

History and Life of the Royal Hospital Chelsea

A talk to the Eltham Society given by Colonel Stephen Daniel
Thursday 6th November 2003

The Eltham Society were told about 'The History and Life of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea' by Colonel Stephen Daniel, a House Master at that famous institution for the Gents in Scarlet or Chelsea Pensioners. The building described by one small girl as 'where all the Father Christmases live', as designed and built by Christopher Wren following Charles II's decree that a place be provided 'for those broken in war in the service of their country'.

At the time, hundreds of soldier victims of the recent Civil War, many of them wounded, abandoned by society and reduced to begging in the streets (many pubs displayed notices saying 'no dogs, no soldiers'), so there were many in need of a helping hand. Building was started in 1662; the site was by the Thames in rural Chelsea on the road to Westminster much favoured by foot-pads, so able-bodied Pensioners helped guard the route in return for being fed, housed, clothed and cared for.

Wren's building was, as always, both stylish and practical. Its appearance today is much as it was 340 years ago and his specifications (for stairways, for example) exactly conform to today's recommended standards, moreover, his structure has outlasted a number of improvements' introduced in recent times.

The rules of admission are that the Pensioner must be an ex-soldier of the British Army, be 65 years old or disabled, have no financial dependants, and must be of good character. Today there are 340 residents with an average age of 83, the oldest at the moment in 98, the last Chelsea Veteran of the Great War died last year. Two recent arrivals, aged 93 and 96, are as strong as oxen and volunteer for everything.

Recently a referendum of Pensioners agreed that women should be eligible to enter; relatively few ladies meet the relevant criteria and only three have applied - one was a hoax, the second was ineligible the third did qualify and should be admitted when accommodation problems have been solved.

There is a waiting list for men but in the normal course of events sadly some sixty residents pass away each year. It is always a pleasure to see the familiar scarlet uniforms at various public and sporting events, such as Wimbledon and, naturally, Chelsea football ground.