

### Harlesden, I presume

by Anna Maxted



- 1 When Rose Rouse moved to Harlesden, a deprived area in north London, 18 years ago, she felt “apprehensive”. Its immigrant communities – West Indian, Somali, Afghan, and Irish – kept largely to their little enclaves, and there was a reputation for gun crime. But rather than 26, she determined to go out and make friends.
- 2 Armed with little more than a cackling laugh and infectious enthusiasm, Rouse approached strangers in the street, asking if they knew the whereabouts of an old landmark, the Willesden Hippodrome. “It was a ploy to chat and to ask questions you never usually get the chance to ask,” she says. And she discovered a heart-warming truth: that if you approach with an open spirit, people come out to you.
- 3 After various schemes – sitting under the famous Jubilee Clock with a sign reading “Talk to me” and organising a dance-fest in the streets with six friends in evening gowns – Rouse hit on the idea of inviting residents, including documentary maker Louis Theroux and comedian Alexei Sayle, to walk through Harlesden with her and chat about their lives. Her journeys of discovery will be published in a book, *A London Safari: Walking Adventures in NW10*.
- 4 “Harlesden is a colourful, wild cacophony,” says Rouse. “It’s dirty and gritty, and has this untamed air.” There are wig shops, grocery stores with

piles of plantains, Portuguese bakeries and Brazilian cafés. We pass Hawkeye Records, the reggae store that also sells bread, and there is a shop that sells “spray for de-demonising your house”.

- 5 Many residents, such as Leroy Simpson, have lived here all their lives. He is chair of Harlesden Town Team, which is a residents’ group that tries to improve the area. Among their achievements are the building of “pocket parks” with allotments where people can grow their own vegetables and playgrounds for children. Simpson’s parents fled Harlesden 15 years ago, but on a recent visit, he says, “they felt different”.
- 6 “They’ll be wanting to move back,” says Rouse. “If they can afford it,” says Simpson. “I just saw the first £1.5 million house get sold.” Rouse isn’t pushing for a posher neighbourhood: she just wants to make Harlesden friendlier. Simpson says: “Because we keep ourselves to ourselves, we’ve become isolated. We want to encourage people to come out into the community. We have a chance to rekindle all the good neighbourly stuff we used to do for each other.”

*The Sunday Telegraph, 2014*