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Britain is building almshouses at fastest rate since the Victorian era: Social housing crisis sees charities fund homes made for 36,000 people

- Over one thousand new homes within almshouses have sprung up over ten years
- Rise is due to the large numbers of elderly unable to survive off their pension
- Other groups such as retired fishermen, miners, retail workers are said to benefit

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Charitable almshouses providing shelter for vulnerable members of society are being built at the fastest rate since Victorian Britain in an effort to solve the social housing shortage.

Over one thousand new homes within almshouses have sprung up over the last ten years, housing 36,000 people, in a poverty boom comparable to that of the mid-19th century, according to the Almshouse Association.

The rise in almshouses, which have historically been run by religious orders, is believed to be due to the large numbers of elderly who are unable to survive off their pension and fill the majority of the homes.



William Lench Court, Birmingham. Run by Lench's Trust, an almshouse charity founded in 1526 by William Lench

Other groups including retired fishermen, miners, retail workers are said to benefit from specialist homes, according to the association.

Seven hundred more of the homes are set to be built in Southwark, south London, Wokingham and Colchester, reports The Telegraph.

With around 30 per cent of the existing almshouses having been founded in the Victorian era the need for affordable housing has not diminished since it was first acknowledged by philanthropists who built the first almshouse in 900.



29th July 1939: Retired sailors reading in the courtyard of a merchant seamen's almshouse

The oldest of the countries almshouses, the Hospital of St Oswald, stands in Worcester where it continues to act as a home for the elderly.

First set up to alleviate the plight of those who would be destined for the workhouse the almshouses helped filled a vital disparity in society's wealth.

Today the association claims the houses are filling the same purpose, offering shelter for a small weekly 'maintenance fee' which differs from renting social housing as occupants are asked to waive their right to buy the property.



Ford's Hospital, Coventry, traditionally known as Grey Friars Hospital



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Almshouses in Temple Balsall, Solihull in West Midlands

Nick Phillips, the association's chief executive, told The Telegraph: 'Over the last 10 years there have been about 1,000 new almshouses built, that's 1,000 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.'

The almshouse charity is governed by locally recruited, volunteer trustees.

The history of almshouses

Almshouses, originally called hospitals or bede houses, were first founded by religious orders to care for the poor in medieval times.

One of the first, and the oldest still in existence is believed to be the Hospital of St Oswald in Worcester founded circa 990 - founded by the Bishop of Worcester (St Oswald) to 'minister to the sick, bury the dead, relieve the poor and give shelter to travelers who arrived after the city gates had closed at night'.

By the mid-1500s there were about 800 medieval hospitals across the country, but the dissolution of the monasteries meant many were sold off to landowners or left to ruin.



Ford's Hospital, Coventry, traditionally known as Grey Friars Hospital. 16th-century half-timbered almshouse in Greyfriar's Lane, Coventry. Founded in 1509 to provide accommodation for six elderly people

During the sixteenth century medieval craft guilds founded homes for their elderly members to live out their lives.

Today, links with the City Livery Companies remain strong, with many still retaining their own almshouses - famous among these was the Mercer, Richard (Dick) Whittington.

Socially conscious charitable benefactors came from all walks of life; Kings and Queens, Archbishops and clergy, the aristocracy, merchants and liverymen - however many of whom wanted to secure their own 'salvation' by donating.

During the Victorian era housing became a huge social problem as people migrated to towns looking for work.

Scandalous conditions of the workhouses inspired wealthy philanthropists to endow almshouses, generally for their local area and in groups of 6-12 dwellings. It is estimated that some 30% of current almshouses were founded during this period.

Source: almshouses.org