

2 PROPERTY SPECIAL | COVER STORY

CRUSADE FOR CARE: Sister Mary Thomas (below) was a leading light in the development of St George's at Ditchling



# Sister does the honours

Nun Mary Thomas, who has just received an MBE for services to St George's Park Retirement Village in Sussex, talks to ANDREA WATSON



**“** I BECAME a member of the Augustinian Order, an order devoted to the care of the sick, in 1963. After training and working as a staff nurse and bursar at St George's I was appointed Superior of the Order in 1993. At the time legislation on care homes was changing and most of our care homes were becoming out of date, so we needed to do something.

I started to get together a team, many of them sisters, to look at what we could do. The old care building was very large and out of date but we did not want to stop looking after people. Gradually the idea of a care village emerged. The idea was the easy bit! Then it was more or less left to me to do something about it.

We started talking to architects and the planning authorities in Lewes and the idea of an enabling development that would pay for the care homes came about. We had to make a good case to build on agricultural land.

Our first application was far too imaginative and was rejected so we went back and were advised to look at where we already had buildings - greenhouses and other structures that were part of the footprint - and we put in another application. Along the way, we went to other homes such as the Joseph Rowntree care village in York and saw what others were doing.

The idea was to have an independent living village at one end of the estate and the care home at the other, giving space and distance between the two.

When we started I thought it would take three months. In the end it took from 1999 to 2006 to get planning

permission! Finally the Bank of Ireland gave us the funding.

It had to be a phased development, with the apartments first. We built Maze Court, which included a restaurant, so when people moved in there were facilities. A lot of experts said not to worry about the restaurant but ours is used a lot.

Our residents enjoy a huge number of events and some are very active. I think we have to support

independent living as much as we can. We have a minibus going out every morning so people can go to the town, for example.

We have a farm here, with a beef herd, as well as lots of animals. Residents enjoy seeing them. It enhances the environment. We also have allotments and some very keen gardeners.

Four years ago, when the new care homes were finished, we had a mass to celebrate and Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, who was Bishop of Arundel and Brighton at the time, came.

When he saw all that was happening, he thought he would put my name forward to the honours list.

I got a letter in November saying I had been recommended to the Queen for services to St George's and on December 29 it was formally announced.

I've not yet been to the Palace but you are normally invited within six months.

We are now at the final part of the development. Knocking down the old care home, which was built in the 1900s, was the biggest challenge and now we have to rebuild that.

I will be 68 or 69 in May, I can't remember, but I have to see it through to the end.

A lot of the sisters have retired but there is still a religious community in the centre of the village and we continue with our religious life side by side.

I was not sure how it would work in the beginning but when we were refurbishing and the sisters had to move out for a time a lot of people said they missed them.

It has been a wonderful and vibrant thing and it is lifegiving to the community to see this happening.

**‘I think we have to support independent living as much as we can’**



**”**