

# Senior Living

*Phil Kemp visits two providers of care for seniors and meets those committed to their well-being.*

When I was invited to visit two residential care homes over the Christmas period, I must be honest and confess that I had mixed feelings, given that I have had family and friends in care. However

what I was to experience first-hand I found to be both uplifting and inspiring. Prior to my visits I undertook some research into the sector and was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of cold statistics defining and assessing what is provided and to whom. But what I was to encounter were very caring and very professional human environments where people undoubtedly come first.

My first destination was the Robertson Nursing Home in Godalming, which is run by Beritaz Care and is housed in an impressive Tudor-style building tucked away on a leafy country lane.

Penny King, who has 25 years' hands-on experience working in the care sector, is the home's manager and very quickly put me at my ease. And during my visit it was evident that the residents I met were clearly enjoying the warm and relaxed living environment too.

"The home isn't purpose-built but has been converted and has a lot of character," said Penny. "Every room is very individual – from the smaller rooms to one that has got its own conservatory. And we encourage new residents to bring in items that mean a lot to them to personalise their room."



Penny's office overlooked one of the home's communal lounges where some residents were chatting over a cup of coffee, surrounded by Christmas decorations. "We do our utmost to make their

day and arrange activities to make a real difference. So, in September we had animals come and visit us in our lovely landscaped garden. A donkey, some pigs and goats – it really livened up their day," said Penny, and smiling added: "We have children come and visit too, which included a group of Cubs who came in to sing Christmas carols for us."

Other activities include cheese and wine evenings, music evenings and exercise sessions too, with the latter a weekly activity called very wittily 'Seniorcise' which provides residents with gentle exercise routines. The home also encourages visitors to bring in their dogs and children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to lighten up the residents' day.

"We recently had a visit from Jeremy Hunt, the local MP," explained Penny, pointing to a framed photo recording the event. "He actually overran his schedule because he was so engaging, sitting with residents and taking time to talk with them. It was a very proud moment for the staff too, and when I had a chance to talk to him we discussed some very important health-related topics, especially helpful given that he used to be the Health Secretary."

Prior to my visit I had picked up on a bit of publicity over the staff's new bright red tabards. "Yes, that was our little environmental bit towards reducing plastic waste. The old tabards were made out of plastic but the new ones are made out of a long-lasting material and do not need to be thrown away after each use. They look great too!" said Penny, smiling.



I could see staff busy in the kitchen and raised the question of food, which sometimes gets mixed responses from residents in homes. "Our chef works extremely hard with everybody. She plans the menus with the residents, and she changes them according to the season, summer through to winter. The chef will go around daily and will ask everybody for their choice. What would they like? What do they fancy today? Food is extremely important. It's a very social event. We really encourage people to come to the dining room. The more in the dining room the more sociable people will be and, inevitably, the more they will eat."

As part of my visit I was introduced to residents and visitors. Mary, who was sitting in the dining area enjoying some food, was keen to praise the staff and what they do. "I like the staff because they are very friendly, kind and helpful – and I really enjoy the music and singalongs we have. The singing at this time of year makes you feel very Christmassy!"

Alan, who was visiting his wife with a friend was keen to add: "She has several carers here and they are very caring indeed. It's a very friendly atmosphere so when you walk in you always feel at home which is incredibly important. And she enjoys socialising with the other people too."

I then headed over to Hatch Mill in Farnham to meet staff and residents, and to find out about the charity that runs this and other homes in the area.

The Abbeyfield Society was established in 1956 by a former Coldstream Guard, Richard Carr-Gomm, who had encountered a growing number of lonely older people that he realised needed support. Having resigned his army commission, he effectively became Britain's first male home help. He soon invited four of his elderly cares to join him to live in his house in south-east London, and that saw the start of more houses being provided for older people. By 1960, Abbeyfield Societies were established across London and throughout the country, and today there are 500 homes operated by the charity.





Hatch Mill in Farnham provides residential and nursing care in a large and spacious converted 18th century grade II building, which, following closure as a working corn watermill, saw various uses including an arts centre and rehearsal studios for the now defunct Redgrave Theatre. The home, which opened in 2001 and, following a full refurbishment, now provides 19 residential rooms on the ground floor and 27 for nursing care upstairs.

The Abbeyfield Wey Valley Society was launched in 1986 and is effectively the merging of society homes in Farnham, Guildford and Haslemere working on a not-for-profit basis, and which as a group provide home care, sheltered accommodation as well as residential and nursing care. Wey Valley House and Hatch Mill were their first two homes.

I met with Tracey Pollard, who as the society's Well-being Manager proved to be the perfect ambassador for the society,



especially as encouraging social interaction and engaging with activities to maintain mental awareness and sustain self-esteem is a core element of the care they provide.

“I started here in 2002 as a senior care assistant and now look after the outings and activities, and co-ordinate fundraising and events. I love it as I get to do all the fun jobs!” Tracey’s broad smile clearly endorsed this. “Our in-house activities are very resident-led, as you’ll find that activities across our three homes in Farnham are slightly different depending upon what the residents want.”

Given that my visit was over the Christmas period, the home was full of brightly-coloured decorations and there was a general festive feel about the place with residents clearly enjoying the atmosphere. “So activities can be anything from pilates and tai chi, musical entertainment, to skittles and hoopla. We’ve had musicians come in and play Christmas tunes, and it’s lovely to see residents singing along with smiles on their faces.”



When I arrived I had parked alongside Hatch Mill’s minibus

which had been provided by fundraising activities by the society as well as a grant from the National Lottery. "We have volunteers that help staff with outings, and again these are chosen by our residents. This year we've had trips to Hampton Court, Windsor Castle, Marwell Zoo and the Watts Gallery, amongst many other destinations."

The fact that these trips are clearly highly popular were endorsed by residents I was introduced to. "I very much enjoy the Runnymede boat trip along the Thames," said Alf, the home's longest stay resident. "And you get a very nice cream tea!" Shirley added: "The trip to Southsea with fish and chips down at the seaside is one of my favourites, and I must say that the staff here are very kind and do a wonderful job looking after us."

We also popped in to talk with Theo, whose room overlooks a pond in the garden where he watches the birds come and go, including regular visits from a heron. "I like all of the outings, and I do enjoy staying here and the staff are very friendly."

Phil Kemp is a Godalming-based writer and photographer. <http://www.weyriver.co.uk>

Robertson Nursing Home & Beritaz Care  
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Hatch Mill & the Abbeyfield Wey Valley Society  
<http://www.abbeyfieldweyvalley.co.uk>