

## LIFE PROPERTY

## THANK YOU FOR THE MUSIC

Retirement communities are embracing the cultural side of life, says **Maria Fitzpatrick**

**B**eecham House is a rather grand retirement home in the heart of the English countryside. Every year, the residents – all gifted singers and musicians, including a retired operatic quartet – put on a concert to mark Giuseppe Verdi's birthday. Sounds beautiful, doesn't it?

Unfortunately, Beecham House doesn't really exist. It's the setting of this winter's hit film *Quartet*, starring Dame Maggie Smith, Sir Michael Gambon and Billy Connolly, filmed at Hedsor House, Buckinghamshire – but it's not as far removed from reality as you might think.

According to David Gabriel, the head of Retirement Homesearch, which conducted a report on the state of the retirement

market at the beginning of this year, a "cultural shift" is taking place. Retirees are increasingly prioritising their cultural interests when choosing a place to live – not only eschewing traditional retirement areas such as seaside towns for urban cultural centres with theatres, concert halls and galleries, but also choosing retirement communities based on the activities they can take part in themselves.

"Retirees are increasingly eager to try new things and expect an active cultural life as a part of their retirement," David says. "They often can't wait to pick up their interests that may have taken a back seat while they were working. Every week we hear from customers who have set up music groups or are embarking on theatre trips.

"I know of a lady at one of our developments in Warwickshire who studied at the Royal Academy of Music and is currently mastering the complete works of Bach. With more time for hobbies, retirement is the ideal stage to become more involved in music and the arts."

Retirement communities, like the fictional one in *Quartet*, are fast becoming cultural hubs in themselves – particularly, it seems, for those with a love of music.

Often it's simply about appreciation, and living side-by-side with culturally engaged neighbours means an instant audience. "Culture vultures" living in the riverside properties at Thamesfield, in Henley-on-Thames, take regular



On song: retirement communities such as the one in 'Quartet', starring Dame Maggie Smith are becoming havens for music lovers

## PITCH-PERFECT RETIREMENT



**Hitting the right note:** Properties at St George's Park, East Sussex, top left, where you can join the choir, top right, start at £320,000 for two-bedroom apartments (01444 259732, stgeorgespark.co.uk); a one-bedroom first-floor apartment at Thamesfield, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, which has regular music recitals, above far left and left, is £360,000 (leasehold) through Retirement Villages. It has river views and communal gardens (0845 5211857, retirementvillages.co.uk). A two-bedroom ground-floor apartment at Elmbridge Village, Cranleigh, Surrey, above right and far right, is £235,000 (leasehold; Retirement Villages as above; open day March 20).

excursions to the Theatre Royal in Windsor, but they have also discovered the benefits of bringing culture to their own doorstep. In the past three months, they have invited a harpist – who moved one resident, Daphne Paul, "to tears" – a local choir and a mandolin player to perform intimate recitals in the beautiful orangery that overlooks the river.

For others, the decision to downsize presents the chance

to tune up their own vocal cords. Don Green, one of the first people to move into St George's Park retirement village in East Sussex when it opened in 2006, has been singing in choirs since a young age, including the Northern Ireland Army Choir, Wellbeck Abbey Choir and the Blackfriars Singers.

He made the decision to move, in his late seventies, from living alone in a cliff-top apartment in Leigh-on-Sea in

Essex to a two-bedroom apartment in the retirement community's Maple Court, determined to "enjoy different activities every day, and make the most of life".

Inspired by Gareth Malone, television's choirmaster extraordinaire, he set up a choir at St George's Park – which is set in 250 acres of sweeping parkland, surrounded by countryside and close to Ditchling village – so that the other residents

could share in his passion.

"There's nothing quite like singing from the bottom of your heart," he says. "It's good for the soul and really regenerates your spirit. It's therapeutic, and is a great way for people to make friends."

The choir, started in the autumn, already has 35 members, some with extensive experience, others with none. "Everyone is welcome to join," Don, now 84, explains. "No experience

## TUNING UP

Singing is the UK's most popular participatory group activity after sport. There are 25,000 choirs, with 500,000 singers across the country reaching an audience of three million. Regular group singing has proven health benefits, from improved lung capacity and better posture to increased self-confidence. Source: TONSIL

or ability to read music is necessary – the only purpose is the pleasure of singing."

The group meets every fortnight to rehearse in the dramatic ornate-ceilinged concert hall on site – where they staged their first performance at Christmas – and is fortunate to have secured the help of a professional to lead them.

Jane Houghton, who studied at Trinity College of Music, spent five years in Italy performing in baroque ensembles and sang for the Royal Opera House chorus for six years, and now runs workshops around the country. She conducts Don and his choir, who have just started rehearsing ambitious harmonies and operatic choruses for a summer concert, including the theme to *New York, New York* the musical and *The Toreador* from Bizet's *Carmen*.

"Jane is shaping us towards a very confident and sweet-sounding future!" Don says.

Elmbridge Village, a community for over-55s in Cranleigh, at the foot of the Surrey hills, is also alive with the sound of music, thanks to its own 20-strong choir, which is led by a former Royal Opera singer, Gillian Ramsden, who lives nearby.

The choir has an eclectic repertoire, from show tunes to hymns, modern pop songs to big-band music. They rehearse every Monday evening and put on concerts throughout the year – including a recent musical collaboration with a local school, whose pupils played instruments to accompany the choir – in the village hall, situated within the Elmbridge Village grounds.

Gillian, like Don Green, believes the feeling of togetherness as well as the physical challenge of participating in music, creates a powerful sense of worth and vitality for members, who range in age from 60 to 90. "There's a big social element to the choir," she says.

"Meeting up with friends to do a non-competitive team activity which has you all working towards the same goal is a tremendous boost to well-being. You have to breathe to sing; if you're singing, you're living."

• [retirementhomesearch.co.uk](http://retirementhomesearch.co.uk)  
• For more properties with cultural appeal, turn to p7