

## **Wandsworth, My Life, My World**

Before I had my son, I was a typical commuter – living in Southfields, and travelling in to central London every day on the Tube. I always had the sense that Wandsworth was a good place to live, but I only knew it very superficially. I left for work early each morning, hurrying to the station and elbowing my way on to the train. On the way back it was usually dark and the only thing I was interested in was getting home as quickly as possible. Even at weekends, my partner and I were often away or spending our time going out in town.

Getting pregnant forced me, quite literally, to slow down. As I got bigger and bigger, people started to smile at me and start conversations: in the street, the chemist's, the doctor's surgery, and even on the train, where I was often offered a seat.

The effect was even more pronounced once I was actually pushing a pram around. The days are long and difficult to fill when you have a young baby, and I was eager to start conversations with anybody who looked even vaguely interested. Before long, I had met lots of my neighbours, the local shopkeepers, the librarians and the window cleaner. I noticed how people – especially elderly people – would seem to light up when they looked into the pram. And I realised for the first time that communities need children as much as children need a community to belong to.

Now my son is three years old. Instead of striding along the way I did in the old days, we take our time. We know the name of our postman and talk to him every day. We swap babysitting sessions with our neighbours and water their plants when they are on holiday. At the library, my son is allowed to date stamp his own books, which he thinks is the best thing ever. We stop to talk to the men digging up the road and they explain to him what they are doing and let him look at their drills and cement mixers. Once, a fire engine was parked in our street and the firemen let him climb up to sit inside.

Thanks to the hours and hours I have spent in the local parks, I notice when the first blossom starts to come out, when a new climbing frame has been installed, and I know where the best conkers are to be found. If a new shop or café opens, I am eager to try it out. Now, when I go shopping alone, our local shopkeepers ask me about my son and I ask after their families. I know whose wife is visiting relatives in India, and whose daughter has just started school. My world might have narrowed since I became a mum, but it has certainly deepened.