

# Talking About Retirement

## Ernest and Diane's Story

*"I've been retired for 22 years, and it's been the best part of my life." – Ernest Dennis*

Ernest was born in South Africa in 1921. He was a twin and when he and his brother, Robert, were born they only weighed 2.5 and 2.75lbs respectively; at that time they were lucky to survive. Initially they were very delicate and, in an effort to build up their strength, their mother taught them to swim at a very early age.

When they left school Ernest and Robert wanted to study mining engineering at university. In those days it was necessary to have a certain level of fitness to become a mining engineer and at first the boys failed the medical. They were, however, allowed to attend first year courses. The doctor they had seen at the medical suggested that they each drink a pint of milk or beer a day and swim. They both took his advice and at the end of their first year passed the medical and went on to become mining engineers.

Ernest still loves to swim and gets up at 7.30am every weekday morning to go to the local swimming pool to do his lengths. He attributes his health and fitness to the swimming regime he continues to follow. He had a hip replacement 12 months ago and can no longer do his favourite breaststroke. Not to be outdone, he has taught himself back crawl.

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Robert, Ernest's twin, still lives in South Africa and Ernest and Diane visit him once a year.

When Ernest was in his 50's, he and Diane left South Africa and came to London. They bought a house near Guildford. Ernest worked in the city dealing in mining investments.

They have two children. After university their son, Geoff, went to live and work abroad. Their daughter, Maggie (Maggie Armstrong who was also interviewed for the book) set up her own professional practice in the West Country. When Ernest and Diane had been retired for several years they decided to move from Guildford to be near their daughter. As Ernest says: *"At some stage you might want to move nearer to your children. They can help you, you can help them. You can babysit for their children and they'll help you too."*

They have always been very gregarious people and are still involved in several organisations. Maggie always says of her parents that they love having an excuse to throw a party.

They have always been great travellers and still take regular trips abroad. Ernest's only quibble, shared by many older travellers, is that it is now more difficult for him to get travel insurance!

Ernest is 85 and Diane is 76. They are post retirees.

## **When to retire**

As he got older Ernest found the nature of his work in the City more demanding:

*“My job was becoming very stressful. I was connected with gold mining investments in the city, and at that time there was a lot of anti South African feeling about apartheid, and therefore we were finding it difficult to move shares.”*

The daily commuting into the city didn't help Ernest's stress levels either: *“We lived in Guildford and it was a forty minute train ride, and very often the trains were cancelled and when they weren't everybody was sitting in a packed, heated carriage – you can imagine coming back from London and being like that.”*

The firm's normal retirement date was 65 and Ernest asked if he could retire early: *“I decided to approach the firm and ask them whether I could retire at 62½ and they said yes, they pushed it forward and I 'retired' at 62½, although they came forward with a deal that meant I gradually disengaged from the company.”*

Ernest was fortunate; he was a member of an extremely generous final salary pension scheme so he didn't have to worry about being able to afford to retire.

## **Planning the transition**

Ernest was lucky, his employer put together a package that enabled him to continue to be employed but in a less stressful occupation: *“They asked me if I'd like to take on a*

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*consultancy job for 2½ years so I did. And during that time I wrote a book on gold mining investment – an account of all the mines and their qualities and so forth, and so that kept me going. I stayed at home and only went into the city two or three times a week.” Ernest found the gradual transition into retirement very beneficial: “I was led steadily into it, and at the same time, because I had more time at home, I could make adjustment and play bowls and get myself into full retirement.”*

### **Retirement was different for Diane, as a housewife**

How did Diane feel about retirement? She had never worked outside the home and felt that her anticipation of retirement was different to Ernest’s. Ernest was looking forward to losing things, such as the stress associated with his work and the commuting. On the other hand Diane was not looking forward to losing her independence! *“Well, I think from the housewife’s point of view it’s quite different – quite a change. And as friends said to me: Keep doing what you’ve always done, don’t let Ernest being at home change that. I did ‘meals on wheels’ and I’d have coffee mornings with my friends and the WI and things like that – and that worked very well.”* Did the fact that Ernest was able to have a gradual retirement help? *“Definitely, by the time Ernest was fully retired we were more or less used to each other’s company – I was used to having him for lunch as well!”*

In addition Ernest and Diane deliberately set out to develop different interests in retirement so that they continued to have a degree of independence from each other.

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Diane: *“We did decide that we weren’t going to follow the same pastimes, the same groups. Ernest decided he would take up bowls and I purposely said: No I won’t.”*

## **Keeping fit socially**

For Ernest playing bowls wasn’t just about keeping fit physically, it was about keeping fit socially: *“One of my retirement ambitions was to continue to mix with people. I mixed with a lot of different people when I worked and I wanted to do the same when I retired, so I took up a team sport that was healthy – socially as well as physically.”*

## **Staying connected**

It is keeping socially connected, Ernest believes, that has kept them mentally alert and able. When they left South Africa to come to the UK they left behind their friends, relatives and colleagues and had to start from scratch to build up a social network.

They were also very aware that the anti-apartheid feelings, that were running high in the UK at the time, could have turned them into social pariahs. In an effort to get to know everyone in the street where they lived Ernest became chairman of the residents’ committee and got to know all 54 houses and their occupants. This active approach to socialising has stood them in good stead during their retirement. Ernest:

*“Socialising helps to keep your brain active, and also when you’re mixing with people, holding conversations and such, it keeps you going.”*

## **Preserving a feeling of usefulness**

Both Ernest and Diane are keen and active members of the clubs that they belong to. Diane joined the WI when they first arrived in the UK and is still a dedicated member of her local branch. Ernest is very involved in the Probus clubs. They give a lot of their time to these organisations and the social benefits are important to them. But they are also grateful for another benefit. Ernest: *“I think one of the big things is, when you join a club and you, say, become a president or take on a job which requires a little bit of work, a bit of organisation – people appreciate it. And, you know, having appreciation from people is a big thing. It feels your life is worthwhile.”*

Being appreciated – continuing to feel useful – is a basic human need. Several pre and transitional retirees expressed concerns about the loss of appreciation and usefulness they might feel, or are feeling, on leaving their pre-retirement jobs. Ernest and Diane have found a way in which they can continue to give and receive important support from the society they live in. As Ernest says: *“You can have everything in the world and lead a selfish life and you might end up thinking to yourself, well, what’s all this about?”*

## **Moving outside your comfort zone**

Perhaps one of Ernest’s greatest challenges has been to develop a range of talks that he gives to Probus clubs and local organisations. Initially it started with a talk on gold

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and has moved into other areas. At the moment he is developing a talk on being a twin. Ernest: *“At the moment I’m working on a talk about being a twin, and how it’s affected my life. Now that means that I’ve got to write out something. I’ve got to memorise to a certain extent, and I’m only too pleased to do that because it keeps my mind active.”*

### **No couch potato time**

With all their various activities – clubs, keeping fit, the church, speech writing, reading, crosswords, do it yourself (yes, Ernest still does most jobs around the house himself) they have little time to be bored. Ernest: *“So really, if you lead quite an active life things come every day. I think the last thing you want to do, of course, is to sit down and just look at the television or something. We do an amount of that sometimes in the evenings but we try and keep away from it.”*

### **Planning well ahead**

As keen travellers one of the things that Ernest and Diane were looking forward to on retirement was having more time to travel – they planned well in advance to take advantage of this freedom: Diane: *“Well, one thing we did plan in 1959, when our last dog died, was we decided we wouldn’t get another one because we thought that would be too much of a tie when retirement came round. It sounds a silly reason, but it was one of the things we said: Well you’ve got to give a dog ten years and we didn’t want to be tied down unnecessarily, as much as we loved the thing.”*

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## **Losses – no longer being able to drive**

Ernest and Diane were the oldest retired couple I interviewed. They were facing potential losses that younger retirees hadn't even thought about – such as no longer being able to drive – this would be a big blow to them. Ernest: *“Well, that’s a very big thing, not being able to drive. And you’ve got to think how are you going to prepare yourself for that.”* As Diane pointed out they are very dependent on a car.

## **How holidaying has changed**

During their travels Ernest and Diane have had a taste of what not being allowed to drive is like. Ernest: *“We’ve travelled the world and before, when we got somewhere like Australia or South Africa, we’d hire cars and drive all over. But then, of course, age stops you hiring cars. In certain countries you are not allowed to hire a car if you are over 80.”* This age restriction has, to a degree, curtailed their travels as a couple. They still go on independent holidays, this year to Switzerland and to visit Ernest’s brother, Robert, in South Africa, but their freedom to roam when they get there is more restricted and they tailor their holidays accordingly. It has also encouraged them to become more involved in group holidays where the transport at their destination is laid on for them.

## **Turning a negative into a positive**

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Not being able to drive when travelling abroad could have been a big negative, but not for Ernest and Diane, they looked for the positive side of the situation. When they were younger, rather than go through a travel company, they had always organised their own trips. They would plan even the long haul trips to New Zealand, Australia, America and Canada out in detail. Now that their days of independent travel are more restricted Ernest uses his planning skills to organise group visits. Ernest: *“When I was president of my local Probus club two years ago, I actually organised a trip for us to go to Italy, and ever since then it’s been kept up. The year after we went to Austria, to the Bavarian Alps, and this year we’ve been to Lake Lucerne.”*

Another advantage of group holidays is that travel insurance is more easily obtainable for older travellers. Ernest and Diane paid, on average, £12 for their travel insurance for a week’s trip to Europe with the Probus club and would have had to pay more if they had gone independently.

Not only has travel broadened their minds; they believe that organising trips – both individual and group – has helped them to keep their minds active and alert. Ernest: *“I just felt there was a goal for me to keep my mind active for what was coming later on. How do you keep your mind active? Well, for me one thing that helped was to try and organise all these trips abroad.”*

### ***How old is too old to have life enhancing medical treatment?***

When he started to have problems with his hip Ernest went to the doctor: *“Initially I’d been to a chiropractor, a marvellous chap. But it was getting worse and worse,*

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*and so I went to the doctor and he sent me off for an x-ray and then he showed it to me. He told me what the problem was and said I'd have to have an operation. Then he said to me: 'Blimey you're too old to have an operation!' The fellow did actually say to me you might feel you're too old to bother with the operation. I said: 'No, I want the operation done'." Ernest was lucky, he had private medical insurance and felt that that swung the balance in favour of having the operation done, and done quickly, and he is extremely glad that he did because his mobility is now excellent.*

### **Risk taking**

*Ernest is a great pragmatist when it comes to taking financial risk: "I look at it this way that it's a matter of circumstance. When you're younger you want growth and you take more risks and you get growth. But when you get to my age then I don't want growth – I keep 1% or 2% above inflation – that's all I want. What for? Because you can't take the money with you."*

But it's not just the financial risk that Ernest and Diane are less willing to take, they are also much more cautious about their physical safety. Diane: *"Ernest is much more cautious about climbing ladders. We've had friends who have fallen off the roof and fallen off a ladder, so yes! And another point – Geoff, our son, visited a little while ago and said: Golly, do you lock all the doors even when you're at home? I said – we're older, you know. We are more cautious about not being alone in the house. You do have to take care."*

## Moving house in retirement

The move from South Africa to the UK was quite a challenge but by actively becoming absorbed in the local community Ernest and Diane spent many happy years living near Guildford and built up a strong network of friends. In spite of this, when Ernest was in his late 60's they decided to move to the West country. Diane positively looked forward to the move: *"We were ready for a change – we felt we'd been there, done that. We'd made lots of friends in the neighbourhood but their children had grown up and left home and many of them had moved away. We felt there was nothing more for us there and said: let's move and see more of the country – a different part of the country."*

One reason for moving to the West country was to be near their daughter, Maggie. Ernest's view was that the mutual support they could offer each other would be valuable and he was as pragmatic as ever in his reasoning behind his decision: *"We moved down here mainly because Maggie had started a business with Carl and it wasn't likely that they were going to move around because it takes some time to establish a business, and so that really was an initial preparation for when we got older."*

However, they weren't blind to the fact that situations change and children may move away. Ernest pointed out that a priority is to find somewhere where you will be happy, even if the children do move: *"You look for your ideal place, because that's going to make a very big difference to your retirement. Of course, the kids may move away too – even though we'd planned and thought that Maggie and Carl would still*

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*be here there was no guarantee. But that just makes it more important that you've made sure that you're retiring in the right place. If they do go away and you've made good friends at that place you'll still be OK."*

Making good friends wasn't a problem, as Diane says: *"When we moved we made lots of new friends – well, we'd always been determined to join things. You can't make friends sitting back and expecting them to come after you."* But they did point out that most of their social activities take place in an adjoining village rather than in the village they actually settled in. While the house they chose suited them perfectly, in retrospect they wish that they had spent a little more time researching the location.

Ernest: *"We felt we didn't fit in very well with the immediate community or with the local clubs and suchlike. My advice to anyone moving would be to get involved in the actual area before you arrive. If you like bowls, see if you can go and have a game at the local bowling club. If the church is important, go to church and meet the people and see if you get on with them. If you're a member of a club ask if you can attend a local meeting. We didn't do that and I wish we had."*

### **Considering a further house move!**

Ernest and Diane have talked about moving house again and are wondering if they can actually face the upheaval that it would cause. Whilst their house still suits them it is on the large side so they are considering a move into smaller accommodation. In the meantime they have discussed where the survivor would live if one of them died. If Ernest were to die Diane would relocate to the next village, where most of their

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friends live, and try and maintain her independence for as long as possible: *“I wouldn’t want to be too near Maggie because it’s not fair to her. And as long as I’m able to manage alone that’s what I’d want to do. Our friends are all in the next village and it’s almost self-sufficient there. You wouldn’t have to worry because the neighbours would never forget you or not notice you; it’s a very caring place. Anyway, that’s where I’d like to go.”*

On the other hand, Ernest is under no illusions as to his own domestic capabilities: *“I would have to be more dependent because I can’t cook and I can’t iron, I can’t do anything, and so I’d have to go into some form of serviced or sheltered accommodation, I’ve spotted one I like. And if I had no responsibilities here I might want to travel more. I’ve got my twin brother and his wife, I might want to shut the door - maybe a flat or something - and go to South Africa for a few months.”*

### **The future**

Not knowing what’s going to happen has made future financial planning difficult.

Ernest and Diane are at a stage in their lives where they would like to consider gifting some of their assets to their children to help with inheritance tax planning. Diane: *“We do have discussions with the family about leaving money to people – family – children and that. But then we’ll say: Ah, but we might need it if we have to go into a nursing home and I say to Ernest: I’m not going to the cheapest nursing home.”*

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Nursing homes costs do vary but Ernest is confident that financially they could cope with the costs of long term care: *“We don’t really have to worry financially if we get into these problems, and why worry about them now, realising that it’s different medical directions which you can go in.”*

Another criteria they want to apply to care in later old age is not to disrupt their children’s lives. Diane: *“The last thing I want to do is lean on Maggie. We want to be independent – and she would want that – it’s her life too.”*

### **Faith**

Providing for themselves spiritually has always centred around the church. Ernest: *“Faith – I mean – well only as regards me – I find it consoling. I find that to have some sort of thing to believe in is consoling, and I like that. It doesn’t mean to say that if one goes to church you’re a bible puncher; it doesn’t mean that at all. It means that you have hope in life. For goodness sake you’re put on this earth, and if you want some sort of hope to look forward to – you hope – that’s all you can do, nothing more.”*

### **How old is old?**

Depending on where you are on the spectrum being grown up, or middle aged, or old is always several years older than you are. Ernest: *“I’m damn lucky to be here at 85.*

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*I mean – of course I’m going to get old. Of course I’m going to get old. I can’t help it.”*

I want to get to 85 and still think I haven’t got old!