



Housing

Seventeenth-century almshouses in the City of London, depicted in a painting from 1818



the poor

Almshouses provided an important safety net for our 'deserving poor' ancestors. **Caroline Roberts** explores their charitable history

Almshouses represent the oldest form of social housing in the UK. They have provided charitable shelter for poor elderly people since medieval times, and these historic buildings can still be seen across the country. Some are grand structures; others consist of cottage rows or groups of dwellings clustered around a communal courtyard or garden. They often have an integral chapel, attractive architecture and traditional features such as statues of the founder, coats of arms, clocktowers and sundials.

MEDIEVAL ORIGINS

The origins of almshouses lie in medieval 'hospitals' set up by religious orders to care for the sick and to provide refuge for travellers and pilgrims. By the mid-16th century, there were around 800 of these across the country. Many were sold or fell into ruin after the dissolution of the monasteries, though some early examples survive today.

In subsequent centuries, almshouses were more often founded by merchant and craft guilds or trade associations for members no longer able to work. The rise of the merchant classes also resulted in more individuals



A well-dressed lady visits the residents of an almshouse in this illustration from 1875

with the means to establish charitable institutions. Wealthy industrialists, church dignitaries, aristocrats and even royalty funded almshouses through endowments of money, property or land. One of the most famous, the Royal Hospital Chelsea, was commissioned by Charles II to care for army veterans. Opened in 1692, today it is home to some 300 Chelsea Pensioners.

The Royal Hospital Chelsea, opened in 1692 to care for army veterans

Founders often set out criteria governing who could be admitted to their almshouse, as well as the principles on which it would be run. Applicants generally needed to be over 60 years old and unable to afford rent, of good character and living in the local area. Some almshouses were single sex; others accommodated both men and women in separate areas, while some admitted married couples.

Almshouses were governed by groups of volunteer trustees, often comprising people with a connection to the founder, local worthies and clergy. A resident master or steward, often a retired clergyman, was responsible for the day-to-day running, sometimes assisted by a matron who oversaw the domestic duties.

During the Georgian and Victorian eras, people flocked to towns and cities in search of work, and urban housing became a major social problem. The Victorian age, in particular, was a time of great philanthropy, when many almshouses were built. Of around 2,000 groups of almshouses occupied today, about a third date from Victorian times.

For many people in distress, the almshouse was a welcome alternative to the workhouse, which was a place of last resort





for the destitute. Workhouse conditions were harsh, with families separated and inmates living in prison-like conditions and forced to do long hours of menial work. Almshouse residents, though, were seen as the ‘deserving poor’ who had fallen on hard times. As well as a roof over their heads, they received a weekly living allowance. Unsurprisingly, places were highly sought after; there were long waiting lists, and contemporary local newspaper reports cited instances of more than 100 people queuing to apply for a vacancy.

Residents of early almshouses were often referred to as ‘brothers’, ‘sisters’ or ‘bedesmen’, reflecting those institutions’ religious foundations. However, by the 19th century the term in common use was ‘inmates’ – a word that

perhaps had fewer negative connotations than today. Each resident usually inhabited one room containing some simple furniture and a fireplace used for cooking, and was given a small allowance of money and fuel. Some supplemented that income by taking on domestic duties

such as acting as a keyholder, supervising comings and goings, and ensuring that curfew was observed. Many almshouses also provided a new ‘gown’ at specified intervals – a cloak, perhaps adorned with the badge of the almshouse – to be worn by inmates when processing to church, where they might pray for the soul of the founder.

STRICT RULES

Residents often had to abide by a strict set of rules or face possible eviction. One such list set out in 1850 by the committee of almshouses in London’s Southwark district required almshouses to attend church punctually and to sweep outside their dwellings each morning before 10am. It was also specified that “None of the Almshouses shall at any time make use of blasphemous words, or any railing, bitter or uncharitable expressions”, and none should get drunk, pilfer or “behave herself in any respect unseemly”.

Unfortunately most residents left few or no personal records. Some occupant lists are available in local record offices or in the keeping of the relevant charity, and names appear in census records. However, these were often compiled for the census taker by the almshouse master, not by the residents, so their accuracy isn’t always reliable.

Individual personalities are more often brought to life in records of bad behaviour. For example, the minutes of an 1840 committee meeting of Southwark Charities records that: “Mary

Residents often had to abide by a strict set of rules or risk eviction

Scarr... was charged again with coming in late, intoxicated, and wantonly hazarding the burning of the place, by refusal to secure her light.” She was duly expelled from the almshouse.

Sadly, some elderly people were evicted from almshouses through no fault of their own. It was all



FRANCIS NORTH, 6TH EARL OF GUILDFORD 1772-1861

Meet the clergyman and almshouse master at the centre of a Victorian charity scandal

Rev Francis North was the son of the Bishop of Winchester and nephew of Frederick, Lord North, prime minister under George III. In 1808, his father appointed him master of St Cross Hospital in Winchester (*pictured*), an almshouse established to house 13 poor men and provide free dinners for 200 others at an annual cost of around £1,000. The post gave him control of the income from the hospital’s considerable endowment of land, and he continued to live in his comfortable vicarage while pocketing the surplus, estimated to have totalled up to £300,000 (equivalent to around £40 million today) during his tenure of over 40 years.

The situation came to light in 1849 after a campaign was launched by Rev Henry Holloway, a retired clergyman who settled in the parish. The affair provided a juicy scandal for the national press, involving as it did a clergyman who was also a peer, having by then been made Earl of Guildford. Parliament launched a four-year investigation during which the earl argued that he had a right to the surplus revenues. In 1850, the inquiry ruled against him and he was required to repay some of the money, though this amounted to as little as £4,000.

too common for a wife to be expelled when her husband died. It was a condition of residency that inmates were able to live independently, because few almshouses were able to provide care when residents became ill. The workhouse, on the other hand, had an infirmary – the final

destination of many who became unable to look after themselves and had no family to fall back on. Those

who developed dementia were removed to the workhouse or the local lunatic asylum. By the mid-19th century, the situation was improving somewhat as an increasing number of almshouses employed a resident nurse and the services of a doctor on a retainer.

During the 19th century, it



Watermen's Almshouses in Southwark, 1839

► emerged that some almshouses were financially able to support their elderly residents in comfort but chose to divert the money elsewhere. This resulted in a number of public scandals. Endowments made centuries before, particularly those involving land, increased in value over time, often generating significant income for charities. Yet some residents struggled on meagre allowances, sometimes specified long before by an original benefactor and not

the Charity Commission in 1853, created to tackle corruption.

Not all almshouse charities fleeced their residents; many genuinely struggled to provide inmates with an adequate living allowance. Charity Commission reports from the second half of the 19th century show that many occupants received poor relief from the parish. Others worked or had working family members living in their accommodation; some even provided board and lodging for profit.

Many almshouses struggled to provide an adequate living allowance

increased to account for inflation, while the master used the remaining income to fund his own comfortable lifestyle.

FICTIONAL PORTRAYAL

It was this scenario that inspired the plot of Anthony Trollope's 1855 novel *The Warden*, in which Rev Septimus Harding is shamed when it is revealed that he pays almsmen at the fictional Hiram's Hospital just £24 a year, taking £800 for himself. It's believed that Trollope was inspired by a real-life scandal in Winchester (see box, page 73). Such cases were catalysts for the foundation of

The 20th century and the advent of the welfare state brought many changes in provisions for almshouse residents. The introduction of old-age pensions in 1908 and the increasing availability of healthcare and social care prompted a shift to residents being supported by the state.

Nevertheless, almshouses continue to provide security and a strong sense of community. Today around 1,600 almshouse charities house about 36,000 residents, each paying a weekly maintenance contribution that is lower than commercial rent. 🌱

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RESOURCES

Take your research further

ARTICLE

Charity Scandals as a Catalyst of Legal Change and Literary Imagination in Nineteenth Century England

w core.ac.uk/download/pdf/46714475.pdf

This paper examines in detail examples of mismanagement in almshouse charities and how these were portrayed in fiction.

BOOKS

Almshouses: A Social and Architectural History

Brian Howson

The History Press, 2008

This detailed exploration of the history of almshouses from medieval to Victorian times is illustrated throughout with photographs and architectural plans, and lists notable almshouses across the UK.

The British Almshouse: New Perspectives on Philanthropy ca 1400–1914

Nigel Goose, Helen Caffrey and Anne Langley (editors)

FACHRS Publications, 2016

This book explores various aspects of life in almshouses including the community, benefits, clothing and gardens.

MUSEUM

MUSEUM OF THE HOME

a 136 Kingsland Road,

London E2 8EA

t 020 7739 9893

w museumofthehome.org.uk

This institution is housed in almshouses built in 1714 to house poor pensioners of the Ironmongers' Company.

WEBSITE

THE ALMSHOUSE ASSOCIATION

w almshouses.org

This site includes an overview of the history of almshouses. Also the Almshouse Association can provide a list of almshouse charities for each county.