

HOME: LIVING

Here to lend a hand

Homeshare schemes let young people offer help and company to the elderly, in return for cheap lodgings. Everyone's a winner.

Hugh Graham

Published 12th May 2013

Lady Valerie Style seems far too glamorous to live in a care home. At 97, the former West End star still throws fabulous parties for the theatre crowd in her elegant, antique-filled Chelsea flat. And yet she's frightened to sleep alone after being burgled,

no longer cooks and is wobbly on her feet, not to mention lonely — her husband died more than a decade ago. She tried a care home, but found it depressing and “nearly fainted” when she saw the bill.



Jenkinson, left, and Faulle with Lady Valerie (Carl Fox)

At the other end of the spectrum is Caroline Jenkinson. The university graduate, 24, wanted to fly the family nest in Lincolnshire to do work experience in the textiles industry, but couldn't afford to live in London. This housing catch-22 led both generations into a marriage of convenience: Homeshare, a scheme in which the elderly provide cheap accommodation in exchange for help around the house and companionship. Started in America in the 1980's it now operates in 14 countries—and its time has come in austerity Britain, as the young struggle to get on the property ladder and care services for the elderly are cut.

In March last year, Care and Share, a London-based company under the Homeshare umbrella fixed Style up with Jenkinson, who agreed to pay £150 a month for 12 months, and in return spend ten hours a week doing light chores, cooking supper and taking her host out shopping and to the cinema. “We'd watch Antiques Roadshow and I'd paint her nails,” Jenkinson says “at the weekends, we'd buy the papers and sit in the park.”

No physical care is involved; as Style jokes: “It would be awful to live with someone who said, ‘Have you changed your knickers today?’” She also pays £150 a month to Share and Care, which does background checks, gets character references and regularly checks up on things.

Jenkinson has also benefitted. She has now found a full-time job and a flatshare, but still provides holiday cover for her successor, Anne-Catherine Faulle, 25, a graduate from Paris trying to forge a career here. It's not every twenty-something that gets to live in a swish art-deco building in SW3, and bump into Ringo Star, a neighbour, in the lift, or chat to David Tennant at Style's parties. Style is also surrogate family: “I've met her grandchildren,” Faulle says. “I like to hear about her life.” Style regales them with tales of her 1930's acting heyday, when she mixed with Noël Coward and Lawrence Olivier. It's a far cry from most young people's flatshares, watching Big Brother and eating Pot Noodle in a hovel. Don't they miss out on youthful hedonism, though? Not entirely. Share and Care discourages sharers from bringing friends home overnight, as they haven't been vetted, but sharers can sleep away two nights a week, and take a month's holiday a year. And Style is no killjoy: “I've got three grandsons who I'm always trying to fix up with these lovely ladies.”

Not all oldies are so much fun. Caroline Cooke, who co-founded Share and Care in 2006, tells of a well-to-do gentleman who treated his lodger, a trainee lawyer, as if she were his maid. In the end they found another Sharer who enjoyed cleaning. Not that they're running a sweatshop. "It's more about avoiding silly accidents," Cook says. "They don't need to climb on that chair to change a light bulb. It's reassuring to have someone there." Share and Care has 30 pairings on its books (ensuring a personal touch) and cover all of Britain and all walks of life: the oldest client is Style, the youngest, an MS sufferer in her sixties; the oldest Sharer is 48.

London has five such schemes; there is also one in Bristol. They are rare in rural areas, but do exist in Cumbria and north Wales. In all, about 200 elderly people use Homeshare schemes in Britain, a number that seems destined to rise. "Care agencies can give physical care," Cooke says. "But they only come for half an hour and then people are left alone. This is about nurturing the other side.