

community **links**

making links

fifteen visions of community

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**FITZROY
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A Life in W1

A Central London School Governor

Anne Shewring

I'VE JUST COME BACK from a school assembly. As a school governor, I go to a fair number of assemblies on everything from forgiveness to the discovery of the gun-powder plot; but this one was rather special. Our Chair had gathered the children together to tell them of the governors' decision to appoint the current Acting Head to the permanent position of Headteacher. To be honest, I cried a little bit, although I tried not to let the Year Six boys next to me see. Partly, they were tears of relief – appointing a new Headteacher is a pretty stressful procedure for all involved – but they were also, I think, tears borne out of pride, pride in our school, in our children and in our community.

I live in central London. You could call it the West End, but that sounds too swanky. The area is known as Fitzrovia, which we locals like better because of its literary overtones. It is said that this district (just north of Oxford Street and south of the Euston Road) was named after the Fitzroy Tavern, where, during the first half of the twentieth century, literary bohemians such as Dylan Thomas, Augustus John and George Orwell, would while away a few hours – or days. A more likely, but far duller explanation is that like most of Central London, it was named after the dynasty who owned that land, in this case the Fitzroy family.

Fitzrovia is in the very heart of London. You might walk along Oxford Street on a Saturday, battling against the crowds heading for John Lewis or Top Shop, and it might never occur to you that just a few streets to the north, real people are living and working. Actually, if you'd asked me five years ago who had a W1 postcode, I'd have answered tycoons and heiresses. No one on a middle or low income could afford it. Surely. But the truth is different.

There has been a community here at least since the eighteenth century, but it was always different to that of the more wealthy Mayfair and Bloomsbury, with their smart residential squares. We have Robert Adams's Fitzroy Square, but the majority of the streets are irregular and unimposing. The housing is predominantly small flats. Many were built in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century to house trades and crafts people, particularly from the nearby clothing business, while the Quakers built some housing for workers from Soho's theatreland. Today these older blocks are interspersed with post-war developments such as the one I live in, which was built by the council in the 1960's, as well as a growing number of massively expensive 'luxury' new-builds and conversions, which tend not to be luxury at all, just small and lacking any storage.

But lots of people live here. And, contrary to what I had expected, it is a community in every sense of the word. Sure, we have a floating population, like any other area of London. Students from UCL, health-workers from UCH, drug dealers from God knows where: they all come and go, but there is also a large and stable population whose children go to school here; people who attend church, play sport at the Warren, or hang out at the Fitzrovia Community Centre. If you live here, and walk down Cleveland Street, you are almost bound to run into someone you know, a person for whom this is their neighbourhood too.

One of the things that makes London hard work is the commute. It takes up your life and your energy. Both my partner and I had done it for years and, when we moved back to London after a few years living in Portland, Oregon, we thought we'd try to replicate the benefits of small city living by find a place in Central London. Of course, we had no real expectation of finding somewhere we could afford, but it was worth a try. In the end, what we could afford was an ex-ex-Council flat. Our block is low-rise, about 250 properties, with a huge central courtyard, where children are relatively safe to play, and a Westminster Children's Society nursery in the basement. (Although my son has been gone from there for three years, we still think of that place as a childcare miracle. Can you imagine, having the most fantastic and affordable nursery, literally, on

your doorstep? I think those people saved my sanity but that's a whole other story.) While even after their recent redecoration, the communal areas are a tad scruffy, and the utilitarian lift is starting to show every one of its thirty-five years, the very fact that this is not a 'luxury development', means that the flats here, while certainly not fancy, are light and airy, have kitchens big enough to hold a family-size table, and even, joy of joys, some storage space.

These 250 flats house an odd collection of people, about half of which are still the Council's tenants. There are people here who were themselves raised in these flats and are now doing the same with their own children, people from all kinds of cultural backgrounds. So, like most other areas of London, we have neighbours who originate from Cyprus, Bangladesh and Turkey, from Liverpool and Newcastle, from the USA, and from just round the corner. Families and older people: mothers who themselves went to the school where I'm a governor and who now, thirty years later, send their own children there.

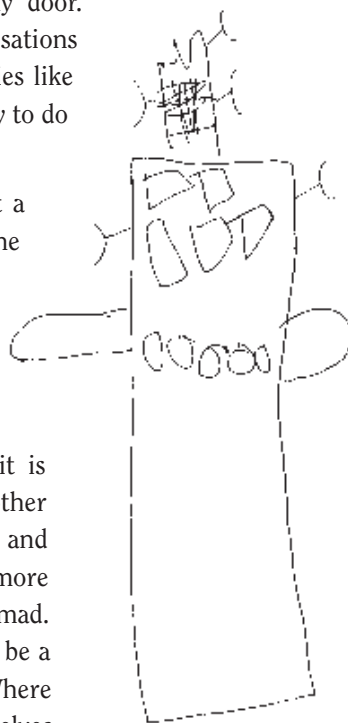
Actually, the school is a pretty good measure of the community. It's a Church of England school, but over fifty percent of our families are Muslim. Most of the children live in small, high occupancy flats. Whether they be the children of Nobel prize-winning scientists (yes, really), of restaurant owners or pub managers, of staff at the Chinese or Polish embassies, or, indeed, of recent immigrants still looking for work, the uniformity of housing (no one is going home to a four-bedroomed, two-garaged house in the suburbs) in some ways acts as a social leveller. It doesn't mean all the children have the same advantages, of course, but it does rather even things out. If we are all living in a limited amount of space, there are inevitable restrictions on the way social differences between children can be marked. We all have to play in the park, for example. Children don't tend to have elaborate birthday parties (for which, much thanks), while visiting one child in their home is pretty much like visiting any child. Larger families mean things are more crowded, but not that much more.

And fathers are around. That's one of the huge differences I notice between our school and, for example, the school I went to, where fathers were only ever seen at Christmas concerts and the odd PTA cheese and wine evening. Maybe things are different everywhere now, but at least half the parents collecting children in the afternoon will be fathers. In part, although not wholly, that's because our parents tend to work near to where they live, which is also near to where their children go to school. Fitzrovia is home to many media-advertising-digital companies, to film workshops, to architects and publishers, as well as to university and NHS establishments and the huge retail and

catering employers of Oxford Street and Soho. Whether you're on the board or drive a board member around, proximity between your work and home life is a good thing. Most people walk or cycle to school. We have very, very few children who arrive by car. School trips are usually undertaken on foot and let's face it, there are no shortage of great destinations nearby.

This is a community that is truly alive. People are working *and* living next door to each other and they contribute different things to the area. Of course, there are people who commute in and out of Fitzrovia, working in local offices and never once considering the folk who live in the flats above them. But that's ok. It means the streets are busy. It means Cleveland Street can support a row of great general shops and cafés, while on Great Portland Street, we can indulge at the smart, French Villandry. It means there are dry cleaners and dentists two minutes from my door. More, importantly, it means that we have organisations like the BBC and the Wigmore Hall, and companies like Nike and ARUP, all just down the road and all ready to do fantastic work with our school.

Of course, there are problems. Fitzrovia isn't a modern day Trumpton. Occasionally, I step out of the lift to see that some local graffiti specialist has been at work again. The old ladies in this block worry about strangers in the building and the dreadful TV reception. If you have a son, finding a decent secondary school can feel like looking for the Holy Grail, while it is almost impossible to persuade a plumber or any other kind of tradesman to face the Congestion Charge and the vast cost of parking here. And if I have one more random thing nicked off my bicycle, I think I'll go mad. More seriously, while space, or the lack of it, may be a social leveller, it can also be a pain in the neck. Where do teenagers go when they want to shut themselves away from their parents? No one has a garden. Many of the children at our school share one or two bedroomed flats with parents, siblings and even extended family. It's hard for children to find a quiet place to do homework or play, or for parents to wind down after work. And it's expensive here. If you don't live in a Council property, rents are massive so that moving to anywhere larger is,



BT Tower

drawn by Arthur

for most people, out of the question. At school, the building itself is a hundred years old and almost entirely impractical as a modern learning environment. We have no green space and have had to adapt the roof-top to create an extra playground for our juniors. And there's no point in denying that multi-cultural, multi-social Britain is right on our doorstep, along with all its wonderful advantages and challenging concerns.

But here's the really shocking news. People in Central London do know their neighbours. We do look out for each other. We do care, and I think that this, in the end, is why I felt so moved this morning. As governors, we had received letters and petitions from parents in support of particular candidates; our children had told us what they thought and why it mattered who led their school; two of our local church leaders – both governors themselves – had given serious thought to how the choice of a new Headteacher would affect the balance we aim to strike daily between maintaining our ethos as a Christian school yet remaining sensitive to, and valuing the faith of, children and parents from a non-Christian background. It's difficult stuff and, because it's not easy and because people do care, sometimes tempers fray. But that's OK. In the end, of course, being a governor for a small community like a primary school is not, as they say, brain surgery. And I know I'm not unique in thinking that our particular community is special above all others. It probably isn't. But here's the thing. Looking at the children this morning, watching how happy and safe they feel in their school, and how relieved they were that we had made the right choice, it's hard not to believe that among the would-be builders, teachers and restaurant owners sitting cross-legged on the hundred-year-old school floor, there isn't maybe one future brain surgeon. And that's why we have to get it right, not just for the children who may cure Parkinson's but for all of them.

■ **Anne Shewring**, aged 41, is a parent (particularly of school age children) a School Governor, a charity fundraiser, a would-be writer, a Starbucks customer and a Labour Party member – yes, still.

Arthur is seven. He lives near the BT Tower and describes how it follows him throughout the day. His favourite person in the cartoon 'Storm Hawks' is Junko. His communities are fans of Pokémon and Thomas the Tank Engine.



making links celebrates the 30th anniversary of **community links** the innovative charity at the forefront of community-based regeneration. This book draws together varied views on our communities and the way we interact. To mark our anniversary we invited some friends to take a look with us at the state of our communities and, perhaps more importantly, where we are going. Looking across the voluntary sector, the public sector, the corporate sector and beyond, thoughtful and committed individuals 'tell it like it is' from their experience and provide visionary, forward-looking insights about how we live together in geographical communities, communities of interest and online communities. Contributors write in a personal capacity about the issues that they think are important for us all.

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Barcode



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