

The man behind the grand design, Mr. Stanley Kermode, surveys a peaceful haven of purpose-built flats for elderly people at Homelands.

THE PIONEER



A PLACE OF OUR OWN

by Jack Dwyer

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Back in 1945 a woman complained at a public meeting in Christchurch that when the health of old people faded they were moved to public assistance institutions—workhouses as they were more familiarly known. These places were often in other parts of Hampshire, and elderly couples were permanently parted, a sad and disgraceful commentary on the times

"Cannot something be done for our old people?" appealed the woman, a Mrs. Churchill. Something was done. The Christchurch Old People's Welfare and Housing Society Limited was formed.

Using existing legislation it borrowed money from the government through the town council and started building homes for the elderly.

That was 23 years ago. Today the society has largely taken over the town's burden of housing the old folk. It owns 366 flats, three clubs and dining halls, two nursing homes, and a welfare home. Hundreds enjoy good housing at cheap rents, and married couples live their remaining years together.

It is a remarkable record. The honorary secretary, Mr. Stanley Kermode, estimates in the annual report just issued that the present market value of all the society's properties, after paying off all mortgages, loan stock, and other debts, is nearly £500,000. Yet even today the total subscription of all the members of the society is a mere £20. Half-a-million pounds worth of property for £20 — not bad going for a voluntary body.

Incidentally, Mrs. Churchill is still on the management committee, along with three other women who have been on it from the beginning: Mrs. Brown, Mrs. House, and Nurse Mitchell.

The pioneer society in Christchurch has been the model for many similar societies up and down the country, so that the success in housing the elderly of Christchurch can be multiplied many times.

The success of the Christchurch society is due to a great extent, says Mr. Kermode, to the efforts of its building foreman, Mr. Ron Tilley, and his team "who believe in giving full value for the money they receive."

They produce for about £1,000 each flats which, according to the Ministry of Housing's own cost yardstick, should cost well over £2,000, says Mr. Kermode.

But many people inside and outside the society believe that the presiding genius is Mr. Kermode himself. A 63-year-old property owner and builder living in Barrack-road, he has fought an uncompromising battle for the elderly.

Some people who do not understand the non-conformist mind think he's a strange man. He is individualistic to the point of eccentricity. He fought a parliamentary election in Bournemouth as an Independent—and you can't be much more eccentric than that.

He hates political parties and once refused the Christchurch mayoralty because he felt the people preferred the party line to his brand of independent thought.

His ambition

He is beloved by the old people, and one day those who live over the border in Bournemouth may have cause to praise his name. His ambition is for the Christchurch society to move into Bournemouth and build the many flats which, he says, are "so badly needed" there.

He is passionately antagonistic to Bournemouth's policy of building old people's homes which he describes as places where the occupants "sit round like potted geraniums."

Bournemouth is very backward, he believes. He once said, "It is strange that while we are closing old people's homes down, Bournemouth is opening them up." To sharpen the point the Christchurch society closed yet another of its homes, Homelands, in the past year. Twelve flats have gone up in its place.

Mr. Kermode once told me: "We find it gives the old folk a tremendous fillip to live in their own independent little units."

The flats are specially designed for ease of management by people aged anything from 60 to 80 and are completely self-contained, centrally-heated, and all-electric.

The difficulties have proved to be few; the blocks do not even have wardens. "We have no need of them when there is a next door neighbourhood within a couple of yards," said Mr. Kermode.

There speaks the individualist who believes that old people should be treated as individuals and not as so many "cases" to be housed.