

Richard Carr-Gomm OBE 2 January 1922-27 October 2008

I'm delighted to be here today to talk about the life and achievements of my father, Richard Carr-Gomm. It is a great tribute to him that so many people – friends, colleagues, and supporters are here to share in this celebration.

Richard Carr-Gomm was born in Warwickshire on 2 January 1922 but his life's true work began here in Southwark with the first Abbeyfield and Carr-Gomm houses.

At first he followed the conventional path by joining the army in 1939, and in 1941, the Coldstream Guards. Richard enjoyed life as a soldier on active service. Wounded in 1944, he returned to the front in 1945. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre (Silver Cross) by the French in recognition of his valour. Richard was one of the first to visit the concentration camp, Belsen, in 1945. This had a profound effect on him.

After being stationed in Middle East, Richard was posted home in 1953 – and told he could make his own way back. Travelling by train through Italy and France, he lived rough, eating scraps of food and washing at public taps. In Italy he visited Cottolengo, a Christian community run by an order of sisters where 8,000 people with a range of problems and ages lived together. It was at Cottolengo, that Richard first considered the challenges that lonely and isolated people in his own country might face and how these could be overcome.

Peace time soldiering in England was fun but not very satisfying. Richard began to feel that he was being guided by God to do something different with the rest of his life. Billy Graham's preaching helped Richard to reaffirm his faith "in the spirit of 'stand up and be counted'", as he put it.

Visiting Bermondsey where his family had property, Richard was struck by how many local residents, particularly older people seemed isolated and forgotten. He wrote:

'I went to east London and I saw loneliness – lonely people sitting on park benches or staring out of windows.'

He responded by resigning his commission in 1955 and trying to become Britain's first male home help. It's hard to imagine now how unconventional this was for a man of his background. But the story of "the Scrubbing Major" who had resigned his Guards commission to scour floor boards for free in Southwark made the front page of the Daily Mail!

Richard felt that the answer to the problems he saw, was neighbourliness. In 1956, he spent his army gratuity on a house in Eugenia Road. His £450 bought six rooms, an outside lavatory and two cold water taps! Supported by local volunteers, Richard invited four lonely older people to join him and installed himself as housekeeper, though not for long. Cooking wasn't his forte! Eugenia Road was the acorn from which Abbeyfield grew, put down roots and eventually branched out across the UK and, in time, across the world.

As Abbeyfield expanded, its management and future direction became matters of great debate and in 1964 Richard fell out with the movement that he had founded. Hurt, and in need of a break, he went to stay in Uganda with his old army friend, the Kabaka of Buganda. Richard returned this hospitality two years' later, when he offered shelter to the first president of the Republic of Uganda, Edward Mutesa II, who fled to England escaping political unrest. We are delighted to see so many Ugandan friends here today.

Back home, Richard was compelled to continue his work and to reach out to others who were vulnerable. Recognising that isolation affected people of all ages, in 1964 Richard established another voluntary group: "so that the problem of loneliness was not only dealt with now but lessened in the future".

This became the Carr-Gomm Society. Once more, the first house, opened in 1965, was in Bermondsey. And once more, community and neighbour involvement was key. While some local people complained at what they saw were the Carr-Gomm house's shortcomings, others

gave furniture and cooked Sunday lunches. The idea spread and, now Carr-Gomm gives housing, care and support to over 4,000 people each year.

Richard regarded spiritual welfare as central to human life. Loneliness blighted it but was not necessarily connected with poverty. Rich people can be lonely too. Richard was keen to continue the battle against loneliness on new territory – this time in Chelsea. A property in Morpeth Terrace was acquired that had once been home to Sir Winston and Lady Churchill. Purchasing other properties in Holland Park and Sloane Square he set up the Morpeth Society to provide a safe haven for lonely people without financial difficulties.

Richard was also the inspiration for many other individuals, and organisations across Britain and the rest of the world. These include Solo Housing in Bath, St Matthew Housing in Bury St Edmunds and Newcastle's Byker Bridge Housing Association as well as Carr-Gomm Scotland and Abbeyfield International.

Dad had married Susan Gibbs, one of the first Abbeyfield volunteers in 1957, and was father to five children. All of us are here today with you, along with Richard's grandchildren. My mother Susan's almost guaranteed ability to oppose his arguments was always instructive in the end and he was grateful for her loving, but not uncritical support.

In 1975 Richard was reconciled with Abbeyfield which was a source of great satisfaction to him and to the organisation. From then until the end of his life he was actively involved in all three of the charities which he founded – attending an Abbeyfield management meeting just weeks before he died. He particularly enjoyed meeting the people receiving the support of these organisations as well as their volunteers and staff.

Richard was recognised with many honours during his lifetime and appreciated them all. The blue plaque dedicated to him in Bermondsey which he unveiled in 2005 described him accurately, if incompletely, as a social reformer.

Richard was an original. He was a man of great humility, compassion and humour. Someone who dreamed dreams and made them happen. He didn't do it alone: the help, and encouragement of the original neighbours and volunteers in Bermondsey, and beyond, were vital in his fight to overcome isolation and loneliness. He continued to challenge and question the status quo to the end of his life.

I will end with one of the many kind messages we received on the death of my father. This is from a member of Carr-Gomm staff: "The world has lost a man of vision who cared about others and acted upon it. He made a huge difference to many people's lives and his memory serves as inspiration to us all."

Thank you.

David Carr-Gomm

Richard Carr-Gomm Memorial Service,
Southwark Cathedral, 29 April 2009