool, my own mini-gym and electric gates. My dream of decorating it with sumptuous sofas, paintings and chandeliers has finally been fulfilled. I drive a specially made lilac Mercedes, wear white silk saris or Versace, and regularly throw grand parties. My husband and I donate a percentage of our profits to charity. Because of the difficulties of my past I wanted to help others, so I became involved with community work, and in 1986 a Labour councillor suggested that I should stand as a candidate for Brent Borough Council. I'd never made a public speech before and thought I wouldn't stand a chance. However, that year I won a local election for Labour. Three years later, I was appointed Deputy Mayor of Brent, and in 1996 I became Mayor. During my year in office I was chauffeured to over 1,000 glamorous functions and I even met the Queen and Tony Blair. Looking back, I really believe my hard start in life paid off. As my husband always maintains, you reap what you sow. I started from scratch with nothing – if I can be a success, anyone can.'



**'Looking back, I really believe my hard start in life paid off. If I can be a success, anyone can'** Lata Patel



'I only come home to earn enough cash to support myself. Money no longer matters to me'

Leah Pattison

#### FROM PAINTER TO LEPROSY WORKER

**From the age of ten she wanted to be a famous painter. But five years ago, Leah Pattison, 28, from County Durham, left her family, friends and career behind to help women and children with leprosy.**

'At my parents' four-bedroom country cottage, I have my own carpeted room with a comfortable bed, a wardrobe of clothes, and a bathroom with hot and cold running water. 'In the Indian city of Nagpur, where I now live, I have no bedroom to call my own. I share a small, one-storey, cement house with a family of eight. There's no modern plumbing – we wash with buckets of cold water from a well – and I sleep on a blanket on the concrete floor. In summer, it's so hot that we all sleep on the roof, exposed to mosquitoes, traffic fumes and constant noise. 'Looking back, I never thought I'd end up here. I did an art degree at Preston University and was determined to make my name as an artist and open my own studio. First, though, I decided to spend a year in India. 'I got a job teaching English and art to a group of girls who were patients in a leper colony. I thought leprosy was a medieval disease that no one got any more. I've always been a hypochondriac – if I sneezed

I thought I had flu. But I told myself that I was healthy, so I'd be safe. I was wrong. 'On the night I arrived at the colony, all of my money – about £1,000 in travellers cheques – had been stolen on the 36-hour train journey. I was distraught, but when the sun rose I was stunned by how beautiful the place was: 200 acres of crops with every family in their own little hut, nothing like the eerie, gloomy atmosphere I'd imagined. 'At first, I recoiled at the sight of patients who were deformed, scarred or had wounds infested with maggots. I changed dressings, remembering all the time that this was much worse for the patient than it was for me. 'Some of their stories affected me so much that I knew I could never go back to my old life. Two girls, for example, aged ten and 12, had seen their father, an alcoholic, set fire to their mother because she had leprosy. 'After six months my visa ran out and I had to return home. But back in the UK, life seemed so trivial. I realised how we surround ourselves with so many things we don't need and how wasteful we are with food. A month later I told my family I was giving up on becoming an artist to go back to India. 'Even contracting leprosy myself three years ago hasn't put me off. At first I thought the patches of dry skin on my wrists were eczema

until a friend recognised the symptoms three days before my 26th birthday. Although I knew it was curable, I was very frightened. 'Sure enough, after a six-month course of drugs, any sign of leprosy had gone. Without treatment the nerves die and your hands and feet become deformed. You can catch it through sneezing or skin contact. 'Four years ago I began a project called START to provide leprosy-affected women and children with better living conditions. If women contract leprosy, they're often disowned by their husbands and left to fend for themselves. 'I've gone door-to-door through the slums of Nagpur to find women who need help. 'I only come home to earn enough cash through bar work to support myself. It's cheap to live in India – I survive on £1,000 a year. Money and success no longer matter to me. 'As for love, I'm still young and have plenty of time to meet someone. My ideal man would be involved in the same kind of work as me. 'I do miss my family and, for some reason, I hanker for fish and chips. Also, if you trip over in the street in India, nobody helps you – in Britain people show more care. But I love my life in India. Even though it's a million miles away from what I imagined I'd be doing at 28, I know I've found the real me.'

Sally Morgan