

## FEATURE

# When they go home with a smile on their face, it's lovely

They are, many people say, something of a lifeline: a chance to get out of the house, enjoy a natter, a cup of tea and a laugh. **STEVEN RUSSELL** hears about Age UK Suffolk's Forget-me-not clubs

It's one of the better Fridays in August – warm and sunny, actually – and thank goodness. Because it's the Forget-me-not Fish'n'Chip Day Out by the sea. You don't want unseasonal wind and rain when 40 people have come to Sizewell for food and fun – and the weather gods are smiling.

Janet Mayhew and husband Geoff are here. It's the second time they've been to this Age UK Suffolk summer treat and they're having a rare old time. They've had tea and biscuits, chatted to some of the other folk who have come out to the coast, and enjoyed their fish and chips. Then there was entertainment – by a group of musicians with guitars, a ukelele, a banjo, drums and tambourines who are part of an Aldeburgh Music community project to help people with dementia or who are affected by it.

And all this for a fiver. Must be the bargain of the year. "Now there's a chance to have a go themselves and see, as one of the musicians says, if they can together come up with a little piece of music. Geoff has a guitar and his wife a drum. Other people have different instruments. It's a bit of a jam session, really, and a nice way to spend part of the afternoon.

Later, Janet sums up perfectly the four hours-plus spent in the sea air. "Lovely!" she says. "My husband loved it – especially being with a group."

Opportunities like this are a boon when life is sometimes demanding. The couple go to the monthly Framlingham Forget-me-not Day Out social club at the St John Ambulance Westbury Centre in Fairfield Road. It's one of several clubs run by Age UK Suffolk for folk with memory problems and those who look after them.

"We look forward to it," says Janet. "You meet different people, you have a talk, and the carers get together – you can have a moan and a laugh! –



and it gets you out of the house." The Framlingham gatherings follow a regular format from 11am until 3pm: a welcome with refreshments and a chat, soup and a pud, and about an hour of entertainment. Another bargain at £5 a time.

Geoff, who in the past had been a hard-toiling farmworker, was diagnosed with dementia about 18 months ago. Janet read in the paper about the Forget-me-not gatherings and thought it sounded a great way to make new friends. She was right.

"We've met a lot of people, and when you see them out it's 'Hello, how are you? Looking forward to the club!' It's something to look forward to. They're a lot of

strangers at first, but you make friends. It's meeting people and chatting, that's the main thing. You get out of the house and you're not lonely – and you find yourself happy. It's nice to just get out and enjoy ourselves."

The couple, great-grandparents, will have been married for 56 years come October. They lived at Worlingworth for 50 years and then moved closer to Framlingham after Geoff retired.

Janet doesn't drive, and her husband had to stop when he became ill. "The car went. That was a bit of an upset for him. It's the independence." Geoff isn't in the best of health, unable to walk very far, and they're grateful to friends

and volunteer drivers for lifts to their clubs. (As well as Forget-me-not, they attend a regular get-together held in the United Free Church.

"Now we've joined the clubs, it makes a lot of difference," says Janet. "If it wasn't for the clubs, we wouldn't go out – well, not much, anyway. I just like him to be happy."

Sounds like they're something of a lifeline. "They are. Definitely. Our sons say 'Mum, you're never at home!'"

Janet is her husband's main carer, though he does have someone in the mornings. The clubs bring a welcome change of scene for them. "It really is a boost. I'm sure the other carers would say the same

■ Fun and friendship at the Age UK Suffolk Forget-me-not day out at The Warden's Centre in Sizewell. Inset left, Jenny Marten gets in the swing of things  
Photos: SIMON PARKER

thing." Geoff particularly enjoys singing. Once a month, she says. Forget-me-not has a session at Otley and they go for a good old singsong. "It's a nice enjoyable afternoon."

Vicky Hutchinson, lynchpin of the Forget-me-not operation, says music often appears to "click" with people who have memory problems.

"It kind of 'switches on a light' when they're singing. Some cared-for people might not say a lot when they're at home, but they can come to a singing group and sing their heart out. It's so lovely for the carer to see that in the person they care for: You can see the benefits of bringing someone to a group like that."

Vicky's official title with Age UK Suffolk is dementia community development officer. She launched the Forget-me-not clubs and runs them with a team of volunteers she describes as "like gold-dust".

About three years ago she was involved in a village dementia project in partnership with other charities, during which she was offered the use of The Warden's Centre at Sizewell once a month –

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**FEATURE**



■ 'I think people welcome a place they can go together and both enjoy themselves,' says Vicky Hutchinson, right, of the Forget-me-not clubs; above, Vicky with the volunteers she says she couldn't do without.



**Forget-me-not facts**

Age UK Suffolk's Forget-me-not clubs offer days out for people with memory problems, and their carers. They're a chance to meet others, share experiences and enjoy activities together. The clubs are at:

- Aldeburgh (second Monday of the month); reminiscence and entertainment, lunch; £5 per person
- Beccles (first Tuesday); Music, memories, tea & cake; £2.50
- Framlingham (last Thursday); reminiscence, entertainment, lunch; £5
- Kelsale (third Friday); reminiscence, tea & cake; £2.50
- Martlesham (second Tuesday); music, memories, tea & cake; £2.50
- Otley (second Thursday); singing groups
- Southwold (last Wednesday); reminiscence, tea & cake; £2.50
- Ipswich (second Friday); Fish & Chip Fridays; fish and chips lunch, tea & coffee and reminiscence; £5

■ For details, and to book places, contact Vicky Hutchinson on 01473 351234, 07841 460379; email vicky.hutchinson@ageuksuffolk.org enquiries@ageuksuffolk.org Information: 01473 351234



■ Janet Mayhew with Geoff. 'My husband loved it,' she says of the day on the coast.



18 at Cransford, and next month will mark 18 years in their bungalow in a village near Framlingham.

"I say we've 'only' been here 18 years because this will be the longest we've lived anywhere," Jenny laughs. "John was in the air force for 12 years, so we moved about a bit."

He worked as a car mechanic when he came out of the RAF in 1967, and had various similar jobs when he moved to Suffolk. John later worked on the dustcarts, but health problems would mean taking an early pension at only 58.

Today, Jenny says, he has Parkinson's-related dementia, along with other health issues. He's good at remembering things from the distant past but not so good with the short-term.

Jenny counts herself lucky that she can drive, and in fact took Janet and Geoff Mayhew and another friend on the Sizewell day out.

Both she and John look forward to Forget-me-not sessions. John can't get out much because of his Parkinson's, and is in a wheelchair much of the time. It's hard for Jenny to push him. "I'm only 4ft 9in, I'm afraid!"

Tell us why it's such a highlight of the month.

"Oh, it's lovely! We go in and I automatically go up to get the tea or coffee for us, and I get told off! 'Go and sit down! We're here to wait on you.' That's the volunteers.

There's the chance of a natter, that appetising soup for lunch, pudding and entertainment. "We've had a lady with her dog, a choir from Otley, and some morris men. It's good. And then there's more tea and cake before we leave!"

It's helpful to meet people with similar experiences. "We can all chat and discuss our weeks and days.

"Oh, we had Charlie Haylock a while back. [The raconteur who regales audiences with tales of rural life from years gone by.] Well, he had you in stitches."

**“It's something to look forward to. You get out of the house and you're not lonely – and you find yourself happy**

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there are transport issues as well."

She's grateful for the financial support of councils, organisations such as Rotary clubs, private donations, the muscle of The Suffolk Community Foundation and more for keeping the groups going, but recognises these are hard times. More financial help would always be welcomed, for costs – such as the hire of venues – can mount.

There's a useful spin-off, too. Forget-me-not groups help raise awareness of the importance of making our villages, towns and cities dementia-friendly communities – making life easier for people with memory problems.

Why does Vicky think the clubs work?

"I can only go by what people tell

it's part of a charity for disabled people – and organised a regular day out during the summer for folk with dementia and the people who look after them.

When the summer drew to a close, it seemed such a shame to stop. They managed to carry on the sessions by switching to the Fairfield Centre in Aldeburgh.

The concept gathered the momentum of a ball rolling down a hill. Why not in Framlingham too? it was suggested, so one started about 18 months ago and is doing well.

Now there's eight of them, from Beccles to Ipswich, meeting once a month.

Four are two-hour groups, known as R&R (Relax and Reminisce) and Memories through Music. "It sounds a little bit like rapping, doesn't it, R&R!" Vicky laughs.

Each of those sessions costs £2.50 per person for an enjoyable informal afternoon of memories and music, plus tea and cake.

The Ipswich group is a little different, known as Fish & Chip Fridays.

At Aldeburgh, the day includes soup and a pie for lunch – with Chopping's Hill Café helping out with discounted soup. Vicky shops

around for the best buys, such as apple pies, and the community supports the club, too, with help towards the cost of the venue.

At Framlingham, the Common Room Café assists, with soup at a very reduced price.

That August day out at Sizewell, by the way, is a once-a-year treat when the Framlingham, Kelsale and Aldeburgh groups combine for a summer outing to the seaside.

Vicky has lots of resources to spark conversations about memories and reminiscence – photographs and books, for instance, and articles on numerous subjects, archive film clips...

There have been music quizzes. She might organise a talk by museum staff, or borrow "memory boxes" full of intriguing objects.

The Forget-me-not aim is about providing a safe and understanding environment where people with dementia, and their carers, can meet others in a similar situation – and enjoy fun and friendship.

"I think people welcome a place they can go together and both enjoy themselves," says Vicky. "You can be isolated in a busy place like Ipswich. You can be isolated out in the country – and quite often, there,