



Living in *Harmony*

Could sharing resources and housing be a greener solution for the future? Jeremy Miles visits a successful co-housing group near Gillingham

It's Sunday afternoon and I'm chatting to Amanda Pearson and James Burgess over a cup of tea and slices of Battenberg cake in a smart farmhouse kitchen. Amanda is a lively dark-haired woman in her early forties who works for the Health Education Trust, and James is a 59-year-old former accountant. It's about as normal a scene as you can imagine.

This will come as a surprise to some because we're at The Threshold Centre, a North Dorset co-housing project which has long been regarded with a degree of suspicion by certain folk. "No matter

how hard we try to persuade people that we're not a bunch of hippies with weird ideas, there are still those who think we must be rather odd," says Amanda. "In fact, we're very normal indeed. We're just a group of people who choose to share their resources and live a greener, more sustainable life."

She stresses that The Threshold Centre, based on a former dairy farm just outside Gillingham, is nothing like a stereotypical 70s-style commune. She gestures out of the window to a courtyard garden with a spacious lawn, shrubs, trees and a glorious crop of



John McMann peeling potatoes for the communal evening meal



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Community elder,
Caroline Sharman

marigolds and sweet peas. The houses – mainly two- or three-bedroom units – are arranged around this central recreation area.

There are several buildings including two terraced blocks – one containing new-build eco-efficient residences, the other converted from the old cow sheds. All have impressive energy-saving specifications. “Fundamentally, the principals are that everybody has their own front door,” explains Amanda. “They have their own house with their own kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and living room but they also have access to shared facilities.”

There are 14 separate homes at Threshold, which currently house 21 men, women and children, and each also has free use of the 300-year-old farmhouse. “We call it our Common House. When you buy or rent here you’re not only buying your own home but a fourteenth share of this house too.”

Co-housing, which has long been popular in Scandinavia and America, aims to encourage residents to share resources and thereby minimise their carbon footprint. The Threshold Centre started in 2004 when six like-minded people pooled their money to buy the old farmhouse, seven holiday cottages

and two old barns. It took four years to achieve full planning permission and final building work was only completed in January. Two of the houses are currently for sale – one is a two-bedroom property priced at £130,000, the other has one bedroom and is offered through the local housing register on a shared-ownership basis.

In addition to the houses, Threshold has an on-site laundry, communal freezers and a vegetable plot complete with polytunnel. The residents, who pitch in with babysitting and dog

walking, also operate a one-car-per-household policy, sharing wherever possible. There’s a bio-mass woodchip boiler for heating, and photovoltaic solar panels to generate electricity. “We ask that each resident gives four hours work a week to the community,” Amanda tells me, explaining that they have a good mix of skills amongst the residents. “Some people love cooking, some like gardening; we play to people’s strengths.”

“I know this kind of lifestyle wouldn’t suit everybody but we see it as middle



The shared farmhouse

Community Issue

way between the extremes of living on a full-blown commune and the isolated, alienated life experienced by so many people who live in big towns and cities.”

As we talk we are joined by John McMann, a 52-year-old single dad who came to live at Threshold after coming to one of their regular open days. John, a mental health worker with the NHS, is about to start peeling potatoes for the regular Sunday evening communal dinner. The group makes a point of eating together twice a week. Tonight's meal will be ratatouille, marrow, and the aforementioned spuds – all from their veg plot, barely 50 yards away. The communal meals are always vegetarian but residents are free to cook anything they like in their own kitchens.

John says that his two years of living at The Threshold Centre has been highly enjoyable. “I like the meditation and the fact that everyone has a spiritual path,” he tells me. “I also like the hugs. We all meet up at 7.50am every morning and have a friendly hug before going to work. Hugging is good. You should have five fruit and veg a day and five hugs a day!”

Amanda, who has done such a good job projecting an image of utter normality, momentarily looks just a little embarrassed but explains: “We are quite spiritual people here but not in a proscriptive or dogmatic way. John is a Buddhist, other people are Sufi, Christian or Pagan, but we are basically non-denominational.”

At this point James reveals that as well as being a former accountant he teaches Sufism and astrology. He likes it at Threshold. “It's got a good atmosphere. It's very mellow and relaxed.” He's not a full-time resident yet but has been staying at the Common House to see whether he is a Threshold Centre kind of person.

“It's a two-way thing.” says Amanda. “Anyone who wants to live here has to spend two weekends as our guest. That way they find out if they like us and we find out if we like them. We then have a



Amanda Pearson
with her dog, Monty

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community meeting and discuss how we feel about that person. It's not foolproof but at least it weeds out the complete horror stories. We have had people visit and at the end of the weekend we all heave a big sigh of relief. Interestingly, you never hear from those people again.”

The current residents, who range from 73-year-old ‘community elder’ Caroline Sharman, to a six-year-old, seem to get on famously. “We've been very blessed with the people we have living here. There have been no serious problems,” says Amanda.

One of the founder members of The Threshold Centre is Michael Giddings, a

63-year-old who spends half his year in Southern India as an assistant guest master at a monastery. Living in a community, he says, requires a sense of humour and patience. “It can be frustrating.” He points to a fence. “It took us two months to decide the shape and height of that fence. You could see that some people were thinking ‘for goodness sake just make a decision’ but you can't always do that. Things take time.” □

For more information about The Threshold Centre go to thresholdcentre.org.uk or call Amanda Pearson on 01747 835633