

Finding friendship

In his third and final look at Wiltshire's almshouses Gary Lawrence visits two rural communities that provide a secure, happy home for people from an incredible variety of backgrounds.

IT IS a long way from the troubled hills of Romania to the carefully manicured splendour of St John's Hospital in Heytesbury but Alex Wilson has many reminders of her homeland around her.

She and husband Barnabas' well-ordered flat on the first floor of the Grade II listed almshouse, which gazes out over beautiful lawns, is decorated with paintings and photographs that trace her circuitous route here.

She and her English mother fled the communists who had seized power and came to England, the place of her mother's birth, in 1955 when her father, the celebrated philosopher and author Constantin Noica was arrested and eventually jailed. "My father was not liked by the regime because he was a philosopher and they took him away," recalls the 78-year-old. "His only sin in this world was being able to think and write things that were not communist based."

Her father was eventually freed in 1964 after a campaign by the fledgling Amnesty International and support from the likes of Graham Greene, a friend of her mother. "It was a difficult time, very hard but so long ago now," she adds.

She met Barn, as she calls her 86-year-old husband, at a church in Torquay and they married in 1989. They began commuting to a church in Bath until a member of the congregation saw an advert for a vacant apartment at the almshouse.

Although it is ostensibly for people living in Heytesbury, Nook and Tytherington the Hospital of St John, which has 44 residents, in 33 one and two bedroomed homes, administrator Paul Budd says there are other considerations too.

"Most residents have lived locally or their family live locally and they need to be closer to them or they have a local connection but at the point when a flat becomes available we do prioritise those with the most need," he says.

The almshouse was founded in 1449 by Walter Hungerford, who fought at Agincourt, and endowed by his daughter-in-law Lady Margaret in 1472. It provided a home for 12 men, usually former servants of the Hungerfords, and one solitary woman whose job it was to care for them.

The original building survived the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s but couldn't escape the ravages of the Great Fire of Heytesbury in 1765. The current building, costing a princely £1,600, was opened in 1769 and received modern extensions in the early 60s and 70s.

Alex and Barn say living in the glorious surroundings makes them feel safe and secure. "To some extent you are part of a community," says Barn. "This flat is marvellous because we have space and the view and the feeling that this is home."

"Everybody is very friendly and yet we can still live our own lives,

which is good for us because we wanted somewhere to live independently."

Paul, who took on the part-time role a year ago after 12 years running the famous rowing institution the Leander Club in Henley-on-Thames, says the attraction of living in a historic home surrounded by well-kept gardens is only secondary to the lifestyle it offers older people who value their independence.

"The great strength that an almshouse has over social housing is that there are a few rules, and if they are big enough, they have some element of staff on site. Almshouses foster and try to develop a sense of community, which perhaps other social service housing cannot provide to the same extent," he says.

That strength is appreciated by another example of the diversity to be found within the walls of an almshouse. Geordie twins Maureen Philbert and Muriel Pearce grew up in Whitley Bay and lived in Hexham in Northumberland – but an extraordinary family event brought the 89-year-olds to Wiltshire.

"I had a son, Stephen, before I was married so he was put up for adoption, that's what happened in those days," says Muriel. "He came back into my life 15 years ago when he searched for me and found me."

St John's Hospital in Heytesbury was founded in 1449 by Walter, first Lord of Hungerford and endowed by his daughter-in-law Margaret in 1472.



Clockwise: Alex and Barn Wilson in their flat at St John's Hospital in Heytesbury; St John's Hospital administrator Paul Budd in the gardens of the almshouse; Margaret and Brian Taylor recently celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary; Twins Maureen Philbert, left, and Muriel Pearce marking the 550th anniversary of St John's Hospital in May this year.

"I couldn't believe it at the time and I wanted to get to know him. He lives in Bradford on Avon so we moved down here to be near him."

The sisters, both widowed, moved to Warminster 13 years ago but wanted to leave within a year after someone let the tyres of their car down. "We were anxious to move somewhere where we felt a bit safer and someone at our church saw the advert for this place and it seemed just right," says Maureen.

Both trained as nurses but Maureen ended up working at the United Nations during the latter days of the Cold War and through the Gulf and Bosnian conflict in a role that she resolutely will not discuss. "It was in the 1980s and 90s and it was a hard job with very long days but it was a good job and I enjoyed it," is as much as she'll reveal.

Both say they enjoy the security of the almshouse. "We are very happy here because it does feel safe," says Muriel. "Helen (Johnson, the house supervisor) and Michael (Mee, grounds

and maintenance) are wonderful and if anything goes wrong they are here to fix it or help."

Michael, says Paul, is yet another member of the community with a fascinating background. "He farmed in Rhodesia and had family members killed by the Mugabe regime and he lost his farm," he says. "He got out with nothing and came to Heytesbury 20 years ago."

"He and Helen have hearts of gold beyond any reasonable measure – someone will say they haven't seen a resident's curtains open and she will be round to investigate or if the lights are on in a flat late at night, she'll be there and call an ambulance if needed."

Every resident has a story. Brian and Margaret Turner met at Butlins in Clacton, Essex, more than 60 years ago and lived in London before moving to Warminster to be nearer Margaret's mother. When 84-year-old Brian's pension from a bookmaker vanished along with the boss they came to St John 22 years ago.

It was something of a full circle for 80-year-old Margaret, who grew up in the village, and whose parents were once residents at the almshouse. "I can see the house I was born in through our window," she says. "I can remember the extension to this place being built and saying to my father 'put your name down'. My auntie was the first person to move into it when it was finished."

Brian was once treasurer of St John's social club. "We used to have whist drives, film shows, bingo, coach outings and birthday parties. Since Covid we've stopped everything, although the bingo has started again," he says.

Both say the complexion of the community has changed as younger people have moved in but Paul says this is a reflection on society as people in their 50s and early 60s fall into difficulty.

"There's lots of new people here and they are younger," says Brian. "They have a busier life and some of them work so we don't see them as much."

There are also full circles at Chafyn Grove Cottages in Zeals, near Warminster, which was built in 1865 by William Chafyn-Grove of Zeals House in memory of his mother. Today it is run by a team of dedicated trustees, led by chairman Lyndi d'Ambrumenil. It originally had four cottages but a barn at the rear was converted into a fifth in 2018. Zeal's Almshouse Charity won The Almshouse Association award for Excellence an Inspiration for its restoration and building programme.

Jenny Lucas found herself alone and isolated from friends and colleagues when she had to move to a small flat in Bourton a few miles away after the death of her husband Graham five years ago. "I didn't want to be isolated from everybody because it is really hard when you are a widow," she says.



HERITAGE



Top to bottom: Chafyn Grove Cottages, Zeals; Chafyn Grove Cottages trustees Lindi d'Ambrumenil, front left, Sarah Bullivant, Ross Coad, back left, and David Corbin; Bottom left: Jenny Lucas moved here five years ago. Right: Angie Savage loves working in the gardens.



Fellow bellringer David Corbin, who is a trustee at the almshouse, told her about a vacant flat. "I didn't think I was entitled," says the 71-year-old in her cosy living room. "David asked me to come and look but I wasn't sure. When I saw it I loved it. "It's lovely here, I don't feel frightened at all being on my own, I know there are people close by and my family aren't far away. The trustees are really kind, you only have to pick up the phone and they are happy to help with anything."

Angie Savage was left shuffling from one rented property after another after her divorce five years ago. "Either the landlord wanted to sell it or they wanted to move back in and I thought I was getting to nearly 70 and I wasn't going to be working much longer, I was going to have to find something which was affordable," she says.

Jenny's daughter is married to Angie's son and when she heard about another vacant flat she tipped Angie off. "I was over the moon with this place because it had been refurbished," says the 74-year-old former garden centre worker. "I am able to do some work in the garden, which I love, I'm always out there."

Asked what she loves about her home, her answer neatly sums up the sentiments of every resident of these amazing institutions I've spent time with. "At my time of life it is all about feeling secure and not having to worry," she says.

"As you are getting older you can't cope with all the ups and downs like you could when you were younger so that adds to the feeling of security. I wanted to spend my last days somewhere that was going to be my home and I wasn't going to be uprooted somewhere else."

There is no doubt almshouses play a vital role in society, providing affordable housing and a supportive network that is cared for by truly committed staff and trustees – and more trustees are always needed. Nick Phillips, CEO of the Almshouses Association, a charity that represents and advocates for 1,600 independent almshouse charities across the UK, believes policymakers disregard their importance.

"Almshouses are the oldest form of community housing with a history dating back a thousand years," he says. "Today, some 1,700 independent almshouse charities provide warm, safe homes to more than 36,000 people in housing need."

"Yet, this effective housing model is often overlooked by both policymakers and the general public, seen more as quirky vestiges of a bygone era. In reality, they are a sign of great social activism, run by local dedicated trustees for local people and legally protected from being repurposed, ensuring they are available in perpetuity for future generations to come." **WL**

• Find out more at almshouses.org.

