

Return of almshouses for the vulnerable could help solve Britains housing crisis



The Printers' Almshouses, in Wood Green, north London, circa 1908 CREDIT: CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/WWW.ALAMY.COM

- [Patrick Sawyer](#), SENIOR NEWS REPORTER

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They have been in existence for more than 1000 years, with the oldest surviving one opened as far back as 990 in Worcester in order to provide a home for the infirm, needy and vulnerable.

But charitable almshouses are now being built at their fastest rate in decades, with a thousand new homes being created in the last 10 years, so much so they are being seen as an effective way of helping to tackle the shortage of social housing.

The Almshouse Association says it has recorded the biggest spike in development of housing run by charities since the Victorian era, with more being built to offer accommodation for elderly people who struggle financially in their retirement.

The oldest almshouse still in existence is the Hospital of St Oswald, in Worcester, which was founded in 990. There are 30,000 other individual almshouse homes dotted around the country, often built around a communal courtyard or garden, providing homes for 36,000 people.

Now another 700 are being built or are in the pipeline, with extensions of existing buildings and new developments in places such as Southwark, south London; Wokingham; the North East and Colchester.

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Modern almshouses in Birmingham

The Almshouse Association compares what is happening now to the mid 19th century, when there was a boom in the opening of charitable almshouses.

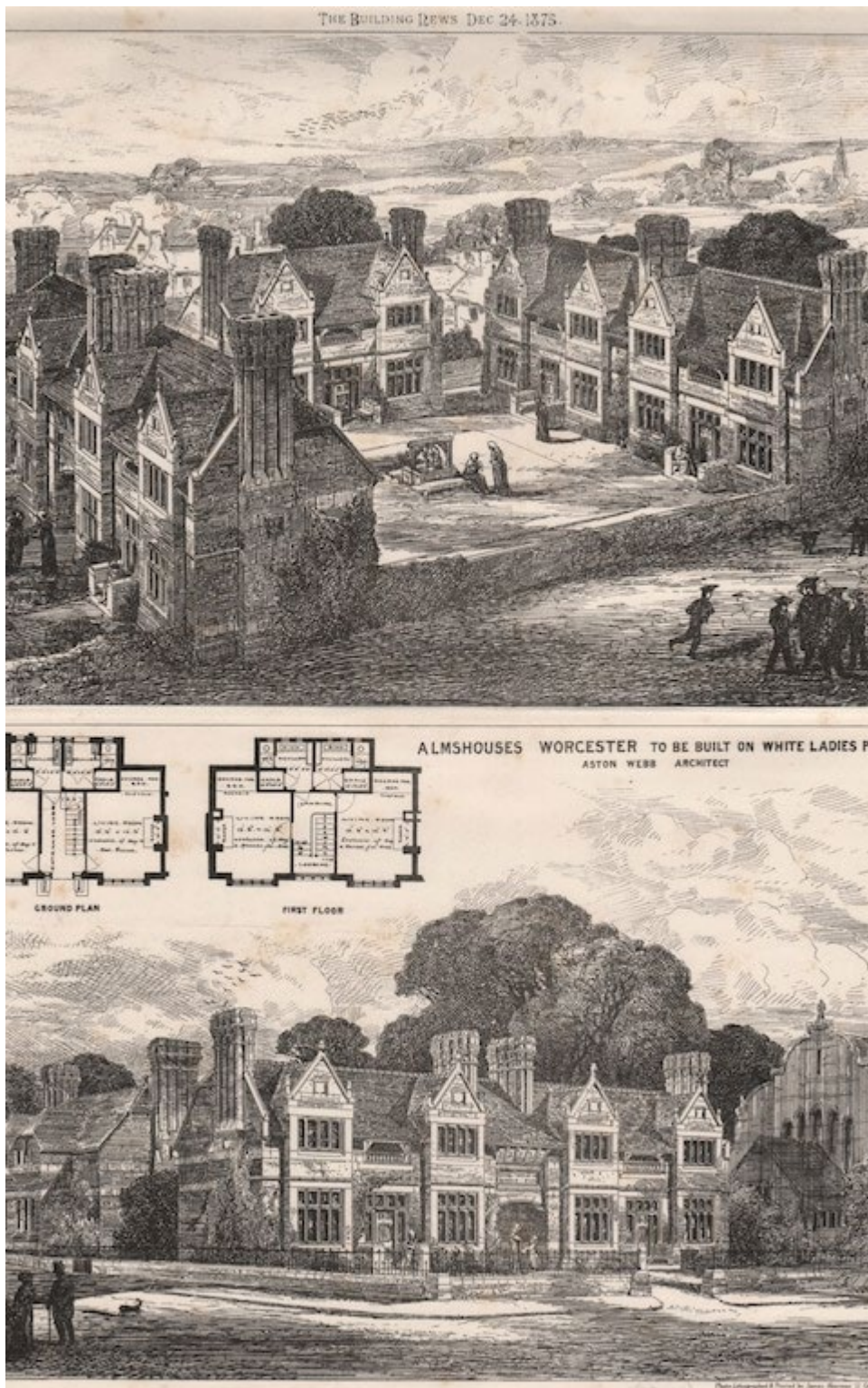
Then, dire conditions for the poor in workhouses prompted some wealthy philanthropists to endow almshouses, often in their local area and built in groups of 6-12 dwellings, often for retirees of specific occupations such as fishermen, miners, agricultural workers or ex-servicemen. It is estimated that some 30 percent of current almshouses were founded during the Victorian period.

Nick Phillips, the association's chief executive, said: "Over the last 10 years there have been about a thousand new almshouses built, that's a thousand new homes. Almshouse trustees have recognised the need for affordable housing. They are keen to support as many people as possible and have responded to growing demand."

United St Saviours is building several additional almshouses in Bermondsey, south London, , while the Durham Aged Mineworkers, set up for retired mineworkers in the north east, has also expanded to accommodate more residents.

There are strict rules for who can be offered an almshouse, with occupants often having to be over a certain age and priority given to those in greatest financial and housing need.

Residents also sign a contract waiving their right to buy the dwelling, ensuring that the almshouse continues to be available for future generations in need.



The White Ladies Property almshouses in Worcester, circa 1875. Aston Webb Architect CREDIT: WWW.ALAMY.COM

Among the almshouses to have recently expanded is one operated in the West Midlands by the Sir Josiah Mason Trust, where a new extension has been added to the existing traditional building.

Here the residents of more than 60 flats share communal areas, with events and activities offering plenty of opportunities to socialise.

The Telegraph

The rent is heavily subsidised by the trust, which was established by a Victorian philanthropist in the 1860s. Residents pay an agreed contribution, depending on what they can afford, towards maintenance.

David Healey, the trust's chief executive, said the new flats were built in response to a growing demand.

"We have an ageing population as a country as a whole and also a housing crisis" he said. "We know that we are experiencing a greater level of financial hardship."

Margaret Smith, 74, moved into one of the 13 new flats in Solihull last September, after her family read about Mason House.

Until then she hadn't even considered the possibility an almshouse would be an option for her.

Despite feeling isolated following the death of her husband in January she was told by Solihull council she faced a long wait for a council house.

"This has given me something for the future to look forward to," she said. "Knowing my children are there and knowing how friendly everyone is, you know you're not isolated. It's like having a second life. I have got something now hopefully to live for."