

**EASTCOMBE'S FRIDAY CLUB: SOME HASTY NOTES WRITTEN AS INFORMATION FOR GLOUCESTERSHIRE RURAL COMMUNITIES COUNCIL ON THE SETTING-UP OF SOCIAL GROUPS FOR THE ELDERLY – BY MURIEL BROOKS, FRIDAY CLUB SECRETARY, IN MARCH 2002. Retyped without much editing in March 2015: many things have changed, but the underlying philosophy has not.**

Eastcombe's 'Day Centre' began about 20 years ago (1982?), used a room in the secondary school, was run by a group of very stalwart women, had a membership of 15-20 local elderly people, and had a varied programme of crafts, games, outings, etc. A lot of us were involved as drivers. The use of the school came to an end and the club was run for a while in the parish room of Christ Church, Chalford.

In 2000 the organizers had various setbacks and were finally discouraged (I believe) by an Age Concern circular that said they should all have catering certificates. They decided to close, much to the disappointment of the members.

A large group of mainly Eastcombe women met to discuss whether the club could be rescued and it was decided that there was such a core of goodwill that it was worth trying.

There are eight or ten people willing to be 'team leaders' and we usually work two successive Fridays, the first as a helper and the second as leader. This ensures a kind of continuity. In addition there is a very large group of people – women – who attend as helpers when they can, and an even larger rota of drivers. We believe that for 12-15 members there should be about five helpers present. (The minimum age for membership is 75 but most members in 2015 are over 90.)

We try to stay as informal and flexible as possible so that there is no hassle for the helpers (who have a lot of fun) and so that the members should feel individually welcomed and cared for. The extreme old age of some members means there are unambitious limits to our activities (no outings except an occasional lunch in a pub). The club only works because we are all friends, the committee having decided early on that if we disagreed about something we should change the subject

We decided that everything should be as 'nice' as possible. Members pay £4.00 a week [£8.00 in 2015]. Lunch comes as a big dish – a pie, for example – from the nearby pub (£30.00 a week) and the team leader of the day brings vegetables, a pudding or puddings, and makes sure that the previous week's shopping list is dealt with so that we are all responsible for maintaining the stock of loo paper, sugar lumps, sweets, squash, etc etc. The 'niceness' comes from proper tablecloths and napkins, flowers on the table, good biscuits, and so on.

Members are picked up from their houses and driven to Eastcombe Chapel for a 10.30 start. (The Chapel schoolroom, incidentally, was chosen in order to get the club back into the heart of the village: the members feel at home, and we have an open-door policy so that other people can pop in for coffee or lunch, and a chat.)

To prevent traffic problems we are on the alert for arrivals so that drivers need not leave their cars. Helpers escort the members in (perhaps with the help of a big umbrella). Some people are very frail, but if they still are at all mobile they are welcome. (By the end of the Day Centre new members were 'nominated' by the local doctors' surgery but we took that responsibility back upon ourselves so that we do not disturb the dynamics of the group. Similarly we make sure that no one disruptive joins the team of helpers.)

By 11 o'clock tea, coffee and biscuits are served and after that some gentle activity may be on offer: skittles or hoopla; or sitting-down exercises to music in the charge of the lady who runs aerobics

classes in the village. If there are visitors invited, this is when we most like to see them. Lunch arrives at about 12.30 and is served as promptly as possible. It is followed by more tea and coffee, and sweets. We then open our 'shop' – a bring-and-buy table. The rationale behind this was originally that in the Chapel we cannot run the bingo or raffles that were formerly popular – but by buying very low-priced goods people still go home feeling they have won something. Members bring donations themselves, helpers try to ensure there are home-baked cakes available, and the owner of a local free-range egg farm brings a tray of eggs to sell each week. We sometimes sell vegetables, fruit and flowers as well – never meat. There is a village shop here, but a lot of members are too old even to go that far, so they probably enjoy 'shopping' on Fridays. Afterwards, if people want to, we play word games or sing or even play I-spy: it depends on the mood of the day. Cars come at 2.30 to take people home. The session is therefore quite short, but it gets our traffic out of the way before primary school ends, four hours are long enough for the elderly to be out, and almost too long for the helpers to keep smiling! We wouldn't do it if we didn't have fun. The only hard part lies in maintaining the rota(s) – it is as important to be scrupulously careful with an old person as with a young child, but all our drivers and helpers are reliable and now expert. The number of people helping means no one has to do it too often.

The £4.00 subscription may sound high, but these members have reached an age when they spend very little. It means that we are relieved of other fund-raising (though we do some) and we remain independent, completely and deliberately. The outgoings are our rent for the room, insurance, an annual fire inspection, the lunch ingredients, the weekly running expenses including a cleaner, and at least two 'treats' in the year. The first is a Harvest Lunch in the village hall (entrance charge kept very low) to which are invited members, their families, and all community-minded local people who support us always. We provide a salad lunch with lots of puddings, people bring their own wine if they wish, there's a raffle, and the usual stalls. This is a thank-you for everybody, and a way of letting the members know that they are still central in the community.

At Christmas we have a lunch for members, helpers and drivers, and charge nothing. Also in December we have a coffee morning with a few stalls, and a visit from children of Callowell Primary School who play carols for us to sing to. Being next-door to Eastcombe Primary School, it is easy for the Head to bring her children (all of them usually) to sing Happy Birthday when we are celebrating a member's birthday (to the nearest Friday). We really value this kind of thing, and the members love visits of singers or musicians from the school.

We pay no one to help (apart from an hour's cleaning on a Thursday). Helpers can donate things or claim expenses, it doesn't matter which. I forgot to mention that there is a summer lunch at the Chairman's house specifically to thank helpers and drivers (part of the nice treats policy).

Anyone thinking of running a group should be really sure that there is a lot of enthusiasm for it, so that it does not matter if some helpers and drivers drop off the list [we began with 40-50]. We talked to as many people as possible beforehand, buttonholing them in the street, the pub, the church, the shop, the supermarket. I do not know if we would have started this from scratch: the club existed and was valued, and we were very touched that some members had known one another all their lives. It seemed important to keep them together. Some have moved away, some have died. Apart from close-by villages, there is a huge housing estate at Bussage with a lot of elderly people feeling very isolated. If we have a space, and willing drivers, we are happy to welcome any new members. The surgery's nurse with responsibility for over-75s is a huge help to us (and actually a driver). She draws needs to our attention, and even brings the 'flu jabs to us once a year. Reciprocally we can alert her or the doctors when we see a need.

Sorry to have written so much. I should like to write as much again. Do please put people in touch with us if you think we can be of any use. Good luck.