A visit to Brown’s Field House, The Abbeyfield Society: Bloom Awards 2011 Winners

You’ll find Brown’s Field House, a residential care home with 27 beds, modestly tucked away in a hushed cul-de-sac about 10 minutes’ taxi ride from Cambridge train station. But don’t be fooled by the unobtrusive location and plain façade, there are wonders within. The scholarly quiet of the road is banished as the front door opens and I’m welcomed in, as if to a party in full swing. It’s lively, people walking about and lots of chatter. Classical music is playing, loudly. Marsha Tuffin, the care home manager, is my hostess and she’s dead keen to show me round.

I’m first shown what was once the bathroom but which is now a hair salon – a lady is having her hair done by a carer. Nearby is a portable trolley, formerly the medicine cupboard, full of beauty products stocked from the £1 shop, Marsha proudly tells me. Marsha turns out to be the great innovator when it comes to decorating and kitting the place out. She recycles and renovates. She’s a big Argos fan. She wanted a striped barber’s pole and lantern for the salon and looked on e-bay, far too expensive, so she improvised convincingly with an Argos lamp, £9, and a coke bottle painted red and white.

The tour continues, objects everywhere you look. It’s a fairground ride of delights and curiosities and for someone like me, with a poor sense of direction, a bit of blur as corridors and rooms lead in to each other – doors are always open so there are no dead ends. The feng shui is good, flow and movement, no stagnation. No wall is bare; there are handbags on hooks, beads, mirrors. Marsha tells me that objects often disappear, get picked up, moved around only to resurface two weeks later – it’s a good sign she says, it means there’s engagement. There are paintings by residents and...
memory boxes mounted on the wall full of mementoes of group outings, of a happy day in Hunstanton. In the activity room there’s a dressing up corner, a teddy in a pram, a piano, a sweet shop (popular with the great grandchildren who visit). Then there’s the ‘reminiscence pod’ – a pop-up room setting with 1950s wallpaper and an old fashioned TV that has within its shell a state-of-the-art set pre-programmed with old films and TV programmes; Brief Encounter is cued up to watch. There are books everywhere of every kind, large print, picture books, and the classics – a copy of the Rule of Benedict catches my eye (this place is surely far more fun than the old saint’s ideal of communal living) and Parky, the biography of Michael Parkinson, Dignity Ambassador.

Over the years, the proportion of residents with dementia has greatly increased at Brown’s Field House – it’s now 85 per cent. But only 2 residents out of 24 with dementia need to take anti-psychotic drugs. Because the atmosphere is so homely and informal, it’s easy to overlook the complete professionalism at work here. The distress that comes with dementia is managed and prevented by the crafted environment and themed areas that make manifest and that validate the past and private worlds of residents – if a lady resident believes she’s still on the west end stage singing Oklahoma, then bring in an old style theatre mirror with lights - and by the skilled attention of staff who use devices like timelines to explain patiently the past to people and their journey to the present. Tellingly, most of the carers have worked here for over 20 years. If someone’s off sick, everyone else mucks in; no temporary staff are brought in.

The tour continues out in the garden where Marsha has big plans for spending the £1,000 Bloom Awards prize money, including raised beds and colourful garden furniture. But there’s already a lot to admire - vegetable plots, a greenhouse, hens, rabbits and guinea pigs. Residents are encouraged when they move in to bring with them old items from their garden – so there are statues, bird tables, sheds, even a complete out-house. These items are
carefully placed outside their owner’s rooms, so they can see them when they’re looking out of the window.

Lunchtime next, a civilised delight that I share with three ladies, Pat, Margo and Joan. There are only three gents in the home, too few says Pat. The colourful menu on the wall promises lasagne with salad and French dressing, followed by ice cream and hot chocolate sauce. To celebrate their Bloom Award, residents had already enjoyed late morning nibbles at 11, washed down with a glass of sherry, but they still have room for lunch. There are snacks and sweets always at hand in the lounge areas – grazing is encouraged, keeping the blood sugars up. Marsha says it’s usual for people to gain weight while living there.

Once lunch is finished I’m invited to a game of table tennis by Joan, who once worked in a youth club where she picked up a taste for the game. A mini table tennis table is wheeled out (another bargain from Argos) and we play, Joan expertly with dollops of spin and angled cross-table sizzlers; me defensively, with a basic ping-pong flat backhand, just about keeping the rallies going.

We head back to the dining area. After lunch it’s quiet time – most people have headed off for an afternoon nap but a few still linger in the dining room, leafing through a picture book or knitting. Marsha tells me that while mornings are the worst time for people with depression, it’s straight after lunch which can be the most distressing time for people with dementia – it’s the time they often ask to go home. Time for me to go too. I would happily stay longer.

Carwyn Gravell, 2011