



ESSEX LIFE

Secrets of Essex almshouses



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Bestowing unique and charming, yet affordable housing to the elderly for 1,000 years, *Denise Marshall* takes a closer look at the historic significance of the humble almshouse

What is an almshouse?

There are more than 30,000 almshouses in the UK, with 71 quaint dwellings dotted across Essex, all protected from redevelopment due to their charity status. In Medieval times many had the name 'hospital', serving as a refuge for retired folk in need. The oldest surviving almshouse in use is St Oswald in Worcester, founded in 990. Thousands have been lost throughout Europe, except in Holland where 50 remain.

[The story behind Essex's charming and affordable almshouses | Great British Life](https://www.greatbritishlife.co.uk/lifestyle/heritage/secrets-of-essex-almshouses-9096324)
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Thaxted windmill and almshouses - Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

With their intriguing Elizabethan style, many buildings add remarkable beauty to our landscape, without commanding huge rents for independent locals. Tudor characteristics include clock towers, statues and even wooden guttering.

Just last year, nine new almshouses were officially opened at St Mary Magdalen House in Colchester, and 2021 also marked the 75th anniversary of the Almshouse Association. The association supports the 1,600 independent organisations that manage and maintain this non-profit accommodation. With Prince Charles as their Royal Patron, they support dwellings for 36,000 people.



Prince Charles is patron of the Almshouses Association - Credit: Richard Gray

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Like many such lodgings, the current South Weald almshouses in Brentwood were built in the 1850s - 12 residences overlooking a carefully tended communal green. The focal point is a central intimate chapel, with a striking Gothic-style window and just enough pew space to seat all residents if they wish.

An old water pump still stands, enclosed under an intricate well-head building. Inscribed at the top is bible reference Proverbs 17:14; 'The beginning of strife is when one letteth out water; therefore leave off contention before it be meddled with.' The moral being, meddling has the same impact as flooding water.

These Victorian structures did not receive piped water until the 1920s, and gas was not connected until 1989, but almshouses have been present in the village since 1567 due to the generous will of Sir Anthony Browne, a lawyer and Lord of the Manor of South Weald.

Who lives in almshouses?



John Samuel, almshouse resident - Credit: Denise Marshall

Resident of the South Weald Almshouses for 17 years, John Samuel, 86, is a pillar of the community and font of knowledge on local history. Here he explains about life at the heart of the village and its links to the Medieval feudal system...

'Years ago, when you got too old to work on the land or in the main house, they'd look for someone younger, but had to offer the loyal employee a house,' explains John, an agricultural expert. 'Rather than kick a servant out, they'd give them a place that would give them a gateway to heaven because they'd done a very good thing.'

'Most of the livery companies in the city have got almshouses. In the 1700s, the trustee would have been the Squire of the Tower family. (The Towers oversaw five almshouses on their land from 1752, built ten more and lived on the estate until it was sold in 1946).'

'It's very plain in the almshouse chapel, but there are two beautiful small paintings. One is of Madame Belli (wife of a former Vicar), and the other is a painting of the churchyard. There's a little house to the side, no longer there, possibly where the Curate may have lived.'

'Pre-Covid, we had a service in there once a month given by the local Vicar, Jane Bradbury, some choristers, a married couple and myself, out of 16 residents. I used to do tea and biscuits.'



South Weald - Credit: Denise Marshall

John has had strong connections to South Weald since 1945 when he moved from Romford aged nine, but he and his family enjoyed long country walks in the area from much earlier. 'I lived in the Verger's cottage from 1986 to 1996 (former home of the St. Peter's school keeper). Then when retired, I lived on a boat until 2006, and I've been here in the almshouses ever since.

'I was working in London in the 1980s as head of the mail office at BP, and I was made redundant. They had a lady Verger, but needed someone younger and I'd been in the church choir for many years so they offered me the job. I had a pretty good pension and was paid £125 a month, the cottage and telephone were free. I absolutely loved it and lived with my son there.

'On duty 24 hours a day, I've been in the church all hours of the night when a mouse has set off the alarms. I've crossed the road in bare feet, with no need to put the light on. I know exactly where I am in there.

'I'd once been offered a place as an almshouse trustee, but the Vicar told me, "when you retire as Verger, you won't get an almshouse if you're a trustee".'

John has fascinating memories of South Weald before the nearby M25 was built in 1975; it was a world of few cars, and abundant wildlife. 'Agriculture is my first love so I when I left school, I began working on the farms to find out what I really wanted to do, he explains. 'There were seven hospitals in Brentwood at one time, as it's high up with good fresh air. I got a job at St Faith's where the BT offices are now, as they had their own farm. Then I got a job at Warley hospital as a kitchen boy.

'After being posted at the catering corps in London for national service, I went back to Warley and played bowls for the hospital. People from all walks of life drank in The Bull pub. We might not have gone to university but our education cost us a fortune. We weren't drunk, but we were in there a lot. I even ran The Bull in the mid '60s while the tenants were away on holiday. That was in the days of wooden barrels.'

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John points out the incredible heritage almshouses hold. 'There's still money coming from the will of Dick Whittington, (via the Charity of Sir Richard Whittington), being used for almshouses and guilds, due to the way it's been invested.' Lord Mayor of London four times, Whittington didn't have any children and left his fortune to help the poor and needy.

The headmaster of Brentwood School is also one of the seven South Weald trustees, as stipulated in Sir Anthony's document from 1563, and the school makes donations towards maintenance costs.

'Each year, we are invited to a tea party at Brentwood with other almshouse residents,' reveals John. 'The children will perform, and I always have to sing two or three songs. I sung a duet with a girl once, which is on YouTube. I love that school.'

With hugely inflated property prices, the almshouses mean John gets to enjoy his retirement where he belongs. 'Each home is ideal for one person, but there are currently four couples. There's a shower room, living room, bedroom and a small yard big enough for potted shrubs. Fourteen horseboxes pass through the village every day to Navestock and Noak Hill, plus lorries and vans. You used to see six or seven bird's nests on the way to school, and we never worried about traffic in the quiet lanes.

'But I get to see my daughter every day as she works at the school opposite, and my grandsons. The church and cricket club are a short walk. I only left the choir four years ago when I realised I shouldn't really be singing anymore. You just know. I was pretty good in my day.'

What does the Almshouses Association do?



Nick Phillips, CEO Almshouses Association - Credit: David Jensen / Almshouses Association

CEO of the Almshouses Association, Nick Phillips, is a surveyor, previously employed by the National Trust. He reveals just how special this accommodation is...

'Almshouses have always been outside the system and the oldest form of charity in the country. They are all independent charities given as legacies, and they run on compassion and companionship.

'There are still councils that don't recognise almshouses as affordable housing and yet they are almost always the most affordable form in the region. There's a real growth of almshouses being built in Essex.'

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Nick is passionate about raising the profile of almshouses to encourage more to appreciate the security they grant to older generations. Likewise, he is keen to meet modern needs, and reach out to young people.

‘There are some almshouses by the river in Greenwich and when you talk to residents about the value of living there, they may be living in these wonderful historic buildings, but the most important thing to them is their neighbours. As an organisation we move forward; we’re getting younger people into almshouses, families, but the buildings themselves are such a valuable part of our history.



Little Easton almshouses - Credit: Acabashi / Wikimedia

‘It really is a great honour to have the Prince of Wales as Patron. My predecessors spoke to the Royal household and he was interested enough and generous enough to put his patronage behind the association. We are also fortunate enough to have the Duke of Gloucester as our Vice Patron. During Covid, they both contacted me to find out how our members were doing and offered their spiritual support.’

The history of how the association came to be, is also fascinating. ‘In 1946, a group of people interested in almshouses met in London as the smouldering embers of the city were still getting over the bombing of the war and said, “this wonderful form of valuable housing could be lost if we don’t network together”, so they started with three or four London almshouses and it just grew astonishingly quickly.

‘The country was looking at the state to do everything for them after the war; the welfare state, the health service, this new beacon of hope, and some thought, do we really need this 1,000-year model of housing when there’s council housing being promised?

‘So, this group of people said, hang on, almshouses do something different. They provide not only a roof over the head, but a sense of community and fellowship that won’t be offered by the welfare state.

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'In rural areas, they are often the only form of local affordable housing. Almost every MP has an almshouse in their constituency, scattered through market towns and villages. They were part of the fabric of society.'

There are stark contrasts between almshouses and other forms of social housing. And while their value may be overlooked, they can never be forgotten.



Almshouses at Churchgate Street, Harlow - Credit: Acabashi / Wikimedia

'Almshouses can't be sold off by law,' reiterates Nick. 'For as long as it's needed, it's there. They are unique in their legal status, protected in the long term. Some of our members are finding running these buildings very expensive. We provide them with grants and loans, and we fundraise in order to help our members maintain their historic buildings.'

'There are a growing number of people in desperate housing need. One thing I can't fathom is, while the philanthropists have stepped forward through the centuries, where are they now? Why aren't they setting up new almshouses for young homeless people and people leaving care? Or for refugees? Where are today's philanthropists?'

'If they came forward, we would welcome them with open arms.'

To support the Almshouses Association visit almshouses.org/donate

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