

RETIREMENT

# Finding fun and health in melody

Jane Slade meets the retirees making music in older age – from singing wartime tunes to writing ukulele hits

Judy Allen started learning the piano when she was six. By the age of 10, she was playing in her local church. After a career as a piano teacher and music examiner she is now, aged 82, playing the organ at Cady Valley Church, a short walk from a retirement village near Chester where she moved seven years ago.

Once a fortnight she also accompanies a singing group she co-founded at Grade II listed Boughton Hall, where she owns a two-bedroom apartment.

Some 29 regulars gather around Judy's grand piano, which occupies a space in one of the communal areas, for a good old sing song. "We have a repertoire of over 40 songs," Judy says. "We sing a mixture of show tunes, pop songs like Simon and Garfunkel, as well as hymns and war songs."

Music has been Judy's life and she is showing no signs of stopping – she even tutors at a summer school in Tonbridge. "Singing is a wonderful way of getting to know people, integrating and socialising," she adds.

"It's so good for mental health,

too. Two ladies joined us recently who had lost their husbands. One man who came for the first time said, 'I have just spent an hour not thinking once about my aches and pains'."

Singing has been shown to release endorphins, reduce stress levels and, according to a report published in the *Journal of Music Therapy*, help people cope with chronic pain. A joint study by Harvard and Yale universities in 2008 even claimed that singing in a group can increase life expectancy.

Boughton Hall is part of the Enterprise Retiring Living group, which is building two more retirement villages: The Red House in Ripon, North Yorkshire, comprising 59 apartments that start from £250,000, and Mount Battenhall in Worcester.

Choirs and music groups are becoming standard features of retirement communities, and operators are nurturing this trend by providing pianos, rehearsal rooms and even performance spaces. "All our villages have a hall or large space for musical performances," says Oscar Russell of Retirement Villages. "Most villages have choirs, sometimes all-female or male and sometimes mixed, while others even have a night-life vibe with music from the decades, dancing and a bar." Owners at Castle Village near Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire have even formed a jazz club.

"Music is a passion for many people, including a lot of our residents," says James Cobb, of Renaissance Villages. "As operators of retirement villages, we strive to make people's lives as fulfilling as possible. The grand pianos in

TOGETHER St Elphin's Singers, below, live in Audley St Elphin's Park, right



Singing has been shown to reduce stress levels and help people cope with chronic pain

many of our villages' clubhouses help to achieve this – a reflection of the passions of our residents."

Retired musician Dorothy Moore, 80, has 14 members in her choir The St Elphin's Singers, which she formed at Audley St Elphin's Park, a development set across 14 acres in the Derbyshire Dales.

"It started with a few people singing carols one Christmas to cheer up residents who didn't go out much," she explains. "We then did a concert and are now doing a cabaret night."

Dorothy, a retired music therapist and teacher, has room in her apartment for a piano and a cello. Music has been her life: she met her late husband when they played cello together in a local orchestra and were married for 56 years. "I couldn't imagine music not



being part of my life. I still get together with old friends from music college to do part singing. It gives so much enjoyment and brings people together."

Learning a new instrument in later life didn't put off some doughty retirees at LifeCare Residences' Grove Place, an independent living scheme near Romsey in Hampshire. There, the seven-strong Strummers and Pluckers, a self-taught ukulele group, have raised £500 for the Alzheimer's Society from a charity single they recorded at a nearby studio.

ELECTRIC The Battersea Power Station Community Choir



The *Ballad of Grove Place*, sung to a 12-bar blues, was written by resident Mike Lemon. "It took two or three days to write and it covers all aspects of our lives here at Grove Place," he said. Lyrics of the tune include: "At Grove Place Village there's more ladies than men/ No battle of sexes, we know our place as men/ Interesting people who make their mark in the world/ If I had more hair, their antics would make it curl". The Strummers and Pluckers have been playing together for more than two years and perform regularly at the



CHARITY SINGLE The Churchill Choir, above; Hampshire Lakes, right

village, where prices start from £295,000 for a one-bedroom flat.

Another musical group at a retirement home is run by Jo Taylor, 71, at Hampshire Lakes, an Anchor retirement village near Yately in Hampshire. A group of residents meets once a week in the library to sing along to musical tracks and old wartime tunes.

Jo, who bought a two-bedroom apartment two years ago, plays the backing tracks out loud. She has no musical training and only took up singing five years ago after her husband Ian died. "It's all just enormous fun," she says. She has also learned the ukulele, and joined the Yately Choral society, performing four concerts a year.

A former systems engineer with IBM, Jo is planning to sing at the Royal Albert Hall later this year with The Really Big Chorus, the UK's largest choral society.

Hampshire Lakes has more than 100 independent and assisted living apartments for over-65s. The second

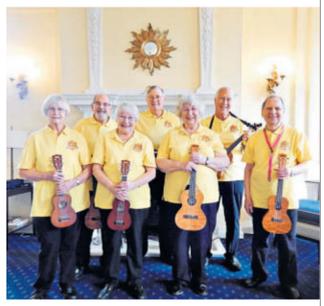
'Singing in a choir keeps the brain agile, but most of all it makes you feel good'

phase of Hampshire Lakes is now available to reserve with prices starting from £348,000.

No one is too old to sing, says Sam Evans, 38, an award-winning baritone and choral conductor, who is music director of seven choirs, including the Battersea Power Station Community Choir. "Nothing brings people together like singing," he says. "If you want to create a sense of community, singing is a wonderful way to do that. Coming out in the evening to share music, make friends and connect with others, can be the high point of someone's week."

It's good exercise too, particularly if you are older. "You use your whole body in an energised way," adds Sam. "It keeps the brain agile, but most of all makes you feel good."

The Churchill Choir, formed in 2016 by choir master and voice coach Ali Sharpe, comprises members from several Churchill villages in Dorset. Ali, who lives with her husband at Dean Lodge in Southbourne, was overwhelmed by the number of budding singers wanting to join when she put out a request for voices. The choir performed its first concert at Dean Lodge three years ago and has since sung at venues in the local community and in



neighbouring towns.

"Churchill approached me to see if we could get a choir going with people from a few different retirement homes in the area," says Ali. "I thought it would be a lovely idea – singing is so good for you and it's a chance for people to socialise while enjoying a hobby."

The choir's big crescendo came when it recorded its first single at Christmas in aid of the older people's charity The Silver Line.

"Singing in the choir is just glorious," says member Gladeta Winter. "You feel your spirits have lifted and it makes the day look brighter."

IT'S GOT TO BE LIKE The Strummers and Pluckers, above right, who live at LifeCare Residences' Grove Place, left

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