

First Year at Somerset Court

'But whatever the outcome, the experiment has to be made.' Sybil Elgar, principal of Somerset Court community for autistic young people, describes the beginning of a pioneer venture in Somerset

Moving into Somerset Court in August last year was the culmination of four years' efforts to establish the first residential centre for autistic adolescents in the United Kingdom. Ever since becoming head of the first school for autistic children set up by the National Society for Autistic Children, I had been concerned about the future of adolescents leaving school. I felt they needed to continue their social and formal education in an adult community which would prepare the more able to become integrated into ordinary life and the more handicapped to live happier and fuller lives within the centre.

Together with the organising committee of parents, I began planning for the adult community. We publicised the need for the centre, raised money and loans and searched for a suitable property. In June 1974 we found it—a large country house in Somerset with 39 rooms, a cottage annexe and 22 acres of land. It was bought by the Ealing Autistic Trust, formed by parents who have children at the NSAC school for autistic children in Ealing, London.

Then began the work of converting the house to the needs of its future residents: equipping classes and craft rooms, common rooms and offices, rooms for games, music and dancing, a dining and recreation hall. We began to cultivate several acres of the grounds, renovating greenhouses for tomatoes and cucumbers, and sowing and planting vegetables, fruit bushes and trees. At last, in August last year, we were ready for the 18 boys and three girls who, together with 23 staff, were to be the first members of the new community.

The first residents

The 23 boys and girls who are now living here are aged from 11 to 20 and have a wide range of abilities and disturbances. All except four are supported by their local education authorities (the annual fees are £2,750) and they came from the school at Ealing, at their parents' choice. Before they first arrived they were well prepared for the move, discussing their new centre and examining a model of Somerset Court. Most of them, therefore, have adjusted to the change and have settled well. They have responded willingly to the allocation of jobs such as bed making, sweeping and dusting rooms, cleaning baths and basins, setting tables, and preparing food and drinks.

The residents vary very much in their abilities. A 16 year old girl who, when she first came to the Ealing school, would throw long temper tantrums and pick her face until it bled, is now one of the most helpful and understanding members of the unit. She chooses her own clothes to wear each day, dresses herself and can use a sewing machine. A boy of 18 who was very timid at school now joins happily in activities at the local youth club. Others, however, who are severely disturbed, demand attention every minute of the day because, for instance, they need dressing and undressing, remain incontinent in their late teens and cannot be allowed to go to the lavatory on their own in case they flood the area with water.

The centre is planned with separate sections for the school, the further education and training unit and ultimately—since in the future we intend to cater more for the older age groups—for the adult residents. The school follows a curriculum as wide as possible and work programmes for the F.E. and training units are being planned according to individual ability. As financial responsibility for the handicapped is apportioned between different authorities, these divisions are administratively necessary at present but in the daily life of the community such dividing lines are very flexible.

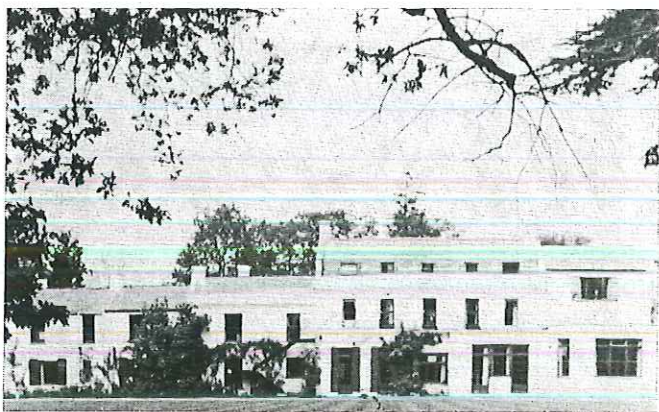
Individual programmes

The centre aims to provide individual programmes of education, social and work experience designed to meet each one's needs and abilities. We try to teach independence and social competence, a sense of responsibility, punctuality and the ability to work well and reliably with a minimum of supervision.

For the young people over school leaving age, a part of each day is allowed for working with 'school' subjects: the concept of language and the practical application of reading, writing, number, time and money. All of these subjects need further study to help the school leavers to function better in daily life. Eighteen year old George, for instance, follows an individual programme which includes work on elementary concepts of quantity and time, reading and understanding of instructions on articles like packets of food, and preparation of food and drinks. Sixteen year old Ann is learning multiplication, division and fractions, tackling punctuation, tenses and other grammatical rules, caring for poultry and making soft toys.

All the children have learning and social problems but they now have the opportunity to continue their education on all levels. Even after only 10 months some of them have acquired new skills. Present training programmes include horticultural work (one of the older boys has learnt to drive and operate the mowing and rotivating machines, others pick, pack and store apples, pot plants and cut hedges); office work (some are learning to type and use the duplicator); printing (two boys can set up type and print headed writing paper, dance tickets and so on); cottage industries (making pickles, jam, cakes, chutney and so on); animal and poultry rearing (a 12 year old helps to look after 40 hens, also ducks, goats and budgerigars); crafts such as woodwork, weaving, basketry, needlework and jewellery making. All of the products are saleable and we are converting an outbuilding into a garden centre where many of them can be sold. One or two of the boys are able to help with painting the fences, potting plants and making seed boxes. I have also obtained some contract work for the children to do at the centre, mainly needlework.

It is equally important that the residents should be able to cope with and enjoy leisure time. They will be concerned with planning and organising future social programmes, including outings and walks, and will be encouraged to join local clubs and to take part in suitable entertainment outside.



Top: Somerset Court from the grounds. Centre: older boys paint fences bordering the entrance drive. Bottom: the craft room, where children are helped by the centre's part time occupational therapist and other staff

Those who are able will help to decide on the daily menu, use the telephone, shop and keep within a budget and convey messages both inside and outside the centre.

We do not want to be an inward-looking community and we have been lucky settling at Somerset Court because of the unquestionable goodwill of people living in the neighbourhood. We have already been invited to take part in functions such as village fêtes, bazaars, football matches, horse riding and going to church. One of the girls works one day a week in the village shop, two of the younger boys attend Cubs and some of the older children attend a local youth club.

We are able to take most of our young people out and about and they enjoy these occasions. However, there are some

who cannot tolerate the approach of other people or enjoy any kind of social situation and it would not be to the advantage of the majority to insist on including them in all outside activities. Instead, separate programmes are arranged for them, such as walks around the grounds, car rides or records.

Importance of future balance

The centre is at present full, although we hope later (money permitting) to build and convert in order to expand to a total of 40 residents. This is a manageable number, and the community cannot, for economic reasons, be too small, but any decision regarding the total number depends on the criteria for selection.

It is important to ensure a sound balance in the varying degrees of handicap. One of the problems we are experiencing is that the balance in our centre is wrong, because we have too many non-contributors. Some of these are aggressive and destructive, liable to break windows, tear bedding, or to be violent with staff on occasions. This disruptive group of young people are not able to profit from any kind of learning or social situation. The provision of teachers, tradesmen and child care staff does not appear to be appropriate for them. They do not seem to need staff who are professionally trained and qualified as much as, perhaps, untrained but understanding helpers, temperamentally suited to giving them the day-long care they require. For our present 23 residents, we have a staff of 23, including four full time teachers (including me), five part-time teachers, five house care staff, a secretary, bookkeeper and domestic staff. (However, when the centre is occupied 52 weeks a year, as it will be later when extra accommodation is available, it may be possible to transfer to the residents some of the work at present done by the staff).

If the project is eventually to fulfil its purpose, the present balance must be rectified in future intakes by the admission of more able and responsive residents. It may, in the meantime, be necessary to set up a 'special care' unit within the centre with a different staff selection and programme for the most severely handicapped.

Conclusions

In 1969 The National Society for Autistic Children issued a report, *Forgotten Teenagers*, which stated:

The lack of facilities for Britain's 'new' population of autistic adolescents is leading many of them into mental hospitals. If a number of centres spread over the British Isles could be provided, a great number of them could be saved from this fate and trained to become useful and accepted members of society.

I do not know if this assumption about 'a great number' is correct. At this moment, I think not—judging by those within my care. However, at Somerset Court we will do all we can to enable the more competent to integrate into society, to help the less able (and these, I think, are the majority) to lead fuller, happier and more useful lives within and without the community, and to protect a *minority* who seem unable to contribute at any level.

The success or failure of this project depends on whether or not, in a time of rising inflation, we can become financially viable and on whether or not the children respond to continuous training and become more able and socially responsible. But, whatever the outcome, the experiment has to be made.