

# Hidden Suburb – Abbeyfield House

Nestling off Erskine Hill in the cul-de-sac called Homesfield is one of the Suburb's best-kept secrets. For the past thirty-five years Abbeyfield House has provided sheltered housing for many elderly women and, more recently, men. Each resident has their own room with their own furniture and an en-suite with shower. Meals are taken together and there are common rooms. This sense of communal living is in keeping with the core values of the founder of the Abbeyfield Society, Richard Carr-Gomm.

Carr-Gomm was a regular Guards officer – he had been amongst the first troops into the Belsen camp – who came from a family with a history of charitable work. Dissatisfied with peace-time soldiering he made the dramatic decision to become a home help in the south east of

London in the docks area. He was known as 'the scrubbing major'.

Finding so much desperate loneliness amongst those he visited, he hit upon the idea of buying a house, which he would live in but would also provide rentable rooms for a variety of people – with common house-keeping and thus the advantages of companionship. The first house was purchased in Abbeyfield Road, Bermondsey, and in 1956 the Society was formed and named after it. By this time Carr-Gomm had been joined by his friend Christopher Buxton, who had banking connections. The Society was able to buy a second house, became a more professional venture, and thereafter grew rapidly. Often local church and Rotary groups took up the idea and used the experience and name provided by the Society.

Our local Society was founded in 1977 but it was some time before suitable premises could be found in the Suburb. It turned out to be 'St. Catherine's' in Homesfield – originally two houses ('Emma' and 'Rosemary' Cottages) – designed by Raymond Unwin and built by William Moss in 1912. St. Catherine's had originally been used to house Poor Law children and then 'tired young servants' where they could go between one situation and another – though they were not considered too tired to work when a money-earning laundry was added to the building at the back. Thereafter it was used by the Church of England's Children's Society (at that time bluntly named The Waifs and Strays Society). When they left, finally we had Abbeyfield House. It took some time to renovate

and it was 1983 before the first resident moved in. The first Open Day was held in 1985.

The house has been updated through the years – a lift was installed, and more recently all the rooms were altered to include en-suite showers. There are now eleven rooms plus a bedsitter, a small flat and a guest room.

Locally there has always been a Friends Committee – initially responsible for raising funds to help purchase the house and make it suitable. It was necessarily rather more active in the early years when Abbeyfield House was independent of the main Society in St. Albans. In recent years Mike and Norma Milner of North Square worked tirelessly for the House – Mike indeed became Chairman of the Regional Council and Trustee of the Greater London Abbeyfield Society. All those who knew Norma will

know how she gave unstintingly of her time – as in anything she committed herself to. Since her death last year Mike has retired from the Committee but still gives his good advice.

Abbeyfield UK was created to help struggling societies and rationalise unsuitable housing stock (some of the original housing was too small to be practical) and particularly to give advice with the now more complicated rules and regulations surrounding sheltered housing and nursing home care. Our local Society decided to come under the umbrella of Abbeyfield UK – now run from its head office at St. Albans. We answer to St. Albans and benefit from specialist staff and regional house managers who support our housekeepers.

One of the great strengths of the House is our staff. There is a rota of housekeepers – Lin Kenny, Laura Morgan, Chichi Habiba, Thelma Robinson, and Elaine Kenny, the general assistant. This year Lin celebrates thirty years with Abbeyfield and sixteen of those have been at

Homesfield. It is our Housekeepers who make it a home rather than a house.

We have Coffee mornings twice a year – amongst other activities – and anyone who would like to visit the House or who may be looking for a place for a friend or relative can come along to one of these or contact Abbeyfield House on 8455 2607.

There is still a committee of Friends of Abbeyfield, which helps to arrange outings for the residents and supports both the staff and the residents.

ANTHEA DAVIDSON



(Above) Lin Kenny, housekeeper of thirty years, and (below) residents enjoying the late summer sun



## Letters to the editor

NW11

**About the new H2**  
Dear Sir,

As I have not noticed any e-mails on the HGS List, our e-mail forum, about the new H2 buses which Metroline fully took over from Aviva in September, I wonder what proportion of residents use them and what they think about them? I am a frequent bus passenger and my road is on its route.

During the summer the service was very poor as some of the old

Aviva buses kept breaking down and the new Metro buses were not ready, so they ran irregularly. Since September however, the new buses have taken over completely and they are keeping more or less to time.

However, I should like to complain about the design of the buses, which provides seats on two levels. Having climbed up a step to get on the bus, where there are only six seats, one is then faced with a further double step to get to the other 13 seats. For anyone

with walking problems or carrying heavy bags, I fear this will be a difficult procedure.

I wonder if the designers realised that many of the passengers are elderly and may have difficulty in reaching these other seats. The six seats on the first level fill up first so elderly passengers will have to rely on others giving up their seats, which they often do.

Yours,  
Mrs W. Stick  
(nom de plume – name & address withheld)

NW11

**More about Hedgehogs**

Dear Sir,  
I just read with interest your hedgehog article (SN135, p3) which has just arrived – I understand ZSL want information about sightings for their Heath survey. Two nights ago we found a hedgehog in our garden (or rather our dog did, but he was quickly put into the house!). We googled about feeding them, and took the advice to put out a little wet dog food and some water, which had been taken by the morning. We think not by a fox, who would probably have picked up the container we left, rather

than leaving it under the plants where we'd placed it. I replaced the water yesterday.

About a month ago, or perhaps more, a neighbour found a hedgehog on the pavement on our street during the day. She asked my advice about moving it and I suggested she didn't, hoping that it would move under a hedge when it was quiet (I didn't want it to be traumatised). As far as I know, it found its way to safety.

We have had hedgehogs in our garden previously – we only know they are there when our dog starts a commotion, and in fact we don't usually let him into the garden at night, so it is likely they are there regularly, undetected.

We live in Greenhalgh Walk, so quite a distance from the Heath – I don't think they're crossing the A1!

Yours  
Dani Solomon

(Dani has told us hedgehogs continued to visit over the summer and so perhaps are less rare than most people think. I live not far away in Brim Hill and never see any in my garden. Perhaps I need to get a dog! Ed)

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