MY NIGHT IN BRITAIN'S POSHEST OLD PEOPLE'S HOME*

*JUST DON'T CALL IT THAT

Forget bingo and biscuits. The latest fashion in 'later living' is complexes with cinemas, gyms, spas and piano recitals – so long as you have £13,000 a month to spend on fees. Robert Crampton, 57 (left), spends the night at a luxury retirement suite in London

Robert Crampton with Auriens residents Paulene Stone (centre) and Claire Doyle, photographed by Tom Jackson

If Richard Osman's Thursday Murder Club had a London branch, it might well be located here, just off the Kings Road. Blimey, I catch myself thinking a couple of times during the day and night I spent at the Auriens "later living" complex as a guest, if only I were 20 years older... In the unlikely (given certain lifestyle choices) event that I outlive my wife and my kids end up searching for somewhere to park the old bugger, I certainly wouldn't mind landing here. Not that I could remotely afford it.

Or maybe, just maybe, I could (see below)...

I don't know who came up with the phrase "later living" (some smart marketing exec in the US, presumably, where the concept is well developed), but it's genius. Old folks' home. Old people's home. Care home. Sheltered housing. Retirement home. None of these quite do it from a PR perspective. Nor does any phrase involving the word "senior", which is OK to describe pet food, but not people. But later living is sophisticated, restrained, respectful. It might well signal an improvement in the UK's shoddy treatment of much of its elderly population.

Those who can afford it, at any rate. Those with big, paid-for houses they can sell, invest the capital and live off the interest. An entry-level flat at Auriens costs £13,000 a month to rent. That's for accommodation and utilities, not food, drink and nursing. I can imagine how a version of the model could be made a lot cheaper, especially if it weren't smack in the middle of Chelsea. But it's only ever going to be within reach of the well-off. Still, the well-off can suffer from loneliness in old age like anybody else.

Auriens is a five-storey complex. It opened last year. There are 56 one and two-bed flats, roomy, like suites in a top hotel, except each has a bell to ring for a nurse, handrails in the bathroom and wall units in the kitchen that can be lowered for ease of access. I pressed the nurse call button and she turned up inside a minute. Decor is modern; no hunting prints or swaggy curtains. The lower ground floor houses a restaurant, bar, gym, spa, pool, library, cinema, garden and hairdresser. Residents must be over 65. They can furnish their flats how they choose.

There is no "organised fun", no reluctant old ladies dragooned into games of bingo or Blitz-themed tea parties. Instead, there are piano recitals, lectures on nutrition and *The House of Gucci* playing in the cinema. The corridors are lined with classic Terry O'Neill portraits from the Sixties: the Beatles; the Stones; Audrey Hepburn; Richard Burton; Sean Connery.

When it opened, Auriens was criticised as "an oligarch's bolt hole". Its initial residents, however, are not Russian gangsters but upper-middle-class Londoners, several of them longstanding Chelsea locals, who are well-to-do as opposed to stupidly rich in large part because of long-term property price inflation. Many enjoyed careers in the creative industries. They're an interesting, likeable bunch in full possession of their mental faculties (Auriens does not cater for dementia sufferers) and physically robust for their age, the average being about 80.

GETTY IMAGES

Paulene Stone modelling Dior in 1967

Let's meet some of my fellow residents. Having been treated to a piano recital by young Leyla Cemiloglu, a Guildhall scholar, I am introduced to Paulene Stone. Older readers may recognise her. She was a famous model in the Sixties, photographed by O'Neill herself, a fixture in swingin' London, married to the actor Laurence Harvey, the star of *Room at the Top* and later *Darling*, for which Julie Christie won the Oscar for best actress. "He was a lovely man. We had a blast. What were the Sixties like? Bloody wonderful."

Harvey died tragically young. As later did their daughter, Domino, who became a bounty hunter in California before succumbing to a drug overdose. A film loosely based on her life starring Keira Knightley came out in 2005. Meanwhile, Paulene spent many years in Los Angeles where she married the restaurateur Peter Morton, co-founder of the Hard Rock Café. Their son, Harry, ran the infamous Viper Room on the Sunset Strip (where River Phoenix had met his end) for a while, before his own premature death three years ago. Long before that, his parents had divorced and Paulene had married the actor Mark Burns, well known for 1968's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Burns died in 2007. Got that? Suffice to say, blessed as she is in many respects, life hasn't been a bed of roses for Paulene Stone.

There is no 'organised fun', no Blitz-themed tea parties. Residents can furnish their flats how they choose

Burns was her fourth husband. The daughter of her first marriage, prior to Harvey, is alive and well. And sufficiently concerned after her mother had a bad fall on holiday in Mexico to suggest that she should move out of her home in Pimlico, less than a mile from where Paulene and I now chat. "I used to be up and down the stairs like a mountain goat," she confides. "But after my fall I started to worry about them. There was no room to put in a lift and I'm too vain for one of those Stannah things. They scream 'old lady', don't you think? I don't feel 81 at all. When my daughter turned 58, I caught myself thinking, 'Well, she's older than me now.'"

She was initially conflicted about coming to live at Auriens. "I loved the community in Pimlico. I knew all the dealers [I'm guessing Paulene means art dealers, of which there is a proliferation in Pimlico] and I had such a pretty house. I'd go to La Poule au Pot. I was going to move into a flat in Belgravia – I'm a bit of a snob about postcodes. It had a fantastic view, but I realised there'd be nobody to talk to. I thought, 'Crikey, I've made a mistake,' and I decided to stay here. I love it; it's so cheerful. It's a jolly group, tea and cake. They said, 'Come and join us.' I like that."

After our talk in the library, I move to the restaurant next door where I meet one of Paulene's new friends at dinner. Claire Doyle, a petite Irish woman, has just turned 79. Her husband, Raymond, a successful builder and developer, died in 2014. She had been a nurse and then an air hostess for Aer Lingus in the Sixties and Seventies. Until last November she had stayed in the family home in Dublin. Her son is in Australia; her daughter and family are now eight minutes' drive away in west London. "When they're older, they can call in."

"Covid was very isolating in Dublin," Claire tells me over guinea fowl and white asparagus. "I saw Michael, my gardener, and Ann, my housekeeper, but nobody much else. My eyes are not so good. I'd had to stop playing golf. I couldn't drive. I'd taken up piano in my sixties but then I'd stopped that. I was withering away, emotionally and physically."

Shortly before last Christmas, Claire became one of Auriens' first residents. "It was my daughter's idea. I could see the logic of it. It's expensive but it's fantastic. It's lovely to have people around. The staff are great and look what they put on! That girl tonight was amazing. I haven't been out much. I need to get stronger. But things come to you here." She conscientiously completes 20 lengths "aqua-walking" in the pool every day.

Claire Doyle and Paulene Stone

It's a far cry from the stuffy single room in east Yorkshire where my mother spent her final 18 months

Several of the other residents I speak to, the ones who don't wish to be named, confirm what Claire says about the isolation – brought on first by widowhood and then by lockdown – as a major factor, if not *the* major factor, in their decision to move in. "I was very lonely, yes, after my husband died," one tells me. "Sixty wonderful years together. We were so happy. I had a lovely flat near here, lots of friends, I wasn't going to give up on life. Then the pandemic came and my friends, and me, we hibernated. For ever. We were *so* careful. We never saw each other. We never saw anybody. My children rang me every morning and evening, but apart from that I didn't speak to anybody. I felt as if I had no life."

Two other considerations are worth mentioning. One relates to the way the high-end London property market has developed in recent years. "Many if not most of the flats in my block," one woman tells me, "were owned by people who were hardly ever there. Lebanese. Russians. Chinese. When the pandemic happened, they disappeared. I wanted company, but there wasn't any."

The other point made by several residents is that they are convinced town rather than suburban or country dwellers. "I've always lived in cities," one told me. "Paris, Prague, London: I never wanted a 'roses around the door' cottage. I want to stay where there are lots of people and culture and energy." My wife, who works in property research and sales, backs this up. She is struck by how many clients seeking a home in inner London are in their sixties or seventies, selling up in the suburbs and wanting to be near good hospitals, theatres and transport links.

After dinner, further potential interviewees having retired to their own quarters, I watch a Tarantino movie in the comfortably appointed cinema. I'm on my own and I've seen the film three times before, so, with only half an eye on the geysers of blood on screen, I essay a little back-of-a-fag-packet economics. ➨

The average price of a four-bed house in Chelsea is about £5 million. If you sold up and got 4 per cent interest, which with a decent financial adviser is not unrealistic, that would bring in £200,000 a year without touching the capital. That's your rent and extras at Auriens covered. It's an absurd amount of money, but it's yours to spend as you see fit in the years that remain to you. What price comfort and companionship? And your kids are happy, because Mum and/or Dad is taken care of and their £5 million inheritance is safe.

And given what's happened to property prices in London over the past 50 years, you don't have to be massively privileged (although it always helps) to be sitting on a £5 million house. You just have to have bought it a long time ago. In 1970, the average house price in the UK was four times the average annual salary. Now, it's nine times as much.

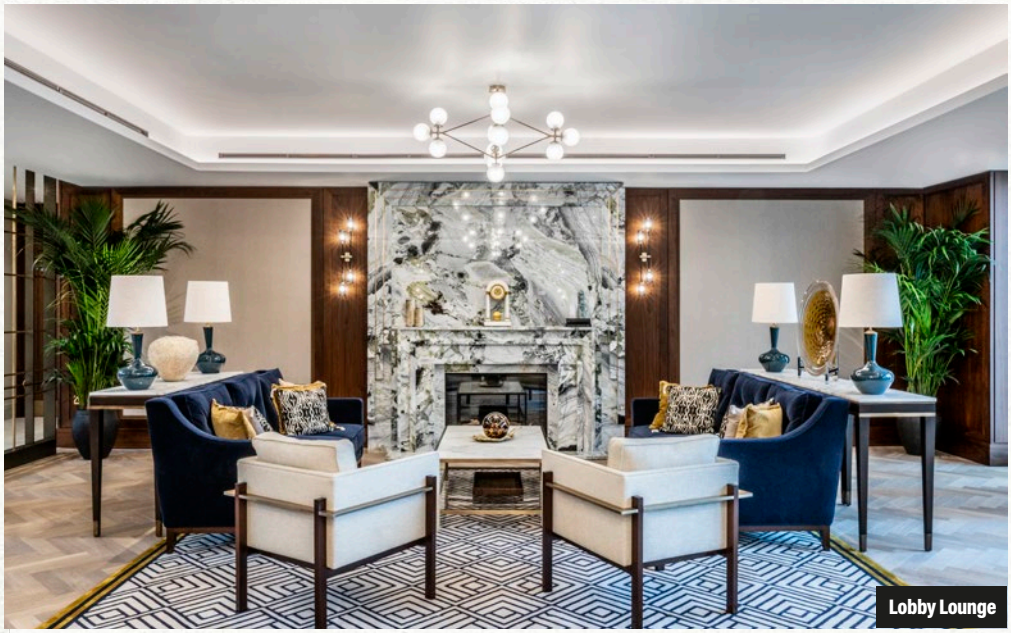
In 1970, the average house price in London was £5,000. Now it's £500,000. So if Chelsea house prices are 10 times the London average, which I don't think they were 50 years ago but anyway, let's go with that, in 1970 the average price of a house within striking distance of Sloane Square was £50,000. And thus, while you most certainly needed to be on a good whack, or have family money behind you, you didn't need to be mega-rich to stump up the deposit and meet the mortgage payments. On a place that is now worth £5 million.

My wife and I bought our house in Hackney in 1995. It's earned more than I have in the years since. If Hackney keeps gentrifying at its current rate, by 2045 when I (or more likely my wife) hit 81, it is not inconceivable she might be in a similar position to someone who is that age now and who bought in Chelsea as a 30-year-old in 1970. That, presumably, is the thinking underlying the long-term business plans of ventures such as the one I sampled.

I reflect on these sums as I return to my suite. They've given me the best room – ground floor, private garden, two large bedrooms, and a considerable lounge/dining/kitchen area. The rent on this place would be a long way north of £13,000 a month. Although with only a quarter of the flats occupied thus far, I get the impression there are deals to be done, such as grand aristocratic ladies presumably used to strike on taking up residence at Claridge's. Maybe they still do. Margaret Thatcher lived her final months in a suite at the Ritz in 2013.

It's a far cry from the stuffy single room in an old folks' home in east Yorkshire where my mum spent her final 18 months, as it should be, given the cost. Not that the bills for my mum were cheap, at about three grand a month. So while Auriens is expensive, *all* versions of the care of old people, in whatever income bracket you or your family finds itself, are expensive.

The following morning, purely in the interests of research into the facilities on offer you understand, I partake of a physiotherapy session with Holly, a health assessment with Gideon and a deep tissue massage with Lucy. Later, I go into the garden to meet my next satisfied customer.



Lobby Lounge

Exterior

And John Blackburn, 88, is a very satisfied customer indeed. "I'm so happy here," he tells me, beaming. Why is that? "It's Shangri-La. It's perfect, isn't it?"

John makes a salient point when he praises the "informality" of the staff. Several of his fellow residents echo that. It's a reminder that (although in John's case his formative years were the Fifties) even the aged are now a little uncomfortable with the traditionally servile attitude you might find in a posh hotel, while detesting the jolly-up overfamiliarity of much of the state care sector.

Originally from Lincoln, John came to London in 1955 and trained as a designer, founding his business in Soho in the Sixties. He worked on famous ad campaigns including Silk Cut and Harveys Bristol Cream. He still owns his office building "opposite *Private Eye* – "I watched Peter Cook killing himself."

. After decades in Islington, it was an accident – a fall walking his dog – that persuaded him he should no longer live quite so independently. He's undeniably wealthy, John Blackburn. And entirely self-made. His job interview at an ad agency aged 21 was his first visit to London; a trip to Geneva in the late Fifties his first time abroad. If, in later life, he wants to spend his hard-earned fortune on a life of ease and interest in Chelsea, I wouldn't be the one to blame him and nor should anyone else. ■

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