



## **Programmes for and about dementia at Den Gamle By**

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Memories are awakened when tableware, books, clothes and many other things are shown to the elderly people in the flat.

**Den Gamle By is a national open-air museum and the third largest museum in Denmark. Since 2004, the museum has run special programmes for elderly people with dementia, and in the last few years these programmes have been shown to strengthen the elderly people's memories, as well as improving their well-being<sup>1</sup>.**

In 2012, Den Gamle By opened the House of Memory, a flat specially furnished for sessions with dementia patients. It is a three-room flat with accessibility for wheelchair users, a functional toilet and kitchen, two living rooms, a hallway and a bedroom. As collaborating partners, memory researchers from Aarhus University and the Department of Health and Care at Aarhus Municipality assisted with their knowledge.

The furnishings in the flat date from the 1950s, which research has shown to be the period when the strongest memories were formed by patients who suffer from dementia today.

Typically, sessions in the flat start with the elderly people arriving at the flat and being welcomed in. Coffee and cake are ready in the dining room, and while household objects from the 1950s are passed round, the elderly guests liven up and become interested. After about two hours, the session ends with singing, and as

the guests leave the flat, it may be difficult to see which of them suffer from dementia<sup>2</sup>.

#### **Drawing international attention**

With its ideal setting for promoting reminiscence, the flat was soon drawing attention. It was visited in the very first week by colleagues from the large open-air museum at Beamish in the UK, who wanted to copy the programmes in Den Gamle By. Since then, visitors have come from museums and universities in Japan, China, USA and several European countries, as well as from more Danish museums and local authorities. Some European colleagues from open-air museums began to try organising similar programmes, and even more wanted to learn about the experience gathered at Den Gamle By.

Over the years, we have also seen that these sessions mean a lot to the elderly guests. One



of our great wishes has been to document how important these programmes are for the elderly, so that both we and others can learn from them and be inspired. In recent years, projects have also been run in collaboration with *CON AMORE, Center for Autobiographical Memory Research* at Aarhus University and through the Erasmus+ project *Active Ageing and Heritage in Adult Learning*, in which Den Gamle By took part from 2015 to 2017.

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<sup>1</sup>This article is a revised and translated version of Djupdræt, Martin Brandt and Lindberg, Henning 2018: *Forskning viser, at erindringsformidling virker*, *Den Gamle By* [Årbog] 2018, p. 83-87.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about reminiscence projects at Den Gamle By please visit <https://www.dengamleby.dk/en/plan-your-visit/the-house-of-memory> or read these articles in Danish: Kryger, Birgitte; Lindberg, Henning and Matthiassen, Tove Engelhardt 2005: *Erindringsformidling – brobygning mellem det sociale og det kulturelle*. *Den Gamle By* [Årbog] 2005 and Berntsen, Dorthe 2012: *Den tabte tid - erindringsformidling og selvbiografisk hukommelse*. *Den Gamle By* [Årbog] 2012.

## Memory research projects at the Center on Autobiographical Memory Research (CON AMORE)

One of the CON AMORE projects was to investigate the difference between dementia patients' memories evoked during a visit to the House of Memory in Den Gamle By, and those from an everyday environment at the care centre<sup>3</sup>.

Participants had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and in the study, both at Den Gamle By at and the care centre, the objects passed round were the same type, representing situations from daily life and special occasions. The objects at the museum dated from the time when the participants were young, while the objects at the care centre were modern. There was an older model of a telephone as opposed to a mobile phone, or old-fashioned and modern cards commemorating confirmation in church.

The conclusion was that there was no great difference in recognition of the old and the new objects, but the study showed clearly that during sessions at Den Gamle By, more memories were evoked by the older objects, and the depth and amount of detail in the reminiscences was far greater.

Another project carried out by CON AMORE led to the conclusion that continued visits to the House of Memory brought back more memories with greater detail. A group of elderly patients diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease visited a

House of Memory at Den Gamle By five times over the course of five weeks, and their reminiscences were tested before and after the visits. The findings clearly showed a greater degree of memory after a visit, with the memories evoked in more detail. The project also included a test group who did not visit the museum, and did not show the same striking increase<sup>4</sup>.

These two projects have helped to establish that autobiographical memories are strengthened by the programmes in Den Gamle By. In another project, Active ageing and Heritage in Adult Learning, in which Aarhus University also took part, the focus was more on well-being resulting from visits to the House of Memory than on memories.

### Active ageing and Heritage in Adult Learning

Active ageing and Heritage in Adult Learning was organised with funding from the Erasmus+ programme from 2015 to 2017, and its main objectives were:

- to develop programmes for elderly people suffering from dementia
- to develop programmes for relatives of dementia sufferers
- to develop programmes for care staff who work with this group
- to evaluate the type of programme for elderly dementia patients which Den Gamle By and several other open-air museums had started to organise.

The collaborating partners in the project, besides Den Gamle By, were the Jamtli museum in Sweden, the Beamish Museum in the UK, the Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum in Hungary and Maihaugen in Norway, as well as the Linné University in Sweden, the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in England and Aarhus University in Denmark. The experience gained was shared among the partners, and also presented at a seminar in Den Gamle By in April 2017, in a report, and in a number of articles<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The study is published in Miles, Amanda; Fischer-Mogensen, Lise; Nielsen, Nadia; Hermansen, Stine og Berntsen, Dorthe 2013: Turning back the hands of time: Autobiographical memories in dementia cued by a museum setting. *Consciousness and Cognition*, vol. 22, no. 3. p. 1074-1081. DOI: 10.1016/j.concog.2013.07.008

<sup>4</sup> The study is published in Kirk, Marie; Rasmussen, Katrine Willemoes; Overgaard, Susanne Bollerup and Berntsen, Dorthe 2018: Five weeks of immersive reminiscence therapy improves autobiographical memory in Alzheimer's disease. *Memory*. DOI:10.1080/09658211.2018.1515960

<sup>5</sup> The report on Active Ageing and Heritage in Adult Learning has been published in book form as: Hansen, Anna (red.) 2017: Reminiscence in open air museums. Results from the Erasmus+ project Active Ageing and Heritage in Adult Learning, Østersund. The report is also available on Den Gamle By's website: [https://www.dengambleby.dk/media/ujib2r4v/aha\\_project\\_report.pdf](https://www.dengambleby.dk/media/ujib2r4v/aha_project_report.pdf). An article in the journal *Kulturstudier* elaborates further on some of the results of studies in the project: Djupdræt, Martin Brandt 2018: Historiebevidsthed hos demente. *Erindringsforløb, velvære og identitetsdannelse på museer*. *Kulturstudier* nr. 1, 9. 29-61.



The concluding meeting of the Active ageing and Heritage in Adult Learning project was held in Aarhus, where the working group also visited the House of Memory.

The evaluation showed that the programmes have an effect on the elderly people's well-being.

It was an important part of the project that as unbiased partners, the universities could investigate the elderly people's general well-being in connection with the programmes. The method they used was the Greater Cincinnati Chapter Well-Being Observation Tool. In connection with each visit it focused on sustained attention, the positive emotional state, interest, and self-esteem.

A total of 118 elderly patients with dementia were studied. The greatest numbers took part in sessions at Den Gamle By (32) and Beamish Museum (32), but groups were also observed at Maihaugen (19), Jamtli (18) and the Szabadtéri Néptrajzi Múzeum (17). In the study, those accompanying the dementia patients were interviewed, and at the sessions the patients' actions and reactions were noted by an observer.

The elderly people's interest was registered by observing whether they said words, or showed active interest in other people's work or their

own, and whether they made unprompted contact with others, through smiles, eye contact or conversation, and whether they accepted or gave help.

The results of the study were striking:

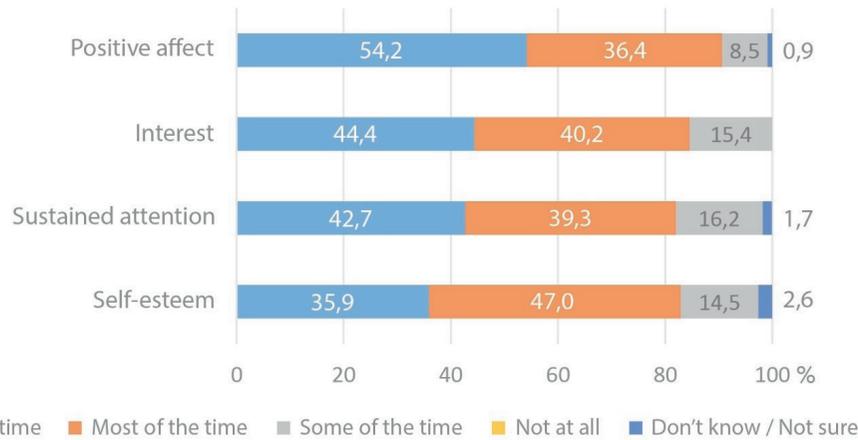
**90.6 %** of the dementia patients expressed or showed positive emotions throughout the sessions or most of the time.

**82 %** of the dementia patients could sustain attention throughout the sessions or most of the time.

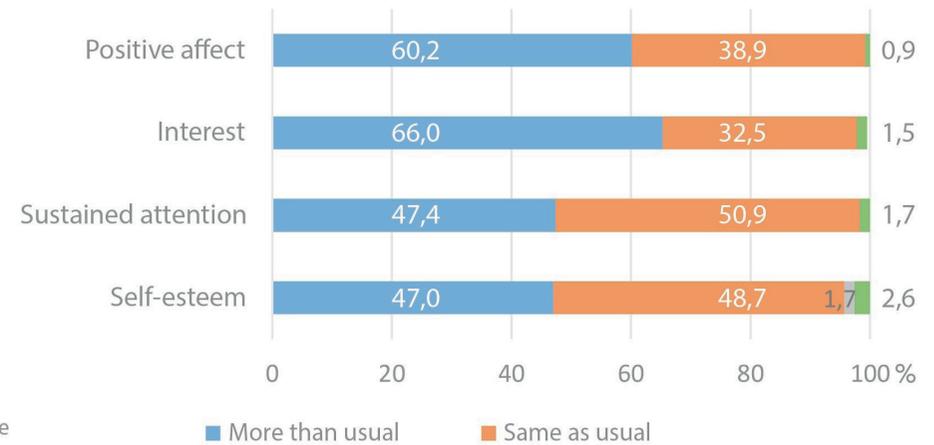
**84.6 %** of the dementia patients showed interest through contact with others throughout the sessions or most of the time.

**82.9 %** of the dementia patients expressed self-esteem in words or body language throughout the sessions or most of the time.

**Wellbeing during sessions**



**Wellbeing compared to usual**



The people accompanying the dementia patients were also asked about the elderly people's frame of mind during the sessions compared with normally.

Depending on which of the four parameters were referred to (sustained attention, a positive emotional frame of mind, interest and self-esteem), satisfaction was increased by between 47% and 66 %. One element that is worth bearing in mind in relation to these figures is that those answering the question were carers for the patients, either care staff or relatives.

Thus the question would also imply an assessment of their own role as carers. This could have an influence on the answers.

More than a hundred subjects were studied, making this the largest study of work with reminiscence at museums for elderly dementia sufferers. The results speak for themselves. The programmes have a positive effect on the elderly people's well-being.

In interviews, the elderly clearly express how the sessions evoke memories, and many are also able to talk in detail about various situations in their lives.

Memories were often awoken by a household object or a room in the House of Memory. It might be the bedroom, or a cream jug or a lamp. These clear moments of remembering are undoubtedly the reason for the improve-

ment in the elderly people's well-being during the programmes. The memories remind the elderly of who they were and are, and among the memories of the past they can find their own identity and their former normal state of mind.

As one of the elderly people said in an interview:

*"I'm still really sorry now that my wife was not there that day. She thinks I'm off my head."*

Teaching social and health-care students.  
Den Gamle By has developed new type of course using the experience from the museums contact with people with dementia.

### **Courses for relatives to strengthen social life for those with dementia**

During the Active Ageing and Heritage in Adult Learning project, Den Gamle By could also learn from European colleagues.

Drawing inspiration from Beamish Museum, Den Gamle By has begun developing offers for relatives of dementia sufferers in collaboration with Aarhus Municipality. When someone is diagnosed with dementia, the medical services are good at informing about the nature of the disease, how it progresses, and what possibilities are available.

Aarhus Municipality wished in addition to give newly diagnosed dementia patients and their families a chance for a "new" social life. It turns out that many friends and relatives lose contact when dementia strikes. How can a newly diagnosed dementia patient be motivated to continue making contacts with others and forming new memories?

How can the dementia patient's relatives be taught ways to help the patient?

These programmes are held by Den Gamle By in collaboration with the Dementia Corner in Aarhus. Groups of eight people, four with dementia and four healthy relatives, meet in

Den Gamle By three times during a three-month period. During the meetings the relatives teach the dementia patients how to use utilitarian objects, photographs and the like as tools to create memories. There is also time for the dementia patients to have activities together, like baking a cake, and the relatives have an opportunity to discuss their challenges with others in the same situation.

Apart from the sessions in Den Gamle By, the groups are encouraged to form a social network afterwards, so that they form a network of relatives. This is modelled on useful experience gained with groups of new mothers, who form networks and share experiences and advice. The project is supported by a public fund for disadvantaged groups, earmarked for work in the health and social sector and labour market.

Through the Erasmus+ project for Active Ageing and Heritage in Adult Learning, Den Gamle By has been able to meet university researchers and employees from other European open-air museums, and share good ideas about how history and reminiscence work can provide meaningful activities for elderly people with dementia.



It has been a pleasure to see how the experience gathered in Aarhus can be put to use in other museums. At the same time, this collaboration has brought good ideas to Den Gamle By, among other things in connection with developing new programmes for relatives of dementia patients. The project has shown that promoting reminiscence at Den Gamle By and other open-air museums is effective. The support from Erasmus + has provided funding to enable university researchers to evaluate the programmes.

Collaboration also made it possible to observe a very large group, consisting of more than 110 people with dementia. This first major study confirms what many employees at Den Gamle By have been able to observe since the programmes began in 2004: promoting reminiscence means a great deal to elderly people suffering from dementia, and helps to improve their well-being generally.