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## Almshouse boom helps poor pensioners

Tom Ball

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Thrale almshouses in Streatham, London, are for over-60s. Pamela Hewitt, left, lives near Tate Modern ROBERT GRESHOFF PHOTOGRAPHY; JACK HILL/THE TIMES

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Since the Bishop of Worcester opened an almshouse a thousand years ago as a sanctuary for the needy their number has grown to about 300,000 *[sic – actual figure is approx. 30,000]* and, for the first time in decades, is rising.

Nick Phillips, chief executive of the Almshouse Association, said that 257 new ones were being built and 455 in the pipeline. “In the past 12 to 18 months there’s been a boom in the number of new almshouses being built, something that we haven’t seen in years since the social housing push of the 1960s,” he said. “They have become a necessity once more as people are getting older and there is less affordable housing around. So communities are responding to that by taking up this age-old form of charity that’s been around since before William the Conqueror and which is clearly a sustainable model for charitable giving.”

The cost of renting an almshouse is a fraction of the market rate and lower than social housing. Many include a laundry service and a warden to help with residents’ daily needs.



Pamela Hewitt, left, lives at Hopton's Almshouses near Tate Modern  
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

Entry requirements are strict and run in accordance with the intentions of the benefactor. Nearly all require residents to be above the age of retirement and local to the area, while many have further specifications relating to an applicant's occupation and circumstances. The Hospital of St Cross and Almshouse of Noble Poverty in Winchester, founded in the 12th century, requires its 25 "brothers" to attend morning prayers in their black robes.

Martyn Craddock, chief executive of United St Saviour's Charity, which is building almshouses in Bermondsey, south London, said: "We feel that there is a real lack of housing options for people, especially those in the inner city, who face no choice but to move out, away from the communities they've lived their whole life in," he said.

Pamela Hewitt, 89, who was a classical singer, is among those for whom almshouses have provided sanctuary.

A resident of Southwark all her life, she had to move out of her council flat when she could no longer manage the stairs, but was offered a cottage at Hopton's Almshouses, a grade II listed building behind Tate Modern bought by United St Saviour's in 2011. "Sometimes when I'm in the garden youngsters will come to the gate and look in," she said. " 'I live here,' I'll say to them proudly and they can't believe it."

