

A tribute

**Richard
Carr-Gomm**

2 January 1922–27 October 2008



Richard with Dame Judi Dench in 2006

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An idea is born

Richard Carr-Gomm was a warm, colourful man with an interesting history. His grandfather, Francis Carr-Gomm, took up the case of John Merrick whom Victorian England labelled the Elephant Man, enabling him to live his last days in peace and dignity.

Richard shared with his grandfather a capacity to reach out to people in need of support and to go against the societal tide. In 1953, a Major in the Coldstream Guards, he decided to travel back from Malta to England slowly, via Italy and France. He stopped at 'Cottolengo' in Turin. This was "a home, or really a small town", where eight thousand people of all ages lived. There were old people and

"...an ordinary house in an ordinary street that still showed the effects of the blitz. But inside something new was just beginning."



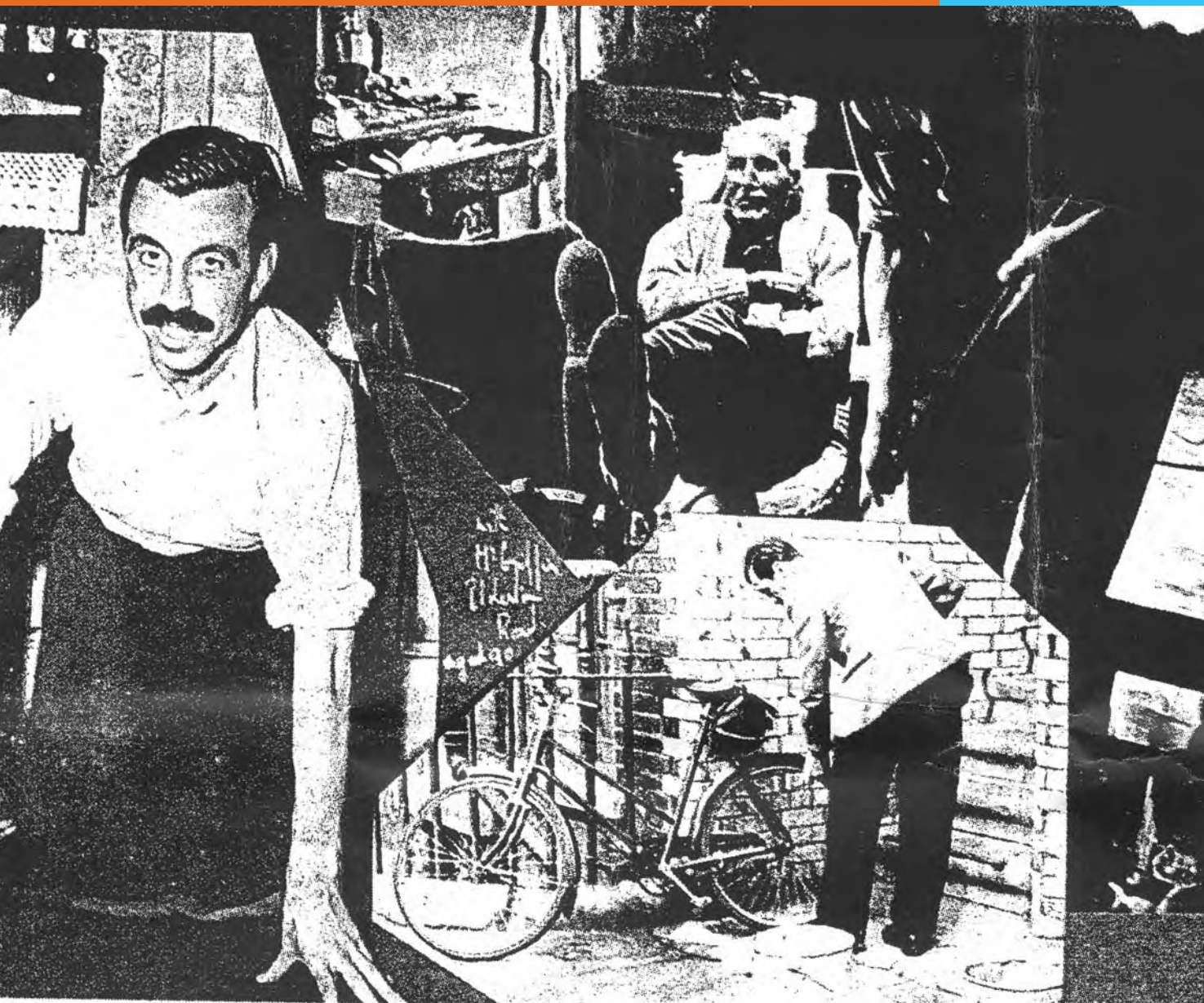
Eugenia Road



Richard Carr

orphans; people with mental illness and people with physical disabilities. All were cared for "by an order of sisters in a Christian atmosphere". Richard reflected that, in England, people in these situations would be supported by the Welfare State, "...but I began to think that there might be some left out. I wondered what happened to them."

You can read the story of how Richard came to dedicate



Gomm

himself to the welfare of other people through Abbeyfield and his other charities in his autobiography, *Push on the Door* (details from Abbeyfield's head office at the address on the back cover).

On 17 December 1955, 50 Eugenia Road in Bermondsey looked just what it was: an ordinary house in an ordinary street that still showed the effects of the blitz. But inside something new was just beginning. An elderly lady and gentleman, Miss Saunders and Mr Halnan who had both been living alone,

isolated within their own community, had moved in that day to be looked after by their rather unlikely housekeeper, the dashing 34-year-old ex-Coldstream Guards officer - Richard Carr-Gomm. The first Abbeyfield house had been born.

Miss Saunders, who was 82, had lived on her own for many years. She had chronic bronchitis and could scarcely walk, as she had worn out her legs after a lifetime of weaving neckties on a treadle. Her landlady refused to let in visitors and so the home help, on her



visits, had to throw pebbles at the upstairs window and then wait while Mrs Saunders laboriously struggled downstairs to let her in.

Mr Halman was 78 and had been a widower, living alone for 25 years. His sight was failing because of cataracts and his legs were weak.

*“...he found a letter
from a complete
stranger
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cheque for £250
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of the work.”*

A few months later the Abbeyfield Society was formally named. Richard purchased five more houses in Bermondsey and when a sixth likely prospect came up for sale, fellow enthusiasts contributed money towards the cost. Richard was still £250 short of the asking price, but the house was too good to miss and the purchase went through. Late on the day of completion, Richard remembered he hadn't opened his morning post. When he did, he found a letter from a complete stranger enclosing a cheque for £250 for continuation of the work.

Quite a few people, including Richard himself, said he was a dreamer. He was one of those people who allow themselves a vision without having worked out every detail of how it might be achieved. But he was dedicated, hardworking and had real courage too. It's easy now to admire his daring in resigning his Guards commission and becoming an unpaid home help. But at the time this step actively upset some people, while others were unmoved by it.

Fortunately Richard excelled at making very good friends. Christopher Bulteel

and Jenny Previt  (who were later to marry) understood what Richard was trying to do in Bermondsey. Christopher worked with Richard on ethos and future plans, while Jenny took on the secretarial work as well as housekeeping tasks. She and Susan Gibbs (who eventually married Richard) were friends already, so when Susan came down to see what was going on in Bermondsey, the two young women made a great team.

Invaluable help in the early days came from the Rev. Leslie Timmins and his wife, Audrey. They lived at the Manse at the end of Abbeyfield Road in Bermondsey and, because of their Methodist ministry, knew a great deal about how the Borough worked. They also gave Richard a roof over his head when his landlady asked him to leave. She had been outraged by a newspaper headline "From the silver of the regiment to the bare boards of Bermondsey" – there was lino on the floor and her rugs were airing on the washing line when the journalist called!

It was at the Manse, the setting for many a planning meeting and late night discussion, that the group of volunteers came up with the name 'Abbeyfield' for the burgeoning movement.

*“...volunteers came
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Abbeyfield spreads its wings

After getting Abbeyfield off the ground in Bermondsey, Richard and his fellow volunteers set about planting the seed in other parts of the country.

Groundbreaking volunteers in Macclesfield, Brighton and Oxford formed their own societies and the framework of a national movement took shape as other towns, cities and villages followed suit.

“The vision was becoming a nationwide reality, working towards Richard’s early dream..”

While each society was autonomous, they abided by the principles of companionship and community involvement that had worked in Bermondsey. The vision was becoming a nationwide reality, working towards Richard’s early dream: “...If only we could have a house in every street to which everyone could come ... then everyone could be treated the same and share equally the care and kindness of the community around them.”

A class act

Richard was not a TV addict and had no concept of celebrity. When his very new wife, Susan, collaborated with *This is your Life* so he wouldn't know about it, Richard recounts, "I was told that we were to spend the last evening of the honeymoon with both our families at a party which included watching a television play as members of a live audience. We were shown to our seats and the audience filled in round us. The show started and, as I had never seen it before, I was not suspicious when Eamonn Andrews came on ..."

“Many well-known people have come to know of Abbeyfield because their relatives or friends have lived in our houses.”

Years later, at the televised Pride of Britain Awards 2006, actress Angelica Huston presented Richard with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Richard commented afterwards that she seemed a very nice girl (although he hadn't recognised her) and that she had told him he reminded her of her father (the film director John Huston).

Over its 52 years, Abbeyfield has gained friends and supporters from all walks of life. Many have discovered Abbeyfield because their relatives or friends have lived in our



Richard with Dame Judi Dench, Abbeyfield patron, after a performance of *Fond & Familiar* to celebrate the Society's 50th anniversary at the Haymarket Theatre, London in 2006.



houses. Dame Judi Dench agreed to support us because her friend and colleague Geoffrey Palmer told her how highly he valued the Gt Missenden house where two of his aunts had lived. Richard Baker, the renowned broadcaster, was a fan of the St Albans house that looked after his mother so well.

Independent, not lonely



“... it’s great to know we can remain independent in our flat yet the facilities are there if we need them.”

Richard’s belief back in the 1950s that loneliness was blighting many lives has been scientifically proven. Many recent research findings have confirmed that loneliness can have serious effects on the individual, similar to those of chronic disease. Older people, of course, are particularly vulnerable to loneliness. So the opportunity for companionship, together with high quality support and housing, is still at the heart of Abbeyfield’s endeavour today.

“...at Abbeyfield it’s like taking your home with you and gaining new friends on the way.”



“The community can provide the facilities and support needed to ensure a high quality of life for all residents.”



*“It feels really homely
and you can do what
you like.”*



*“You could no do
better than an
Abbeyfield house
because you are so
well looked after.”*

*the views of the moors,
complete with munching
sheep, are magnificent, and
the versatile Extra Care
facilities allow older people
to have complete
independence whilst
providing optional care and
social activities, including
fitness classes.”*



Involving local people



Abbeyfield could not have been born without the effort of local people. Neighbours and supporters in the early days did not think of themselves as volunteers, perhaps, but that's what they were – just like Richard and Susan and their friends.

Today things are very different. The pace of life

has changed, demands on people's time have multiplied; legislation and

regulation are a burden.

But the need remains for the personal warmth and commitment that only caring individuals can give.

And, fortunately, across the UK and internationally Abbeyfield volunteers are still opening doors.

"Volunteers are the bedrock of Abbeyfield"
Michael Staff, National Chairman.



“...the need remains for the personal warmth and commitment that only caring individuals can give.”

While volunteers make sure that Abbeyfield is at the heart of the local community, at the heart of every house is the housekeeper. Richard was himself a volunteer housekeeper for a short time and soon realised how pivotal the role was (and that he was not cut out for it, being “no cook”, as Jenny Bulteel recalls). The Abbeyfield housekeeper of



today needs a range of professional skills, a respect for residents’ privacy and dignity, plus that rare quality of being able to give personal support and reassurance. Together, the residents, housekeeper and volunteers create the warm and unique atmosphere of each Abbeyfield house.



“ Together, the residents, housekeeper and volunteers create the warm and unique atmosphere of each Abbeyfield house.”



The Abbeyfield concept has gone global – Abbeyfield International was founded in 1988 and today 16 countries across the world are full members.

“...loneliness is a global, human matter which cuts through the many divides.”

An idea without borders

No matter where in the world Abbeyfield takes root, the volunteers who drive each project ensure that every house plays its part in the local community. Richard's idea of “an ordinary house in an ordinary street” persists today – although the high standards of our modern Abbeyfield houses are a far cry from the spartan conditions of Eugenia Road in the 1950s.

Richard welcomed Abbeyfield International, saying “I’m thrilled that it has gone international ... It (loneliness) is a global, human matter which cuts through the many divides.”



In Mexico at the Casa Carinosa (named after a flirtatious dance!) four residents – all in their 90s – live a happy Abbeyfield life in this beautiful house.



Japan

In 2006 the first Abbeyfield house opened in Gifu, Japan (just south of Nagoya), 100 miles west of Tokyo. The purpose-built ten bedroomed property boasts a plot of 992 square metres. Built at a cost of £415k it is the result of six hard years of planning and fundraising by the Japanese society.

Australia

A disused church has been superbly adapted to become Abbeyfield House, North Melbourne, Victoria.



New Zealand
Richard signs in at Waikato House, Hamilton.





Milan

There are now four Abbeyfield houses in Italy.



Worldwide there are now around 9000 residents living in 850 Abbeyfield houses. In the UK and Australia a number of care homes and day care facilities extend the range of options available to an increasing number of older people.

**Find out more at:
www.abbeyfieldinternational.com**

Two pioneers remember

Audrey Maxwell-Timmins

In 1953 Methodist minister Leslie Timmins and his wife, Audrey, moved to the Manse in Abbeyfield Road, Bermondsey. Audrey remembers “There was a real community spirit and an air of pride amongst the people anxious to restore their borough to meet the new age.”

Tim and Audrey invited Richard to stay at the Manse after his eviction from lodgings further down Abbeyfield Road, and their home was a hub for discussion and planning. The hardworking volunteers at this time included Susan Gibbs, Jenny Previte, Christopher Bulteel and Barbara Lodge Patch.

Audrey recalls, “By this time the media had begun to take Richard’s vision seriously. This is Your Life brought more volunteers interested in his work. There

“There was a real community spirit and an air of pride amongst the people anxious to restore their borough to meet the new age.”

was great camaraderie between the volunteers from all walks of life, especially helped by the input of Susan Gibbs and Jenny Previté who understood Richard’s aim and enthused other volunteers.

I will remember Richard not only as a friend, but as someone who had an aim in life which he wanted to achieve and despite many setbacks he never lost that vision and achieved his aim. But his determination to see it through could not have been successful without his great sense of humour. There was always much laughter.”

“...he never lost that vision and achieved his aim.”



Jenny Bulteel

"I arrived in Bermondsey in January 1956. Richard was housekeeping in 50 Eugenia Road for the first two tenants, Miss Saunders and Mr Halnan. I asked if he would like help for a month. And that was it - I stayed two years."

Life was never dull! The post brought offers of help, offers of furniture, offers of outings. Nothing was ever refused. We lived from hand to mouth as far as the houses were concerned and the right thing always turned up when needed.

Very often when we had finished work at the houses for the day we would congregate with Tim and Audrey and drink tea and coffee far into the night. It was from here that the plans gradually evolved for turning the beginnings into a permanent Society. No one could think of a good name until someone said "Well, we always end up in Abbeyfield Road – what about Abbeyfield?" And so it was.

"...plans gradually evolved for turning the beginnings into a Society."

Saluting Richard

Audrey's son Nicholas and Richard were great friends from the start. They often adjourned to the garage at the Manse where Richard would teach Nick and his little brother Jeremy how to present arms (broomsticks) and salute. "Our chief impressions of Richard were of his enormous height, his massive hands, dashing moustache and that slow but deeply infectious smile followed by explosive laughter." In 2006 Nicholas observed "I can think of plenty of people who have founded one great charity or movement, few who have founded three (Abbeyfield, the Carr-Gomm Society and the Morpeth Society)".

"...that slow but deeply infectious smile followed by explosive laughter."

"I asked if he would like help for a month. And that was it - I stayed two years."





“Globally there will be a recognition that the Abbeyfield idea offers a world-wide solution to the problem of loneliness in older age.”

And the story continues

In his introduction to the Abbeyfield Annual Review of its 40th year in 1996 Richard wrote, “There is so much ahead for Abbeyfield. The millennium will see a much larger older population and Abbeyfield will find even more imaginative ways to provide the best accommodation for them. Globally there will be a recognition that the Abbeyfield idea offers a world-wide solution to the problem of loneliness in older age.”

“...they celebrated the life courageously lived by this extraordinary man.”



Admirers from across the world have paid tribute to Richard.

In Port Alberni, Canada, they celebrated “the life courageously lived by this extraordinary man.” Terry Whyte

remembered Richard describing in his autobiography how, from an early age, he wanted “to look over horizons, to be unnoticing of the conventional and keen to break new ground if it seemed the better thing to do.”

From Uganda one of Richard’s friends wrote, “I read the article about the death of our lovely brother Richard Carr-Gomm. He was a real friend of the late King of Buganda... Can we build on his ideal of loving old people and start it in Uganda?”

Paul Allen, Abbeyfield’s Chief Executive, said: “I feel really privileged to have met Richard and only wish I had known him longer. I know that the deep sense of personal loss I feel at his death will also be felt by Abbeyfielders across the country and across the world. He was a great inspiration to us all... Abbeyfield will do all it can to continue to care for the lonely elderly in his memory.”



Mrs Oriel Milligan, a Friend of the Abbeyfield house at Strathdee near Kirkudbright in Galloway, created this lovely pastel portrait. She took it from the photograph of Richard that accompanied his obituary in *The Daily Telegraph*.

Richard Carr-Gomm was a prophet who, unusually, was honoured in his own country. The beginning of his pioneering journey on behalf of lonely people was recognised by the press, perhaps because of its apparent

eccentricity at first. But his sustained commitment and leadership proved that the

“...the ‘Scrubbing Major’ was in it for the long haul.”



“Scrubbing Major” was in it for the long haul. Late in his life the plaudits came flooding in, and a few months before he died *The Independent on Sunday* named him among the top 100 Britons “who have given back, enhanced the lives of others and realised that in an acquisitive society there is a crying need for values other than mere materialism.”

Richard Carr-Gomm

- Born 2 January 1922 in Warwickshire
- Educated at Stowe School
- Won place at Oriel College, Oxford but instead went into the army, first Royal Berkshire Regiment then Coldstream Guards.
- Awarded Croix de Guerre by France in 1944.
- Resigned his commission in 1955 and volunteered as a home help in Bermondsey
- Founded Abbeyfield in 1956
- Married Susan Gibbs in 1957 – sadly, Susan died at the end of 2007
- Children Anna, Elizabeth, Harriet, Adam and David
- Founded Carr-Gomm Society in 1965
- Founded Morpeth Society in 1972
- Awarded OBE in 1985
- Awarded Beacon Prize 2005
- Lifetime Achievement Award Pride of Britain Awards 2005
- Unveils blue plaque in Bermondsey commemorating his work in April 2006
- Died at Batheaston, 27 October 2008.



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