

## **HISTORY OF ABBEYFIELD IN AUSTRALIA**

The first Abbeyfield house in Australia opened in the Melbourne suburb of East Malvern in 1986. Two established houses were purchased and modified to provide private bed sitting rooms, ensuites and shared space for ten older people living on low incomes. These were older people who wished to retain their independence but who welcomed a measure of support and companionship within their own community. The house included a self contained flat for the live in housekeeper and was surrounded by an impressive garden much enjoyed by those who lived there. This house has seen many changes as residents have moved on over the years but it still offers safety and security to older people who live in the area more than twenty years later.

After this hard won beginning, Abbeyfield in Australia has grown slowly but surely until it now has twenty three Abbeyfield houses open in six of the Australian states and territories. Almost all of them have been purpose built, designed by local architects as part of the streetscape within a clearly identifiable neighbourhood. The design of the houses emphasises the dual goals of resident privacy and communal living. This is further illustrated in the gardens surrounding the houses. Each resident has immediate access to their own outdoor space while sharing the larger communal gardens surrounding the house. The houses are located across Australia from Babinda, in far north Queensland to Huonville in southern Tasmania. As well, there are houses in South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory. In parallel, three accredited hostels for older people in need of care have been developed in rural and urban settings.

The capital funding of Abbeyfield houses in Australia has always been a challenge and there have been substantial differences in the source of capital funds over time. When the first house was developed in East Malvern in the mid 1980s, many organizations contributed to the capital cost. The Commonwealth government contribution was matched by contributions from philanthropic trusts, interested individuals and the local community. Subsequent houses have been developed on the basis of partnerships both formal and informal between federal, state and local governments. The local community, with the help of philanthropic trusts and local business interests has provided funds for the furnishing and fit out of the houses. Recurrent funding is fully covered by the fortnightly contributions paid by the residents. The houses operate at no ongoing cost to any level of government.

The local community is always important in the development of an Abbeyfield house, but for one house in Tasmania it was crucial. In 2001, the financing of a house at Huonville involved a three way partnership between the trustees of a local deceased estate, the Tasmanian Government, and Abbeyfield Australia. The trustees, responding to the wishes of their client and her family, generously provided the land and much of the capital to build the house.

The Tasmanian government provided capital funding for three places for financially disadvantaged people, and Abbeyfield Australia provided project management and expertise to establish the house according to Abbeyfield guidelines.

Australia's most recent Abbeyfield house opened in Curtin, in the ACT, in 2006. Funded entirely by the ACT Government, this new house is a pilot project to provide housing for young people with mild intellectual disability. This is a new client group for Abbeyfield and offers a new challenge to the organization. The local society is made up of parents and friends of the residents and community representatives. This particular group of younger people is ideally served by the Abbeyfield model which frees and supports the residents while relieving their parents from the anxiety of what will happen to their children when they are no longer able to care for them. This new clientele provides an enormous challenge to Abbeyfield in Australia and may well influence the future direction of Abbeyfield not only here but all over the world where Abbeyfield operates.

The success of Abbeyfield in Australia lies in its unique blend of security, support and independence. Older people who wish to stay within their own community can do so because the houses are designed and built to fit into the local area. Residents generally have access to familiar shops and facilities, can continue to see their own doctor, use a familiar chemist and enjoy the social activities available. Not only are residents secure within the Abbeyfield house but they are secure in the community around them. In this environment, residents retain their independence. They continue to be in charge of their own lives and make decisions on their own behalf but are aware that support will be available to them if and when they need it.

A full time live-in housekeeper is employed in each house by the locally based committee of management. At the weekends and on holidays the housekeeper is supplemented by casual staff who are responsible for providing a main meal. The housekeeper's role is an important one involving not only cooking, shopping and cleaning but also giving the residents a focus and acting as an interface between the residents and the committee of management. In Australia, the housekeepers are employed under a federal industrial award which defines the terms and conditions of their employment. Abbeyfield Australia offers training and support in tandem with the committees of management who also carry out day-to-day supervision.

The role of volunteers is intrinsic to the success of Abbeyfield in Australia. From its inception, Abbeyfield has relied on the good will, expertise and effort of locally based volunteer committees of management. The input from volunteers, committed to the Abbeyfield concept, ensures cost effective and sensitive day to day management of the houses. Abbeyfield places considerable emphasis on training and support for its volunteers and offers a comprehensive program of meetings and resources to assist them in their work. As well, volunteers play an essential role in the development of the houses.

Their contribution to the initiation and establishment of the houses provides the impetus for the involvement of the wider community and for the successful approaches to funding bodies to identify the source of the capital development of each house. For example, the new venture involving intellectually disabled young people would not have got off the ground without the dedication of those family, friends and community members who got involved. They investigated the options,

identified the appropriateness of Abbeyfield, took on the responsibility for lobbying and negotiating and gave their time and energy to developing an Abbeyfield house to meet the special needs of their young people.

Abbeyfield began in London in 1956. It was founded by Richard Carr-Gomm, a British ex-army officer who, on retirement in 1955, wanted to help people in need. He started out from a room in Abbeyfield Road (Bermondsey, London), surrounded by numbers of needy pensioners and began working with them as an unpaid home help. He soon realised there were many people who had been virtually abandoned by their families and who needed practical help and friendship to overcome the apathy and loneliness in which they lived. He purchased a run-down house, renovated it for four residents and opened the doors with himself as the housekeeper. As soon as the first house was running smoothly, a second house was purchased. Publicity began and another five houses followed in the same area. With such rapid growth, Richard was advised to form a legal company with an easily identifiable name. Because meetings had been held in Richard's own home in Abbeyfield Road, the new organization was called the Abbeyfield Society and became a legal entity in 1956. Partly because of its success, Richard Carr-Gomm decided to extend his own involvement beyond the Abbeyfield model to meet the needs of people with mental illnesses. The Carr-Gomm Society was established in the mid 1960s providing housing for people of all ages many of whom were disturbed and in need of considerable support.

Abbeyfield spread across the world in the years which followed. The original idea of providing companionship and support to people in need in inner London has proved highly successful. While the majority of houses are located in the United Kingdom, the movement has spread around the world to 18 countries. Its international operations include: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Holland, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States of America and, of course, Australia.

Abbeyfield came to Australia with Judy Dunster whose father was an early supporter of the concept in Scotland. This was the first time Abbeyfield had moved away beyond its beginnings in the United Kingdom. From her arrival in Australia in the 1970s, Judy met with politicians, community leaders and local groups to gain support and inform them about the concept. In 1981, the Abbeyfield Society (Australia) Limited, a not for profit company, limited by guarantee, was incorporated and the first Australian house opened in 1986. The Australian society, in its philosophy, objectives and general mode of operation, developed from the United Kingdom model but was adapted to Australian conditions.

There has always been enthusiastic support for the Abbeyfield concept in Australia but finding the substantial capital to build new houses has proved to be difficult.

The Abbeyfield model offers residents a valuable alternative which enables them to continue living in a familiar environment with access to companionship and support. In an ageing society, the need for cost effective community managed housing will continue to grow. At the same time, the need to develop suitable housing for younger people with physical and intellectual disabilities is an emerging issue. To this end Abbeyfield Australia will continue to establish strategic partnerships between



governments and community based organizations to facilitate the on-going development of Abbeyfield in a changing environment in Australia. dementia, extreme behaviour or a high degree of frailty.