Over the past half-century, Pocklington has opened five major residential centres in Northwood, Roehampton, Shepherds Bush, Birmingham and Plymouth. It has bought houses to enable visually impaired people to live independently and it runs innovative services in the community.

There aren’t many charities specialising in the visual impairment field that have provided housing and care together. It is our policy to continue providing this unique service.

We have always been innovative and pioneering in developing specialist accommodation. When our Shepherds Bush flats were opened in 1967, they provided 100% of the purpose-built housing for visually impaired workers in London. In the 1960s and 1970s we were one of the first organisations to combine sheltered housing with full-care home facilities, a concept that is now being emulated by others.

Today we operate in Greater London, the South West and the West Midlands, and continue to invest heavily in the properties we own, the services we provide and our extensive research projects.

My family has been involved with the trust since its earliest days. My great-grandfather worked with Thomas Pocklington during his lifetime, as did my grandfather Albert, who managed Thomas Pocklington’s estate before the charity was created, and my father John. My father and my late brother Anthony were trustees of Thomas Pocklington Trust and my mother Pat and I also have the honour of serving the charity today as trustees.

I am convinced that Thomas Pocklington would be proud of the work that the charity has carried out in his name during its first half-century. Equally, I am sure that there is much we can still do to help visually impaired people. We are looking forward to the challenges of the next 50 years.

Rodney Powell, Chairman of the Board of Trustees
**Early days**

**Thomas Pocklington Trust owes its existence to a jeweller-turned-property developer called Thomas Pocklington who, having suffered a short period of blindness, used his fortune to found the charity.**

Thomas was born in Sheffield, Chesterfield or Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire, in 1860. All three towns are claimed as his place of birth in various census records between 1861 and 1901, although Sheffield is the most commonly cited. As a boy, Thomas lived in Whittlesey with his grandmother, Elizabeth Hurry, and his uncle, Jeremiah Hurry, a watchmaker.

The 1881 census records that Thomas had moved to London and was now living at 10 Grafton Street, St Pancras, and working as a watchmaker and jeweller. He had also married Mary Ann, a Londoner born in 1854. That same census also records that Thomas's mother, Ann Pricilla Pocklington, was now living with Jeremiah in Whittlesey.

Current trustee Rodney Powell believes that Thomas was apprenticed to his great-grandfather, John Powell, as a jeweller and watchmaker. This seems highly likely: the 1881 census shows that Rodney's great-grandfather, John Powell, lived and worked as a watchmaker and jeweller in St Pancras.

A decade later, the 1891 census reveals that Thomas had made great strides. He had his own watchmaking business and home at 248 Uxbridge Road, Shepherds Bush, and a live-in servant, 16-year-old Grace Zusson. Mary Ann Pocklington is absent from the 1891 census, and Thomas now has a new wife — Harriet Sarah Ann, John Powell’s eldest daughter. The England & Wales Birth, Marriage and Death Index records the death of a Mary Ann Pocklington, born in 1854, in the first quarter of 1888.

In the final three months of that year, the same records show that a Thomas Pocklington was married in St Pancras. The spouse's surname was not then listed in records, but we can assume it referred to Thomas's marriage to Harriet.

**Thomas the businessman**

Thomas, Harriet and her sister, Annie Eliza Powell, were by now living on a farm called ‘Oldfields’ in Acton Vale, West London. Their home was later demolished to make way for a repair shop belonging to the Morris car dealership Stewart & Arden.

“I remember my father telling me that they could walk northwards from there across fields to what is now the A40. The area was completely undeveloped, not the urban sprawl that it is today,” says Rodney.

By 1901, John Powell had retired and moved with his wife, Sarah, to Cowper Terrace in Acton Vale, near to Thomas and his family. John died in 1904, aged 67; Sarah a year later, at the age of 69. Also living close by was Thomas’s mother, Ann, whom the 1901 census lists as living in Acton. Jeremiah had probably lived with her until his death in 1900 at the age of 79.

The 1901 census reveals that Thomas now listed his occupation as “company promoter”, a general Victorian term for a businessman.

In Round London: Down East and Up West (1892), Montagu Williams wrote about London life and customs: “There is no more remarkable being in the city of London, with its many curious trades and vocations, than the company promoter... Though everybody knows him, either personally or by reputation, there is in all quarters much uncertainty as to his origin and antecedents. The successful company promoters are enormously wealthy, they have palaces at Kensington or mansions in Grosvenor Square, besides charming places in the country.”

Williams’ satirical words reflect some of what we know about Thomas: from an ordinary background, he had always wanted to move up in the world. And, after giving up his jewellery and watchmaking business to work in property development, he began to amass a fortune.

Shortly before the first world war, Thomas bought a site on the corner of Grand Avenue, Hove, where he built a seaside home called ‘Downbarton’. Harriet and Annie lived there permanently and Thomas joined them at the weekend after working in town during the week.
Did Thomas lose his sight?

Thomas's move into property development — like his bequest to the charity — has been attributed to a temporary loss of his sight. According to one brief history of the trust written in the early 1960s, Thomas suffered an inflammation of the eyes that left him blind for three months. Apparently, he vowed to make his fortune and use it to benefit the blind. After recovering his sight, runs this theory, Thomas left the watchmaking and jewellery trades because of the strain the finely detailed work put on his eyes.

From what we now know about Thomas, it seems more likely that it was his ambitious nature that led him to leave the jewellery trade. Rodney also has no evidence to support the eyestrain theory. “He did have sight problems as a young man but neither I, nor my father, had or have any real knowledge as to precisely when or why that happened. Generally, he had good eyesight during his adult life,” he says.

In later life, however, Thomas did almost lose his sight in an accident. By now he had grown rich from the fruits of his property empire, and taken on some of the trappings of a country gentleman.

“Thomas had a 1,500-acre country estate called Friningham Manor in Detling, near Maidstone, Kent. It was there that his chauffeur accidentally shot him in the eye during a shooting party. His sight was saved at Maidstone Hospital,” says Rodney. Was it this incident that inspired Thomas to leave his estate to a charity for the blind?

Thomas in later life

Thomas continued to work in West London, near to where he had lived as a young man. With the assistance of a property adviser, his brother-in-law Albert Charles Brooks Powell, Thomas ran his business from an office in the basement of his London residence at 20 Lansdowne Road, Holland Park. His mother Ann, who died in 1920 aged 84, was by now living close by in Holland Park Avenue.

Thomas's property portfolio included houses in the best parts of the West End such as Oxford Street, South Molton Street and Bloomsbury, as well as extensive suburban properties.

The surveyors Sladden & Stuart managed the Pocklington property interests from offices at 44 Royal Crescent, Holland Park. In 1927, Rodney’s father, John Powell, was articled at the firm. When he became a junior partner in April 1935, the name was changed to Sladden, Stuart & Powell.

Thomas worked at his Lansdowne Road offices until his death from heart trouble, aged 75, in 1935. After his death and before ‘Downbarton’ was commandeered by the Royal Navy for the war effort, Harriet lived with Annie in Hove, recalls Rodney’s mother, Pat Powell. “I must have met Harriet in 1943. She had a curvature of the spine and by then lived in a nursing home in Chorley Wood,” she says.

Thomas had been childless and the Pocklington name died with Harriet, who lived to 85 and died in 1951. After her death, Harriet’s brother and sister, Albert Charles Brooks Powell and Annie Eliza Powell, shared a house together until their deaths in the 1960s.
In his will, Thomas left a large proportion of his estate to buy “a suitable piece of land, with or without buildings... to provide a suitable institution for the care, welfare and instruction of the blind”. He had also stipulated that his estate should accumulate for 21 years after his death before his wish was carried out.

“It was an unusual bequest,” admits Rodney, “but a wise one: clever investment and some luck with rising property prices left the charity with money to build more than one centre for blind people.”

The Acton Gazette reported Thomas’s charitable bequest, noting that as a former resident of the area he had “a kindly feeling for Acton”. An unnamed “old local friend” told the newspaper: “I am not surprised that he left so much money to charity. It was characteristic of him. I never met a man keener in business or with a sharper eye to a good proposition. But, unlike many others with a gift for amassing wealth, he had a sincere sympathy with those in misfortune, especially the blind.”

This friend also explained why Thomas had set up two funds of £10,000 each for “apprenticing orphan or fatherless boys” in Acton or Shepherds Bush and in Kensington: “He was always anxious to help the young to a good start in the battle of life. He especially deplored the decline in the apprenticeship system and laid great stress on the value to the individual having a trade in his hands.”

Another “old Actonian” quoted in the article recalled Thomas’s good humour: “It was refreshing to hear his hearty bursts of laughter when anything pleased him.”

Two trustees, Albert Charles Brooks Powell and a surveyor from an Acton High Street firm, Mr Athawes, managed the trust jointly over those 21 years. In 1958 the charity — then known as The Gift of Thomas Pocklington — was approved by the Charity Commission and was run from Thomas's former office in Lansdowne Road.

Pat Powell recalls visiting the offices where her husband worked as a trustee of the charity: “You couldn’t put the fire on until October and then only one bar. Not a penny was wasted so everything could go to the trust.”
In September 1958, the Charity Commission gave its approval to the establishment of The Gift of Thomas Pocklington.

In his will, Thomas Pocklington had asked his trustees to use land from his estate or buy land to “provide a suitable institution for the care welfare and instruction of the blind”. Residents of that institution should be “poor persons of either sex of the age of 16 years or over suffering from blindness or incipient blindness”. He also requested that money from his estate should be used to fund research into the “prevention, alleviation and cure of blindness” and to set up two apprenticeship schemes.

Pocklington had also stipulated that his estate should accumulate for 21 years following his death before his wishes were carried out. When the charity was established — thanks to shrewd investment and rising property prices — its funds amounted to around £750,000, with perhaps as much as £500,000 more expected within a few years.

Such resources would allow for more than one home for the blind to be built. As a result, the Charity Commissioners applied the cy-pres doctrine — from French, meaning “as close as possible” — which allows for the terms of a charitable trust to be amended when its original aims become impossible, impracticable or illegal to perform. The charity’s trustees could now build as many homes as the capital of Pocklington’s bequest would allow, providing there were sufficient reserves of money to cover running costs.

Five of the seven charity trustees were to be appointed by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (now known as the RNIB) for a term of four years; the other two, as far as possible, were to be associated with the management of the Pocklington estate. A surveyor and nephew of Thomas Pocklington, John Powell, and the solicitor, Stanley Martel Page, were appointed trustees for life. John Godfrey became the first clerk to the charity. In later life, John also served as a trustee.

In 1959, the trustees resolved that their first venture would be to build “a geriatric unit to accommodate a maximum of 30 blind people”. Their preferred location was Kensington in view of Thomas Pocklington’s long association with West London. But “owing to the scarcity and high price of building sites” and “the dangers inherent in smog for elderly people”, they decided to seek a site on the “outer fringes of London”.

Late in the same year, the trustees were offered a three-acre plot of land in Northwood, Middlesex by Marie Basden following the death of her accountant husband, Edward. The land was part of the eight-acre family home, “Harescombe”, which was proving too expensive to run. Her daughter, Eileen, recalls that a neighbour, RNIB director-general and Pocklington trustee John Colligan, suggested selling part of the estate to Pocklington.

Pocklington began negotiations with Mrs Basden and with the local district and county councils over planning permission. The charity, which was represented by John Powell and John Colligan, accepted Mrs Basden’s price of £6,500 and the purchase was completed in October 1960.

In November 1962, the Acton Gazette reported that 29 boys from Hammersmith and Acton had benefited from the trust. “One grant has enabled a youngster to qualify as a chartered accountant, and drawing instruments have been bought and tools provided for boys wishing to become plumbers, carpenters, compositors and engineers,” it reported.

“Several of the boys have come from large families and have widowed mothers who have struggled to give their sons the opportunity to continue their education or to complete their apprenticeship.”

The two charities are still running today. Although their objects are less specific than those set by Thomas more than 70 years ago, they remain true in spirit. In Kensington and Chelsea, for example, the trust can “donate up to £300 a year towards education costs for young people in need, age 21 years or younger, who were either born in the Kensington and Chelsea areas of London or have lived there for more than 10 years.”

### 1957 Charity Commission approval

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### 1958 Charity Commission approves the establishment of a charity known as The Gift of Thomas Pocklington

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### 1959 Stanley Martel Page, a solicitor, is elected first chairman of the charity

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Eileen Basden remembers the foggy day in December 1961 when her mother, Marie, laid the foundation stone for Pocklington House in Northwood: “It was simply freezing. Tea was laid on in our house but no none could see to get there because of the fog.”

Eileen’s brother, Dr Ralph Basden, who also recalls a day marked by “the world’s worst fog”, enjoyed a long professional relationship with Pocklington House. Until he retired as a GP in 1992, Dr Basden was medical consultant at the home, visiting residents every Monday and Thursday afternoon. According to the minutes of a trustee meeting of the time, it was agreed “the honorarium for his services as medical consultant to the home should be thirty guineas per annum on the basis of one guinea per resident”. The home’s first matron, appointed in July 1962, was Mrs Ridgway.

Lord Newton, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, officially opened Pocklington House on 19 December 1962. The first resident of the home, which provided care and accommodation for 30 people, was Mrs F Middleton from nearby Harefield in Middlesex.

A local newspaper reporter visited the home in February 1963 and wrote that it had “an air of spaciousness, elegance and charm”, likening the atmosphere to that of “living in a first class hotel”.

It its 1964 annual report, the RNIB noted that “one of the happiest features” of the home was that its double rooms allowed it to “cater for a number of blind married couples, some of whom had previously been separated for lack of suitable accommodation”.

According to the social historian June Rose in Changing Focus: The Development of Blind Welfare in Britain, Pocklington House was “one of the first purpose-built homes for the elderly blind in this country. Warm and comfortable, all the accommodation for residents is on one floor so that there are no stairs to climb ... The atmosphere is friendly and there are no petty restrictions to annoy the elderly inhabitants.”

The writer met one resident, “a cheerful military-looking gentleman in his eighties [who] was quietly enjoying the warmth. Until he came to the home, he had to go out every day until 6 pm in the coldest weather as he had no fire in the room in his digs. ‘It’s home here’, he said. ‘There are two mottoes — don’t be afraid to ask and at meal times, there is always more if you want it.’”

In April 1962, Pat Powell, the wife of the trustee John Powell, laid the foundations stone for Pocklington Court in Roehampton. The Wandsworth Boro’ News reported Pat’s words on the day: “I do hope this will be the foundation of much happiness for the many who will make their homes here.”

In fact, as she recalled almost 50 years later, Pat had found the Roehampton site herself: “I was taking the kids to Richmond Park and I decided to go around some estate agents first. That’s how we found the land.”

The 53 single flats and 11 double rooms offered homes to blind people who had retired from work but were still able to live independently. June Rose described Pocklington Court as “a blueprint of the kind of housing that would make life pleasant and possible for the elderly blind”.

On 13 February 1964, Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent, opened Pocklington Court. Official thanks from Princess Marina’s lady in waiting, Frances Balfour, arrived a week later: “The spirit of happiness which she encountered among the residents was indubitable proof of the great success achieved.”

The 1960s

Land is bought in Northwood, Middlesex, to build Pocklington House

Foundation stone laid at Pocklington House by Marie Basden

The 1960s

A second home on the way

1960

1961
Pocklington now turned its attention to the needs of blind people of working age. In the 1960s, the nub of the problem — as it remains today — was that while London offered blind workers more employment opportunities than elsewhere in the country, it lacked suitable, affordable accommodation to house them.

The trustees successfully bid at an auction for land on the Goldhawk Road in Shepherds Bush, West London. Pocklington Close, a two-storey block of 42 small studio flats with shared bathrooms and kitchens, was opened on 28 October 1967 by Ernest Fernyhough MP from the Ministry of Labour.

Mike Brace, who is now Chief Executive of Vision 2020 UK, was a student in 1960s London and visited friends in the Shepherds Bush flats. “The unemployment rate for blind people of working age was around 70 per cent,” he recalls. “London was the place where they were most likely to find employment because of its transport and jobs. People wanted something that wasn’t a hostel. They wanted a self-contained flat where there was help, if it was needed, and in an area on a public transport network. Pocklington Close was a major step forward for a lot of people.”

Among the first tenants were Janet Stonehouse and Dennis Sommers, both of whom are still living there 40 years later. Originally from Hampshire, Janet had trained as a physiotherapist with the RNIB before moving into her new Pocklington flat. “It gave me a home in London in the 60s and it remains a good base for me. I have a very nice flat here,” she says.

In the 1990s, Pocklington demolished the original building and built new fully self-contained flats in their place. They were also given a new name: Pocklington Lodge. “The flats are a hell of a lot better now. People used to have to share bathrooms and kitchens and you didn’t get a choice of the people you shared with,” says Dennis.

### Medical matters
Responding to the prevention of blindness theme of World Health Day in 1962, the Pocklington trustees made a significant donation to the British Foundation for the Prevention of Blindness. This led to the establishment, under the auspices of the Royal College of Surgeons, of the Pocklington Eye Transplantation Research Unit. Pocklington continued to fund research at the unit until 1981. During the 60s, the trustees also funded an annual Pocklington memorial lecture, which was given by leading specialists such as Professor Joaquin Barraquer and Professor Lorenz E Zimmerman.
One of the first tenants

Lilian Reynolds, née Ward, was perhaps typical of the new residents of Pocklington Court, Roehampton. Born in the first year of the 20th century, Lilian had worked for the London County Council (LCC) as a teacher of the blind and for the RNIB as an instructor in telephony and crafts until retiring in 1960. Two years later, Lilian applied for a place at the newly built Pocklington Court. At the time, her housing was unsatisfactory: she was living in a flat in Putney with no bath and an outside toilet.

In a letter supporting her application, the LCC emphasised that Lilian “would be of real use and service among the other tenants of these flats”. On 13 September 1963, John Godfrey, clerk to the trustees, confirmed that her medical examination had proved “satisfactory” and offered her a flat at Pocklington Court at a rent of one pound 15 shillings a week.

Pocklington Court was one of the UK’s first purpose-built sheltered housing centres for people with sight loss.
Pocklington Place in Northfield, Birmingham, was designed to provide sheltered and full-care accommodation. Self-contained one and two-bedroom flats were built for retired blind people who, when they grew older and needed more support, could move into a full-care residential care home on the same site.

The New Beacon, a monthly magazine for and about people with sight problems, described the new venture as Pocklington’s “biggest and most ambitious project” in its February 1970 issue. “In planning so comprehensively, it is hoped to allay the fears which are always present with the older flat dwellers, that when they can no longer look after themselves they must move to a totally new environment, away from friends they have made at an age when to make new friends can be a major problem.”

Plans to invite Princess Margaret to open Pocklington Place officially fell through because on the only day convenient to her the building would not have been finished. The then Secretary of State for Social Services, Sir Keith Joseph, was asked to take her place.

Pocklington Place opened in 1972 and was managed by Ernest Williams and his wife, Val, until his retirement in 1980. Ernest had been educated in the Edgbaston school of the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind and later managed Pocklington Court in Roehampton.

An obituary published in the New Beacon in February 1994 said: “[Ernest] was a man who revelled in the society of his fellows, and was able always to make those he was with feel important and appreciated … No establishment he managed, in partnership with his wife Val, was an institution. It was simply a place where people shared their lives together, and enjoyed themselves and one another.”

Pocklington’s fifth and final housing centre, Pocklington Rise, was built in Plympton, near Plymouth, Devon. Work started in 1972 but progress was slow. A delegation that included the two Johns — Colligan and Powell — visited the site in February 1973 to meet the architects and builders. According to the minutes of a trustees’ meeting, the delegation “felt that there was a very considerable complacency and had forcibly expressed their views to all those concerned”.

The home finally opened in 1975 and followed the same mixed-resident philosophy as the Birmingham home, although it was two-thirds the size. Devon County Council chairman Charles Ansell, the Bishop of Plymouth, Richard Fox Cartwright, and 150 guests attended the official opening in October.

**Working for Pocklington**

**Francis Butcher, CBE: clerk to the trustees**

Squadron leader Francis Butcher CBE was a tireless worker for blind people in West Africa, reported the New Beacon in its obituary published in September 1994.

In the 1960s Francis was director of the Nigerian National Council for the Blind, before setting up the West African Organisation for the Blind. During this time Francis played a part in the fight against river blindness (Leishmaniasis), which became one of the medical successes of modern Africa. He also helped to introduce systems of integrated education for blind children and to develop village training centres for blind farmers.

On returning to England, Francis joined The Gift of Thomas Pocklington Trust for the Blind, as clerk to the trustees. Lavina Hall, who was assistant manager at Pocklington House in the 1970s, remembers Francis fondly, describing him as “old school”. “He was a squadron leader in the RAF. I remember him saying he flew back to one airport with his co-pilot dead beside him. I found him very supportive and he treated us with respect,” she says.

In 1984 after 16 years at Pocklington, Francis was succeeded as clerk to the trustees by Paul Quin. Francis died on 3 July 1994, aged 79.
Working for Pocklington
Stanley Martel Page: solicitor, chairman and trustee

Stanley Martel Page was Chairman of the Board of Trustees until December 1969. He retired from the board in 1977 and was replaced as a trustee by John Powell’s son, Anthony. Stanley’s dedication to the charity was put on record by the trustees: “Not only was he involved in the formation of the trust in respect of which his legal knowledge and close association with the late Thomas Pocklington was invaluable, but he was also the first chairman, which office he held with distinction for 11 years.”

Stanley had been a partner in Hiscott, Troughton & Page, the firm of solicitors that had administered Thomas’s will. “He played no small part in seeing that the fortune left by the deceased for the benefit of the blind was conserved and passed over to the Gift in such a healthy state,” added the trustees.

Betty Biss, née Leppard, supervisor of homes

Betty worked for Pocklington in the 1960s and 70s. She joined the RNIB after leaving the RAF at end of the second world war and eventually become secretary to the director-general John Colligan. Betty looked after the (then) four Pocklington homes until she left in 1974 after marrying.

“Roehampton was one of the first homes with individual flats. A lot of people working at the RNIB went into those flats, because, of course, it gave preference to employing blind people,” she recalls.

Betty recalls the sterling work of Ernest Williams who managed Pocklington’s Roehampton home in its early years. “He was partially sighted but he worked 12 hours a day; he was a wonderful man. Ernest was a great help to me and we were wonderful friends.” Ernest and his wife retired in 1980 after 17 years’ service with Pocklington.
In 1985, events were held at all five Pocklington homes to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the death of Thomas Pocklington. The former Labour MP Doris Fisher, who had been made a life baroness in 1974, planted a commemorative tree at Pocklington Place, Birmingham, in July 1985.

In a letter of thanks to T J Horne, the superintendent of Pocklington Place, Baroness Fisher of Rednal wrote: “The strawberries and cream encouraged the garden party atmosphere [and] the Birmingham concert Orchestra was so much enjoyed for a truly super performance. The residents’ appreciation was obvious.”

At Pocklington Court, Roehampton, local Conservative MP David Mellor planted a tree to mark the 50th anniversary. A week earlier on 28 June, a laurel wreath had been laid at Thomas Pocklington’s tomb in Highgate Cemetery, north London.

Paul Quin served as clerk to the trustees from February 1984 until his retirement in March 1998. An obituary, written by the Pocklington trustees, was published in New Beacon, the RNIB magazine, in February 2006.

“Paul will be remembered for the way that he selflessly reached out to people during his life. Without fail he brought great enthusiasm to everything that he became involved with, but always with an air of considered calm.

“During his time at Pocklington Paul was instrumental in widening the range of its activities, including increasing the number of flats at Plympton, initiating the redevelopment of Pocklington Lodge and starting the charity’s independent housing service. He also championed the case for Pocklington’s research programmes, causing a substantial increase in the resources allocated to that area of activity.

“Before joining Thomas Pocklington Trust, Paul had enjoyed a long and successful career in the Royal Air Force, serving both in the United Kingdom and abroad. He was a solicitor by profession.

“Many of the foundations enabling the trust to provide the range of services available today were laid during Paul’s time at the helm of the Charity. Pocklington will be one of the many memorials to his life.

“Paul passed away on 27 November 2005, having resisted his illness with all the stoicism and dignity that those of us who have had the privilege of knowing him would have expected.”

Recently retired Pocklington House manager Lavina Hall has very fond memories of Paul. “The home changed dramatically in my time and Paul did a lot for the place,” she recalls. “He was very hard working and a really nice person to work under. He always had time for you. He would come around once a month and pick three residents to have a private interview with to find out what they were happy and unhappy about. He was instrumental in enlarging the centre with 13 more rooms in 1988.”

Paul Quin, OBE: clerk to the trustees

1980
Founder member John Colligan retires as a trustee

1983
Pat Powell opens new wing at Pocklington Rise; Anthony Powell dies and his brother, Rodney, succeeds him

1984
Francis Butcher retires as clerk to the trustees; Paul Quin succeeds him

1985
Final Pocklington memorial lecture

Remembering Nan Emmel

Nan Emmel moved into Pocklington House, Northwood, in the mid-1960s. In her working life Nan had been nanny to the Skinner family of the Lilley and Skinner shoe shops. “For her birthday the family used to take her to Moor Park golf club for lunch. On her 100th birthday Nan got 100 cans of Mackeson — she was a great stout lover,” recalls Lavina Hall, who worked at the Northwood home for more than three decades before retiring as manager at the end of 2007.

Lavina remembers Nan’s 108th birthday in 1983: “She was an astonishing character and kept her wits about her until the end. Nan was a very sharp lady, with a sharp tongue. For her last birthday her bank manager came and he was very ingratiating because he was trying to impress the Skinner family. He told her to look after herself and she replied: ‘Would you go back to the bank and look after my money.’” Nan died in November 1984, shortly before what would have been her 109th birthday.
John Powell, the nephew of Thomas Pocklington who served as chairman of the charity for more than 20 years, died in 1993. In an obituary published in the New Beacon in February 1994, the clerk to the trustees Paul Quin wrote: “Much of the Pocklington estate was in land and buildings, and John played an important part in securing the capital of the charity, both before and after it was established in 1958. As trustee and later as chairman, he played a leading role in developing the Gift’s work of providing high-quality services at an affordable cost for blind and partially sighted people.

“With advancing years, John suffered problems with his eyesight, with which he coped in his usual quiet way. He lost much of his remaining sight in November 1992. He was determined to cope, however, and continued his work with the Gift right up to the end.”

In 1994, John Powell’s widow, Pat, made a gift to Pocklington in honour of her late husband. This was used to provide summerhouses for the Roehampton, Birmingham and Plymouth homes and a sheltered seating area at Northwood. Pat became a trustee in 1994.

In the mid-1990s, Pocklington began to build up a portfolio of flats and houses to provide independent housing for people with sight loss. It now has some 20 houses and flats in London, Berkshire and Wolverhampton.

Jason Spencer and his wife moved into a three-bedroom house in Wembley, north London, in April 1995. Thirteen years and two children later, Jason says: “Pocklington has treated us with nothing but respect. They’ve left it to us to live, which is what I wanted. Last year my wife was seriously ill and she needed a wet room and shower installed. The trust put their hands into their pocket and paid for it.”

Jason, who is a self-employed IT consultant, says that without Pocklington’s independent living scheme he would not have been able to relocate from Suffolk to London: “I was living in the middle of nowhere and job-wise it was useless. Now I can support my family to a comfortable standard of living. I cannot see me moving from this house for years.”

Josie Blatt is another Pocklington independent tenant. She lived at Pocklington Close, Shepherds Bush, from 1967 to 1995 before moving into a small house in Hammersmith, West London. “I’ve got used to it now. At first it was so different, having to buy all your own furniture and paying extra bills,” says Josie. “Pocklington leaves you to live as independently as possible, but staff will come around if you ask them. I like to look after myself and I’m happy here.”

Rebuilding work began at Pocklington Close in 1994. By 2000, Pocklington Lodge, as it was now known, had been rebuilt at a cost of £4 million. Local Labour MP Clive Soley performed the opening duties at a modernised home that now offered 49 supported studio, one and two-bedroom flats and one three-bedroom bungalow for adults of working age.

Susan Moore, who works for an education authority, has lived at the Shepherds Bush flats since 1981. Thanks to the modernisation of the flats during the 1990s, Susan no longer has to share a kitchen and bathroom. “I like the privacy. I love the flat dearly and I’ve no wish to move away. It’s very convenient for shops and transport and I’ve always found the staff here supportive,” she says.

Susan welcomes the security Pocklington Lodge offers: “I can carry on living here when I retire and I haven’t got a mortgage hanging over my head. If something goes wrong in the flat, there’s always someone in the building to look at it. I’d never move away — I’d be a fool to.”

Andrew Hodgson, an actor and singer who recently appeared in ITV drama The Royal and moved into the Shepherds Bush flats in 1987, sums up their appeal: “The security here has been invaluable because I’ve been in and out of work. I wouldn’t have been able to buy my own property and it would have been an added anxiety.”

1993 First recipient of the Pocklington Fellowship at the College of Ophthalmology starts research into Bardet-Biedl syndrome; John Powell dies

1994 Rebuilding work begins at Pocklington Close; Pat Powell becomes a Pocklington trustee

Andrew Hodgson, actor, singer and tenant at Pocklington Lodge
Following discussions with the Charity Commission, the original 1958 scheme was amended in 1999. The new scheme widened the charity’s scope, allowing it to provide services outside its homes and to enter into joint ventures with other bodies. The number of trustees was also increased from seven to nine, but only three, not five, were to be appointed by the RNIB. At least one of the trustees now had to be “registrable as blind or partially sighted”.

The changing world of work
According to the RNIB, which ran the School for Physiotherapy in London until it closed in the mid-1990s, “physiotherapy, of all the professions, presents a uniquely ideal opening for those without sight”. At its peak in the 70s and 80s there were perhaps as many as 800 blind physiotherapists. The charity also ran the College of Shorthand-typing and Telephony in the capital.

But the traditional employment specialisms for blind and visually impaired people such as physiotherapy and telephony were disappearing by the 1990s. “Gone are the days of basket weaving,” says a relieved Mark Lewis Lloyd, a Pocklington independent housing tenant who lives and works in West London. Jobs tend to be more varied nowadays. But, adds Mark, “the choice of employment is still limited for a visually impaired person and the chance of finding work that pays enough to rent on the open market is very low.”

Moving into Pocklington House
Watford-born Maysie Green moved into Pocklington House in the mid-1990s: “I’m absolutely delighted here. It feels like home. I love the garden, the cleanliness and the staff. Life is good. What more can you have than a beautiful place like this?

“It’s a family home because that’s what we are – a family. I thank Thomas Pocklington for providing this home. Nobody who hasn’t lost their sight can put themselves in our position. We understand each other’s needs.”

Training the staff
Pocklington introduced work-based training in the form of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) for its staff in the early 1990s. “It brought about much better care and gave staff an incentive to stay. We could then promote from within. One resident said to me recently, “You can’t beat the home-brewed ones,” recalls Lavina Hall, Pocklington House manager until 2007. “NVQs aren’t just a paper qualification; they offer real hands-on training. I think they have improved the quality of life of residents.”

“We’ve become more professional as an organisation,” reckons Debbie Waller, who has managed Pocklington Rise, Plymouth, since 1999. “When I came we had no one who was qualified. Staff can’t provide care if they don’t understand what they’re meant to do.” The home now has Investors in People accreditation and all staff are trained to NVQ level 2, 3 or 4.

As people live longer, blindness is often only one of many disabilities they have. Dementia, which is more likely to affect the elderly, can be disturbing both for the resident and staff. “We have people with dementia, but we’ve done a lot of training and all our staff know how to manage often difficult situations,” adds Debbie.
For the first four decades of its life, Pocklington had gone it alone. Now, as it began to expand its services to people with sight loss, Pocklington entered into partnership with a number of other organisations. The charity also entered the new millennium with a new name: The Gift of Thomas Pocklington had become Thomas Pocklington Trust.

Pocklington Rise, Plymouth, celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2000. On 28 July, a turf cutting ceremony took place to mark the start of construction of eight new sheltered flats that were being built in conjunction with Anchor Trust.

In 2002, Pocklington opened a specialist day service in Stourbridge, West Midlands, for people with sight loss, in partnership with Dudley Social Services and Dudley Council for Voluntary Services. Later it expanded to provide a resource centre and more recently the management of the local Talking News. A year later, it opened a new community support service for younger people with physical as well as sensory disabilities in Wolverhampton. This scheme, run with Wolverhampton social services, helped young people develop self-reliance and offered access to community facilities.

Pocklington also took over management of a centre in Balham, South London, in partnership with Wandsworth Social Services. The Pocklington Resource Centre offers an IT suite, an art room with kiln, a low vision clinic and large communal room for social and fitness clubs. The centre also produces talking news tapes for Wandsworth residents from stories taken from local paper and the council’s magazine.

The centre is managed by Odette Battarel, who has been blind for the past decade: “If you don’t mix in the blind community you don’t get any information about services. It took me 10 years to find out there’s a rambling club for the blind. You also get to know people who work so it gives you hope; you think, ‘If they can work, so can I.’ It is very important that people share their experiences; they can get a lot of emotional support and confidence from that.”

In 2005 Pocklington opened its groundbreaking housing project in Lord Street, Wolverhampton, for people with sight loss and other physical disabilities. Managed by Pocklington, the centre was built by Midland Heart housing association. It provides 14 purpose-built two bedroom flats for younger people with sensory and/or other physical disabilities, combining the benefits of independent living with the practical advantages of 24 hour care and support for all tenants.

Close by, Pocklington manages six flats for young people with sight loss and other disabilities at 345 Newhampton Road East, Wolverhampton. Again the bricks and mortar are owned by Midland Heart with Pocklington providing management and support services for all those living there.
Until August 2006, Pocklington Court, Roehampton provided sheltered housing for people aged 55 or older. Now, almost a third of the flats are taken by 18-45 year-olds. “There was a real need for accommodation for younger people wanting to work in London,” explains centre manager Sue Powell.

Two of the younger tenants are Alex Stone and Ian Kelly. Alex had been living in nearby Tooting with family before moving into Pocklington Court in August 2007. “I couldn’t find anywhere to live. I was on the council waiting list but I was extremely low priority,” he says.

Ian is Pocklington Court’s newest resident, having moved from York to London in January 2008: “London is a far more accessible place for people who are visually impaired. You get a freedom [travel] pass to use on trains and buses. If you compare it to, say, York, where you’d wait up to an hour for a bus, in London they come quickly. But to work in London you need to live there and you can’t live there without the money. It’s a Catch 22 situation.” Or rather it was, until Pocklington was able to offer Ian a flat.

“We’ve become a more normal community. It was a lot like a nursing home before,” says Sue. Her deputy, Vicky Randall adds: “It’s got much more community spirit. It seems more alive. We had to change because we weren’t used to having people who wanted to go to Putney High Street to buy a bikini.”

The residents agree with the staff that Pocklington Court has become a better place to live. “There’s more spirit around the place. It’s got a balance now, a nice mix of young and old,” says Gena Walker.

“It’s changed considerably over the time I’ve been here,” says Esther Cannon who moved into Pocklington Court in 1978. “And it’s changed for the better. There are more youngsters, which is nice.”

Pocklington has begun to modernise and rebuild. In January 2008, Pocklington Place residents moved into 64 new one and two-bedroom flats. This scheme is owned by Midland Heart housing association and managed by Pocklington.

In Plymouth, the trust is building a new extra-care centre of 62 apartments to replace the existing Pocklington Rise. While this work takes place the residents are living temporarily at Peirson House, a purpose built centre rented and operated by Pocklington.

Busy lives
It is not only the buildings that have changed for the better over the past decade; so have the lives of the residents. “Pocklington Rise now offers many more activities,” says Debbie Waller, who has managed the Plymouth home since 1999. “Tenants, staff and volunteers recently raised £30,000 for a new minibus to take residents on trips to the seaside or moors, for a pub lunch or on a shopping trip.”

“The home is very different to when I first arrived,” says Lavina Hall, who started work at Pocklington House in the 1970s. “Now we have yoga, armchair exercises, bowls, quizzes, cookery, beauty therapy and aromatherapy. We even have an activities co-ordinator, which would have been unheard of years ago.”
Research: changing focus

Over the past decade the focus of the research funded by Pocklington has shifted from medical to more practical areas that can improve people’s day-to-day lives. For example, it has commissioned studies into the housing and support needs of both older and younger people with sight loss and into the experiences of people with dementia and sight loss. Currently, Pocklington spends almost £700,000 a year on research.

“Pocklington is the major agency for research for people with sight loss, especially older people. It’s stuff that’s not just done for academic reasons; its research is linked to the practicalities of living with sight loss,” says Mike Brace, Chief Executive of Vision 2020 UK.

One project investigated which types of artificial lighting most help people with sight loss. “Unlike most organisations, Pocklington puts its money where its mouth is. It not only did a piece of research into lighting that was of major practical use, but as a provider it actually paid for those changes to be made for its residents,” says Mike.

Born in 1914, Louise Druce of West Norwood, London, raised four children before working as a librarian. She has lived at Pocklington House since 2001: “I was so impressed by the welcome and atmosphere of the place. I’ll never forget my first impression. The whole place appeared so light and airy. However bad you feel there’s always someone worse off than you. It’s a good lesson I’ve learned; how other people cope with their disabilities. There’s a sense of security here: whatever goes wrong, you ring a bell and someone comes immediately.”
Chief Executive Ron Bramley outlines how Pocklington will respond to the needs of people with sight loss in the future.

Thomas Pocklington Trust has come a long way in 50 years, but there is much work still to be done. Sight loss is a hidden disability - unless a person has a white cane or a guide dog - the general public is likely to be unaware of the disability.

This lack of awareness extends to the housing, social services and health care professions which do not treat sight loss as a major disability. As a result, visually impaired people do not get a fair deal in terms of their housing, care and support. Pocklington can help - but not on its own.

The UK population is ageing, which will mean an even higher demand for our services. Overwhelmingly, the people who need Pocklington’s help most are older people, yet social services rarely provide sufficient money to pay for their care.

Modernising the centres

We have been engaged in a multi-million pound modernisation and rebuilding programme. In Birmingham we have moved to a new extra-care housing centre owned and built by our partners, Midland Heart housing association.

The centre opened earlier this year and allows tenants to lead active and independent lives, with assistance available 24 hours a day. Communal facilities include a restaurant, lounge and bar, activity rooms, library, shop and laundry. Pocklington manages the centre and runs the care and support services. I believe the accommodation and support available will be unequalled anywhere in the UK. The move to the new Birmingham centre also gives us the opportunity to look at new housing services on the old site.

At Pocklington Rise, Plymouth, we are building a new extra-care housing centre of 62 apartments that will offer tenants a greater degree of choice and better quality accommodation. Facilities will be similar to our Birmingham centre and will include a restaurant, lounge, laundry shop, guest suite and hairdressing salon. The work will be completed by 2010.

At Pocklington House in Northwood, Middlesex, we are looking at the future of our residential care home which is reaching the end of its life. We are currently deciding whether to build a new residential care home on the site or a mixture of residential care and retirement housing.

We are also planning to review the future of our supported housing centre at Pocklington Court, Roehampton as the studio accommodation is in need of updating.
Support in the community

The first part of our mission at Pocklington is to: “Provide quality housing care and support services for people with sight loss which promote independence and choice.”

In pursuing this aim, we want to do more by offering a broader range of community support services. We know that the majority of older people want to remain in the family home; for people with sight loss this is even more important because many will have lost their vision while living in a familiar environment — because they know the layout of the home, they will be reluctant to move to unfamiliar surroundings.

It is hard for people with sight loss to live at home when support from social services is rarely adequate or even available. People living alone can easily become isolated. In fact, research shows that up to a third of older, blind and visually impaired adults in the UK do not go out by themselves.

Currently, we can offer a home to around 350 people, but there are around two million people with sight loss in the UK, most of whom are older people. As the population ages, this figure will grow. We face an enormous challenge to meet this need, but with our partners we aim to do far more.

Research and development

The second part of our mission is to fund research and development aimed at alleviating and preventing sight loss. We provide around £700,000 a year to fund social and public health-related projects. Much of the research is aimed at finding practical ways to improve people’s lives and improve awareness of health issues affecting sight. We are also using our research findings to pilot new service models and to develop best practice that we can share with other service providers. Our research themes include: housing; lighting; meeting the needs of people with sight loss and other disabilities such as dementia or hearing loss; prevention of sight loss; and lifestyle issues.

Pocklington has embarked on a major programme of research into lighting at home. Research from the University of Reading and trials of new lighting solutions in the homes of people with sight loss have given us a sound evidence base on which to inform both policy and practice. We have produced a new housing design guide and we are producing guides on new lighting solutions. We have also convened a national multidisciplinary group to develop a good practice framework for lighting.

The problems facing people with sight loss may seem forbidding, but Pocklington is working hard to make a major difference to people’s lives.

Ron Bramley, Chief Executive
Building for the future: work is underway on the new extra-care housing centre at Pocklington Rise, Plymouth