



When our newborn son, Thomas, was unexpectedly born with a rare and potentially life threatening condition - Persistent Pulmonary Hypertension of the Newborn (PPHN) - our world was turned upside down. Especially when at midnight, on the day after his birth, he was transferred from Colchester's Special Care Baby Unit to the Intensive Care Unit at Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge.

I'd just had just had a C-section under general anaesthetic so to be offered a room at Acorn House so that we could be near to Thomas as he fought for his life and I could recover close by, was a god send.

We stayed at the house for almost two weeks and it really is hard to put into words how much Acorn House helped us as a family. We were handed a set of keys as we arrived by Thomas' cot in Intensive Care (having followed, Thomas' ambulance, in our own car from Colchester Hospital) and were told we could stay as long as we needed to. At that moment we were exhausted, scared and away from home. Instantly, all the practical issues of where to sleep and the expense that might entail were taken care of. I was admitted for that night on to the Rosie Maternity Ward but Acorn House was somewhere for my husband to stay that enabled him to be close to both Thomas and myself.

Staying at Acorn House helped our family considerably. To be near to Thomas was so important. We were literally a three minute run (or wheel chair push!!) away. Grandparents, aunties and uncles all wanted to visit Thomas and show their support to us and Acorn House provided us with a base to sit and prepare them for Intensive Care, a home from home where we could make our visitors a lunch, cup of tea and provide a sense of normality in an otherwise chaotic situation. Acorn House kept us together as a family - both physically and emotionally.

It meant that Thomas always had us on hand, night or day. As he came off his life support, I was able to breast feed intravenously as he began to rebuild his body. Having our own bedroom enabled me to express milk in private, comfortable surroundings and that, indirectly, helped Thomas. It was also wonderful to know that we had a direct line, literally from beside my bed to the telephone at the end of Thomas' cot. I was able to call for updates and reassurance and knew that, if he had deteriorated, that they would call us. Fortunately, Intensive Care did not need to phone us. Thomas' dramas always seemed to happen when we were on the ward - but it was reassuring to know that they could.

It was very important to have a space away from the intensity of the wards. I was still recovering from my c-section and it was a godsend to have a space to just cry and sleep! Acorn House very quickly literally felt like home.

I had worried when we'd been offered a place to begin with, picturing a hostel that was dirty and very basic, but Acorn House is just lovely. We felt privileged to be there. The house manager, Jane, was very helpful. She had actually used the house as a parent

when her son had been poorly so she knew how we felt and was there when we needed her but also knew when "not to ask" - She was practical, caring and great fun!

We also found it extremely helpful to be with other families in the house. Upon arrival at Intensive Care in Cambridge, we met another couple who had just arrived with their daughter. That night we were all trying to encourage and console each other. The next day when we moved in to Acorn House we met them again and they became really good friends. We became very close to a number of other families and we all looked out for each other and our children. We gained strength from each other and were able to support each other during one of the most difficult times of our lives as we were all in the same boat. Some of us were fortunate enough to eventually be able to take our children home - other didn't - but the friendships formed during this difficult time were extremely strong, even when we didn't share a common language.

The layout of Acorn House also meant you could be alone when you needed too but the communal areas were invaluable; the kitchen enabled us to host family meals at the house and support members of our extended family that came to visit Thomas. The chance to all sit together for lunch was wonderful.

One of the biggest benefits of Acorn House was the opportunity it offered for our other two young sons to join us and be included in Thomas' journey. The day we moved in our house manager, Jane, told me that our two young sons aged four and two years were welcome to visit and sleepover and I felt as if one huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. We all needed to be together and it was wonderful to have them sleeping soundly on the little pull out beds beside our own. Our four year old Callum asked me "Is Thomas going to be an angel or a baby?" and I could only tell him that we weren't quite sure - but that we could still love him, either way. Our children were welcomed in to the house with literally open arms. They were given little Easter bunnies, a teddy bear and even an Easter egg. They felt instantly at home at Acorn House, calling it 'Hotel Thomas' and the lovely play room and gardens meant that their time at Addenbrookes was less stressful and happy. They still talk fondly of Hotel Thomas even now!

Six months on, we are now home with Thomas and he is doing so well. He is still under a consultant at Colchester Hospital but is well on the road to a full recovery. He was christened in the summer and, instead of presents raised funds for the three charities that helped him. One of which was Acorn House. His Aunty has also just run her first ever half marathon, completing the Great North Run, again for The Sick Children's Trust. We all feel indebted to the wonderful charity that is The Sick Children's Trust.

**Sacha, Thomas's mum**