

LEST WE FORGET

The garden party thrown to unveil the statue of David Lloyd George, with resident Colin Prickett



The house that helped seal the armistice

The Sussex mansion where Lloyd George summoned his War Cabinet is now a retirement home – but feels like a country club, writes Jane Slade

When David Lloyd George heard the news of victory on the Western Front, bringing an end to the First World War, he is said to have danced the hornpipe. He had been living at Danny Mansion, a rural retreat in West Sussex that he shared with his wife Margaret and his mistress Frances Stevenson (often at the same time).

As prime minister from 1916 to 1922, he rejected Chequers as his grace-and-favour mansion, preferring the rented house in the quiet village of Hurstpierpoint in the South Downs to host dignitaries and politicians. It was also where he pursued his affair with Stevenson, who was his secretary. Now called Danny House, the Grade I listed Elizabethan stately home was converted into 20 flats in 1956, making it one of the first retirement villages in the country.

However, unlike most other old people's homes, Danny has a fascinating past and is celebrating a proud moment in its history.

On Oct 13 1918, in the Great Hall, a vast pine-panelled room that was built in 1595, Lloyd George convened members of his War Cabinet to agree terms of the armistice with Germany.



The characters sitting around the large oak table included a young Winston Churchill.

After this fabled meeting, a message was sent to the American president, Woodrow Wilson, endorsing an armistice with Germany. This decision eventually came into effect on Nov 11 that year.

Now, the Great Hall is where residents like to have tea or listen to recitals next to the imposing stone fireplace. Nearby is a plaque commemorating the meeting that took place a century ago this year, listing its attendees. At first glance the house doesn't seem to have changed; the Great Hall is filled with antique furniture and evokes the atmosphere of a colonial country club.

Richard Burrows, the current owner, bought Danny House in 2004 for £3million, including the surrounding 100 acres of parkland. He stages summer picnics in the grounds, organises music recitals and talks, and has installed a croquet lawn to keep his guests, who pay from £3,000 per month in rent for a one-bedroom apartment, fit and active.

Local celebrity Dame Vera Lynn has been a frequent visitor over the years, and two months ago Burrows threw a huge garden party. A statue of its former resident, Lloyd George, was unveiled by Colin Prickett, 98, who has lived at Danny for 21 years.

Prickett has also met the two men who started the world wars: the Kaiser and the Führer. He encountered Hitler during a visit to Germany in 1937 where he met Tom Mitford, the brother of the infamous Mitford sisters, who were supporters of fascism and Hitler. Unity Mitford was particularly dazzled by the Führer, and it was she who invited Prickett to meet him for coffee and cakes at the Bayerischer Hof in Mu-



PROUD HISTORY Richard Burrows, top right and above; the plaque commemorating the meeting in the Great Hall, left; Danny House, above

nich. "I remember him exuding Austrian charm," he recalls.

Burrows decided to throw the party not only to mark the anniversary of the armistice, but also to re-enact a garden party that Lloyd George had hosted at Danny in the summer of 1918, dressed in full costume. "There was a band playing on the lawn outside Danny, the Sussex Yeomanry Cadet Band from Brighton," recalled neighbour Daisy Randell in her diary. "There were large marquees, an area for dancing, refreshment tents and countless people, many in uniforms of all colours and sizes."

"I recall being surprised how small Lloyd George was. And I recall the mischievous twinkle in his eye as he shook hands. It was a happy occasion. Perhaps unreal as I think about it now for

here we were, in the midst of a frightful and cruel war, and yet, enjoying ourselves as if the war didn't exist, chattering, laughing and dancing."

During his stays at Danny Mansion, Lloyd George would take a daily walk to the top of Wolstonbury Hill, a local landmark at 676ft. He took his War Cabinet documents under his arm, so he could sit at the top and work on them while surveying the views. Randell's diary recalled how "on occasion a shower of rain would send him scuttling back for Danny, and he would leave some of his precious documents behind. On such occasions we often saw his long-suffering secretary, Miss Frances Stevenson, grunting up the steep slopes to retrieve them."

Joanna Bastin, 78, a retired historian and author, moved to Danny five years ago. For her it was like coming home, since her ancestors, the Campion family, used to own it. "My mother was born here and I remember coming here as a child during the war – but I never imagined I would end up living here," she says.

"Danny is more of a country club than a retirement village," explains Burrows. "All our residents have lived fascinating lives. Everyone is very sociable and there are lots of opportunities for friendships to flourish."

He has even revived a historic cricket pitch. "We have one of the oldest cricket grounds in the world," Burrows adds. "Sandyfields was first documented in 1717."

Another quirky feature of life at Danny is that wheelchairs and walking frames are banned from the public areas. "All our residents are active and mobile, even though some are well into their 90s," Burrows explains. "We don't want them to be reminded of the negative aspects of old age."

Instead he takes them for drives around the grounds in his vintage Bentley, on boat trips around the pond, and on wild flower walks along the half-mile-long drive. Help is provided by groundsman John Foster-Spink, a stockman who also looks after the 250 sheep, 15 chickens and 10 pigs that live on the estate.

