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Kites

On Sunday the 15th of May, we went to the 18th Streatham Common Kite Day. Unlike our usual outings, we and many others did not want a calm hot day to enjoy the sunshine. Everyone wanted a breezy day, but hopefully some sun as well to keep us warm. I am happy to report that this is just how the weather turned out, a mixture of blue skies and clouds, sunshine and breezes. We arrived at Streatham Common railway station and our route towards the green was confirmed when we saw two large high flying kites visible over the rooftops. Streatham Common is a large area of grass and woodland in south London, much like all the other commons in London, but on this day it was completely transformed. The entire green was dotted with people, and the sky dotted with colourful kites, with lots of white strings between them. There were stalls in brightly coloured tents, selling food, souvenirs and of course kites, information on local societies, such as wildlife conservation and Friends of the Common, and a children's play area with bouncy games and slide.

A large arena was roped off in the centre for the displays of kite flying that were to take place during the afternoon. The atmosphere was one of excitement, anticipation and exploration, as this event is one of those where visitor participation actually makes the day happen. Families and children were buying kites, unpacking kites, launching kites and running around with them. The kite stalls had the wind vane types tethered to poles around the tents and I think my favourite was the rotating circular one with long tails. One always sees these at the seaside and I wouldn't have been surprised to turn around and glimpse the sea somewhere!

Most of the kites were geometric shapes in rainbow colours, with trailing tails. Many were in the shape of animals: swallow, owl, kite (a type of small hawk), bright pink flamingo, black menacing shark, mauve smiling fish, pink octopus and blue and green dragonfly. There were some airplanes and I liked the one that had a spiral tail attached to each side of the tailplane, looking like curling spinning vapour trails. A few were indeterminate beasties with big eyes, fangs and waving tentacles that one felt might sting like a jellyfish. One could buy the smallest kite, barely six inches in length, but being made of shiny mirrored plastic, it shone like a brilliant flying diamond, fluttering and glinting in the sun and appearing much larger than it actually was. These are ideal for flying at home in the garden, with the advantage that they can be flown by running along with them, without having to wait for a breezy day or a trip to the park.

In contrast to the personal kites, there were some large floating characters, giant nylon constructions filled out by the wind but held aloft by a large parachute type of kite much higher up. The first we saw was an enormous crocodile, and being long and thin he was undulating in the breeze, but fortunately not roaming around and filling his giant belly with any of us. He was later brought down and next up was a voluminous billowing blue teddy bear, swimming horizontally and swaying this way and that. Before we went home, we saw a third offering in the form of three angel fish tethered along the lower part of the line, also swimming in the air and enjoying every minute of their freedom before being packed away at the end of the day.

Kites

We watched two of the kite displays, where specialised kites were danced around the sky above the arena to music, swooping up and down, and crossing over each other and back again. The interesting thing about these is that they are not flat, so when they land, they are still standing up on their points, and can be jerked back into flight again. Dancing kites to the loud soundtrack of Chariots of Fire held our attention completely. The next display was two kites with extremely long tails that formed circles, loops and spirals as they followed the track of the kites. These reminded me of the toys we used to make, with a wooden sewing thread spool on a length of string, with a very long light plastic tail attached to the spool, which could be swung round in loops in the back garden.

We left mid-afternoon, and by that time the crowds had doubled and many were sitting on the grass on their picnic blankets, eating and drinking to get their strength up for another session of kiting and running around. The great thing about this type of event is that once it is over, that is not the end of kiting but just the beginning. Everyone who bought a kite can return at any time and continue flying their kites on the green. I am sure that once this happens, the children with smaller kites will start to literally raise their sights onto bigger kites, and if the budget doesn't stretch, then make their own. Plastic bags and barbecue skewers will start to reappear in wonderful new shapes, with a much loftier purpose in mind, attaining the freedom of the skies for their ground dwelling owners. (887 words)