

Allan and Mike: Dementia-friendly cinema at South Hill Park

Once a month, South Hill Park's cinema becomes host to a very special group of people. Their Dementia-friendly screenings offer a small piece of respite for people living with dementia, as well as their carers, to come and enjoy a relaxed screening and some socialising. We sat down with two of the volunteers who make it happen, Allan and Mike, to hear more.

Tell us how you first became involved with South Hill Park?

Allan: I'm with the Bracknell Film Society, and back in 2017, we were looking at something we could do to give back to the community. The idea of dementia-friendly screenings was the most popular suggestion, so a small working party of us set up and ran the screenings, where my role was to select the film and help with organisation. Right from the start, we linked up with what was then the Dementia Action Alliance in Bracknell, along with the Alzheimer's Society. People living with dementia and their carers came in for a special trial screening at South Hill Park, so they could experience the space and advise us on lighting, sound levels, and the types of films they'd like. That feedback guided our film choices for the first year and beyond.

Mike: I'm a South Hill Park volunteer. My role is to coordinate between SHP and the Bracknell Film Society, mainly arranging volunteers for each session. I prepare a callout notice, see who's available, and make sure everything's covered on the day.

Allan: These days I still help choose the films and preview them to find a suitable interval point for the ice cream break. I pass that information to the Community Engagement team at SHP and the projection team about a week before each screening. During the event I mill around with Mike, meet and greet people, make sure the ice creams arrive on time, and that refreshments are ready afterwards. Then I chat with attendees to hear what they thought of the film and what they might like to see next time.

What does a dementia-friendly screening entail?

Allan: They're just like cinema used to be, lights left on low, normal sound levels, and a relaxed atmosphere. We don't show anything too loud or fast-paced. It's cheaper than a normal cinema, with free tea and coffee and paid ice creams at the interval, just like the old days!

Most films are nostalgic, classics from 50 years ago or more. The idea is to evoke memories. People might not remember the film later, but they'll remember how it made them feel and that good feeling lasts, even if the memory itself fades.

What keeps you both involved in the dementia-friendly screenings?

Mike: I'm retired, and this gives me something meaningful to do, it keeps my brain and body active! It's valuable for the people who come too. Some carers who've lost the person they cared for still come along, because they enjoy the company and the friendly, relaxed atmosphere. It's a group of people all in the same boat. I've had my own health issues recently, but I keep going. It gives me purpose and perspective.

Allan: For me, there are two main reasons. Firstly, as a Bracknell Film Society officer, I feel a commitment to the project we started eight years ago. Secondly, SHP feels like my cultural and spiritual home, so I want to contribute to its growth and community relevance.

What do you think attendees get out of these screenings?

Mike: It gets them out of the house! And it gives them a safe, welcoming environment where they don't feel embarrassed or different.

Allan: Exactly. People know they can relax. If they want to sing along, that's a success, not a problem. The screenings are inclusive; we sometimes have people with autism or other needs too. Everyone's welcome.

Why do carers still attend, even after their loved one has passed away?

Allan: Because the bond between carers survives the loss. Bracknell is known for its excellent provision for people living with dementia and their carers, and those networks are strong. The carers who helped start these screenings formed lasting friendships, they share an understanding that most of us can only imagine.

Have there been any memorable moments?

Allan: One that always stands out is from our very first dementia-friendly screening, of Blue Hawaii with Elvis Presley. A gentleman in the audience sang along with the songs, and we later learned that one of those songs had been played at his wedding over 50 years earlier. He might not have remembered what he'd eaten for breakfast, but he remembered every word of that song. It was incredibly moving.

Do either of you have personal experience with dementia?

Allan: Yes. A friend from the film society, Tony, developed dementia while living alone in Bracknell. He had little contact with family, so a few of us looked out for him. I helped make sure he got to appointments. It could be challenging and sometimes frightening, but it opened my eyes to what carers deal with every day — their patience and resilience are remarkable.

Mike: Before this, I'd never really encountered dementia. Now I'm much more aware. I can recognise the signs, for example, once at a train station I saw a man avoid stepping

on a cracked stair because he thought it was a hole. I recognised that behaviour instantly.

Do you think it's important to raise awareness and inclusivity around dementia?

Allan: It's absolutely crucial. People living with dementia already face enormous challenges and so do their carers. If the public isn't aware, everyday life can become incredibly hard. Even simple things like catching a bus or shopping can be stressful if people are impatient or unkind. Bracknell has been excellent at encouraging shops and businesses to join the Dementia Action Alliance — even things like replacing black mats, which can look like holes to someone with dementia, make a big difference. Awareness makes life more humane.

What does South Hill Park mean to you personally?

Mike: Coming here has helped me grow as a person. It's a community hub that keeps people connected and engaged. Without it, I think a lot of us would just stay home and that would be it. Before retiring, I worked in a very insular industry in computers, and was naturally shy. When I stopped working, I knew I needed to do something or I'd just stay home watching TV like my father did. Volunteering at SHP has changed me completely. It has built my confidence and got me out meeting people. Fifteen years later, I'm still here.

Allan: For me, it's my cultural and spiritual home, a place where art, film, and community come together in the best way possible. Having a plac

Finally, what does it mean to the community to have SHP championing dementia-friendly activities?

Allan: It shows that SHP is inclusive, forward-thinking, and genuinely connected to the community. The screenings are a valuable community activity. They give people living with dementia and their families something positive and enjoyable, while raising SHP's local and even national profile. SHP is featured in the national Dementia-Friendly Guide to Cinema, and the Film Society was even shortlisted in the 2017 Alzheimer's Society National Dementia-Friendly Awards, where we came third nationally!

Mike: Exactly. SHP gives people a reason to come out, meet others, and feel part of something.

Allan: When they leave the cinema, they might not even remember what film they just saw, but they'll remember that it made them feel good. And they will take that good feeling with them in their day. The good feeling will persist, even if the actual memory is gone. That's what it's all about. It's not just about film, it's about belonging.