Later this month the Chartered Accountants’ Benevolent Association (CABA) will celebrate 125 years of supporting institute members and their dependants who have fallen on hard times. On 24 March, its actual birthday, it will launch a book chronicling its history for the first time and throw a celebratory event at its Rugby offices for local stakeholders showcasing the work it does.

Later on, in May, the charity will highlight the importance of achieving a better work/life balance – a key issue for 21st century chartered accountants – by holding a national ‘Take a break with CABA’ event. Although this is still at the planning stage, it is being designed to encourage members to take time out from their busy work schedule to enjoy a break with colleagues, family or friends.

It’s all a far cry from CABA’s inaugural meeting at the institute’s offices on 24 March 1886. The profession was still in its infancy – the Royal Charter had been granted six years before – and ICAEW boasted just 1,444 members (all men). It was also still reeling from the effect of the 1883 Bankruptcy Act, which transferred the right to deal with bankruptcies and liquidations away from accountants to the Official Receiver’s office.

Indeed, one of the first institute members to be helped by the new benevolent association was ‘WED’ (as the records refer to him), whose practice dwindled away as a result of the Act. He ran out of money and then became ill. CABA gave him an initial grant of £10 and was planning to award him 15 shillings a week for three months to tide him over until he recovered, when he died. His wife then received a further donation of £10 to pay for his funeral expenses.

THE BEQUEST
That first year, CABA handed out £50 to four beneficiaries. Today, it has between 300-400 clients both in the UK and overseas on its books and in 2010 paid out upwards of £1.2m in financial assistance and benefits-in-kind. It is also on a much more stable footing financially thanks, in particular, to Henry Merrett who died in 1958, leaving the bulk of his estate to CABA. The trustees invested the £174,000 in farmland near Bracknell, which was sold to property developers in 2005 for a staggering £65m.

As a result, CABA has been able to stop actively fund-raising (although it still welcomes donations and bequests) and focus instead on developing a far wider range of services for both qualified and trainee chartered accountants and their dependants. So now, in addition to its financial and carer services, it runs a 24-hour confidential helpline, career clinics and consultancy, debt advice, drugs and alcohol counselling and a range of courses in stress management and well-being.

A NEW APPROACH
The charity has also changed its approach to both existing and new cases, as chief executive Kath Haines explains.

‘One of the things I find fascinating about the people who approach CABA is that the original reason they get in touch is not necessarily their core problem. So now we take a holistic approach and look at the whole person.

‘Someone might come to us and say their washing machine is broken, they can’t afford to replace it and can we help them buy a new one. That might be the immediate need but it will be the tip of the iceberg. If you dig a little
DEBT, DRINK AND DRUGS
The economic crisis has brought a new influx of people, particularly younger members in their 30s and 40s, seeking counselling and help. In the run-up to Christmas 2010, 60% of the calls to the helpline were about debt. And the incidence of drink and drugs abuse is on the increase.

‘People turn to something else to help them through and we have to try and break that dependency. We don’t want to cut people off but we do need to manage expectations. And there has been a tendency for people almost to treat us as if we were a pension fund which, of course, we are not.’

‘Someone might come to us and say their washing machine is broken... can we help them buy a new one. That might be the immediate need but it will be the tip of the iceberg’

CABA’s team of support workers include, for example, debt advisers, someone who is experienced in child support and care, and a health counsellor. ‘The last person we recruited to the team specialises in maximising income for people,’ Haines says. ‘The first three cases he took on, he managed to secure £4,000-£5,000 worth of benefits for these individuals that they weren’t aware they could claim. Two of them now feel that they can live independently. They may still have to come to us for one-off things but they are no longer reliant on us.

So it’s not all about paying money out. It’s about making sure that people have access to what’s available to them. It is really important that people shouldn’t feel dependent on us. We recognise that has happened in the past and we have to try and break that dependency. We don’t want to cut people off but we do need to manage expectations. And there has been a tendency for people almost to treat us as if we were a pension fund which, of course, we are not.

CARING SUPPORT
Brenda was working as a finance director in a local business when her 48-year-old husband suffered a stroke. She felt she couldn’t leave her job to care for him at home as they now relied on her salary and was worried that her position would be threatened if she took extended compassionate leave.

She contacted CABA and spoke to a carer support officer who advised her of her social services entitlement and emailed fact sheets and website addresses, including information about the care that could be provided for her husband at home.

CABA also liaised with the couple’s social worker to ensure that a carer assessment was carried out. They were offered a package of care by the local social services that allowed Brenda to return to work and her husband to regain some independence. CABA also provided a small grant to pay for some much-needed equipment that was not available to the couple through social services or the NHS.

HEALTH ISSUES
Following the breakdown of her marriage and suffering with depression, Caroline was admitted to a psychiatric unit. She lost her job, her accommodation and had large debts.

She approached one of CABA’s debt advisors who helped her manage her debts, liaised with the local authority about temporary housing and advised her about the state benefits she was entitled to.

CABA provided a small grant to help with moving costs and made a donation towards technical training and career coaching. With its help and that of mental health professionals, she regained her lost confidence and updated her skills. A year later, Caroline has regular accounting work and is able to meet her living costs and successfully stick to agreements made with creditors.