



“Most of these people wouldn’t have any other chance to get out and about without us. It’s vital for them”

**Ray Hautot,
St Mark’s Family Centre**



Sitting alongside a glinting Brighton seafront on the sunniest day of the year are a cobbler, a ceildh dancer, an electrician, a ballroom dancer, a parachute packer, a pianist, and a teacher. Their average age is 90, but you wouldn’t know it.

The banter and good-natured ribbing is relentless, and it’s hard to keep up with all the running jokes and years-old, light-hearted rivalries.

Being old in Britain can mean isolation, poverty, and poor mental or physical health. NPC estimates that 1.8 million older people in the UK experience a combination of these problems, while almost 3 million of them live alone.

Older people face many of the most difficult social problems to address: poverty, isolation, and ill health. Groups such as St Mark’s Family Centre in Mitcham, south London, tackle these issues head-on with a drop-in centre, excursions, cookery classes and hands-on support

But groups such as St Mark’s Family Centre in Mitcham, south London – a community group that supports over 600 people a year in one of the capital’s most deprived boroughs – offer a space and sense of community to people who may have no other opportunities to socialise.

Loneliness, depression and poverty aren’t easy problems to measure, or to tackle. So it’s an enormous credit to St Mark’s that, on today’s day trip to Brighton, there’s nothing but smiles and laughter as 12 older people hit the beach.

CHARITY DONATION **St Mark’s Family Centre £60,000**

don’t fade to grey



“If you want to know anything, the people at St Mark’s come up with all the answers,” says Chris. “I live nearby and pop in on my scooter. It gets me out and keeps me active. I still work sometimes. Look at my shoes – they’re 14 years old, but I fixed them up and they’re as good as new.”

“I didn’t think I’d enjoy my retirement, but I’ve stayed active and love it now. St Mark’s keeps me busy, and I do my own garden.”

Victor is having a day off from genealogy, his new hobby. “I can trace my relatives back to Queen Elizabeth I. I got into it when I bought my laptop. One of my relatives was executed by the Queen, you know,” he says, his eyes sparkling with the enthusiasm of a man half his age. “I was an

UNITED FRONT

A day trip to Brighton is only one of the ways St Mark’s Family Centre helps older people make the most of their golden years



electronics engineer, and to keep my brain active I love crosswords. My laptop it helps me to stay sharp.”

“If I won the lottery I’d give St Mark’s millions,” Victor continues, as seagulls whirl above him in the bright sun. “It’s an important facility for us, and it needs more coverage.” As he speaks his “companion”, who used to be a ceildh dancer, nods in agreement. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell them we’re lovers!” laughs Victor.

St Mark’s acts as a community for those whose families have moved away, whose friends have died, and for older people who simply have no one else to turn to. It also runs courses in healthy cooking for people on lower incomes, and acts as a drop-in centre for people with mental health issues.

Organiser Ray Hautot says St Mark’s has benefited enormously from the support offered by ECT, and that the centre is an indispensable resource for the local community. “Most of these people wouldn’t have any other chance to get out without us. It’s vital for them,” he says.

As the group strolls slowly but steadily along the seafront, past the wailing funfair and tetchy young families, they are like a drifting island of tranquillity.

St Mark’s aims are modest, their methods are not headline-grabbing, and their clients are not the highest-profile group. But it’s groups like this that offer a sense of social cohesion and support to the people who need and deserve it most. **ECT**