

Playtime for young at heart

Gareth Huw Davies learns that you need to shape up to live in a modern retirement development

Mr and Mrs Modrell flowed with septuagenarian athleticism down a staircase as wide and grand as the one which Morecambe and Wise famously descended arm in arm with Angela Rippon. The canned music, by pure coincidence I'm sure, was the Hallelujah Chorus.

Jim Modrell gave me the can't-stop-now, so-much-to-do handshake of the committed retiree with a busy day of engagements ahead. These might include a stroll down to the art club in Hampsthwaite village or shopping in Leeds.

I happened to know that Jim and Iris, among the first to move into Hollins Hall, this pioneering retirement development of 71 houses and flats based around the Yorkshire house near Harrogate where the beer magnate Joshua Tetley used to live, had already put in the hard work. The bookings schedule in the swimming pool showed that they had been in by 6am for several lengths - there's a splendid view of Nidderdale through the ceiling-to-floor window to inspire them. In the gym, their impressive times on the running and rowing machines were chalked up for others to ponder.

I declined an offer to try out the gym but had earlier opted for the fat-rich fry up in the restaurant (That Nick Sanderson, managing director of Audley Court, parent company of Hollins Hall, and I were alone at a high cholesterol breakfast was a comment on how healthily retired folk here eat, or that most were still abed. I suspect the former.) And, technically, I didn't qualify to use the gym being somewhat shy of the worryingly low entry age of 55.

By 11am some jaunty light operatic music was setting a frolicsome mood. A bottle of champagne stood provocatively behind the bar. I resisted the temptation and settled soberly into the softest sofa with the biggest tasselled cushion to read the Yorkshire Post.

Nick Sanderson believed there is nothing in Britain quite like Hollins Hall, and the model it is based on, Audley Court's first retirement complex at Willicombe Park in Tunbridge Wells. "There are similar schemes in the US" he says, "that endeavour to allow people to retain their independence for as long as possible. There is a gap here that needs to be filled between old people remaining in big, old family homes and



At home: Gareth Huw Davies, top, takes tea at Hollins Hall, Harrogate, where residents buy their own homes

moving into care homes, often before they need to, or living with relatives".

Residents buy their own homes, ranging from single bedroom apartments in Hollins Hall itself, to two bedroomed detached cottages dotted around the 14 acres of surrounding parkland. All are adapted for the disabled. On completion next year, about 100 people ranging from the fully and shamingly fit to those who need several hours of care a day, will be living here. The Tetleys were Hollins Hall's most famous residents. Joshua Tetley, his wife and daughter are

buried in Hampsthwaite churchyard. The house passed to an ardent teetotaler, and eventually to Barnardo's who ran it as a boys' home. Barnardo's closed it in 1998, but still owns the land and is involved jointly with Audley Court.

The hall was restored to its original Georgian state and has become the club house, with restaurant, bar, gym and lounge. There are several apartments for people who require closer attention, or perhaps want to be nearer the bar. A new wing contains

staff quarters, guest rooms, activities rooms and more accommodation.

A monthly service charge of about £420 pays for the facilities here and other services such as 24 hour security, CCTV cover, grounds maintenance and a free bus. Residents can call on additional services, from shopping to personal care. As a mark of their independence, they pay their own council tax and utilities bills.

I stayed in once of the guest rooms. The hall felt like a four-star hotel, with mock-Ming vases and lots of elegant

furniture. I was the last person in the lounge when a young couple, nurse Rachel and security man Chris, strode in purposefully.

"We are the night team" said Chris. "Any problems, any trouble at all you pull the orange cord (ubiquitous in every room, corridor, shower) and we'll be along". He added darkly. "Some have been known to use the cord to order a table in the restaurant".

At breakfast, Sanderson explained the deal in the restaurant. People pay with a swipe card and settle up at

the end of the month. "Better than pub food at pub prices. We subsidise it".

He heaped praise on his chef Paul, who had done us baked salmon delicate with a herb crust and deep-fried spinach the night before. There was a long wine list. His busy day is Sunday when all the relations come to visit and the restaurant is full.

The people who come here typically sell their houses for £225,000 - £250,000 and buy here for £160,000 on average. "They can afford to live on their equity and enjoy themselves"

says Sanderson. "Many people in their seventies were comfortable in the 1960's and 1970's, used to foreign holidays, private pensions and had good jobs. And they meant to spend it on themselves. People say growing old isn't as much fun. Well now it can be".

Hollins Hall: 01423 524115

CHOOSING A RETIREMENT HOME

- ❑ Retirement flats are usually self-contained in developments where facilities typically include a recreation lounge, laundry room, lift and a guest suite. Sample prices (for one bedroom flats): Lothian £72,000, London £86,000, Aylesbury £98,000, Weymouth £102,000
- ❑ Very sheltered housing is becoming popular, for elderly able and disabled people of sound mind. Typically suite those seeking a more manageable home without losing independence
- ❑ There are specialist retirement developers building flats for the over 60's. McCarthy & Stone is one of the biggest
- ❑ Charities running sheltered housing include Abbeyfield (www.abbeyfield.com) and Retirement Security, 40 Rother Street, Stratford-upon-Avon, CV37 6LP