

Centuries of supporting independence

There are almshouses all over Wiltshire and many of us have passed one wondering who lives there and where they came from. In the first of three articles Gary Lawrence takes a look into their world, beginning with a visit to one of the county's oldest.



SALISBURY IS humming with its usual late morning hubbub and the occasional wail of a siren punctuates the general roar of the traffic in and around the city. But Winifred Alford's sitting room, just a stone's throw from the city centre, is an oasis of calm as she watches the birds hop across manicured lawns.

Her well-ordered, handsomely decorated home lies within the walls of the College of Matrons, a stately 339-year-old building just beyond the gates of the Cathedral Close. Its impressive frontage, topped by a cupola and bearing the Royal coat of arms is much gawped at by tourists and locals alike and at any point of the day there are several taking pictures and wondering what lies beyond its main door.

The college is one of 39 almshouses in Wiltshire registered with the Almshouse Association offering sheltered accommodation in a variety of buildings – ranging in age from hundreds of years to just a few. Salisbury has the largest concentration with 13 in and around the city. Each is run by a charity, some will be responsible for just one or two buildings and a handful of homes, while others oversee a whole range. Most are for older people on their own but some house couples and others offer low cost housing to young families.

Winifred, an 88-year-old former hospital almoner (latterly known as a medical social worker) has lived at the College of Matrons for 18 years after moving from Donhead St Andrew near Shaftesbury when she felt unable to live on her own somewhere so remote. She, like hundreds of others, has found somewhere to live that not only offers affordable accommodation but a place in a community. Hers is one of six three-storey, two-bedroomed homes alongside a two-bedroomed and a one-bedroomed cottage in one building at the college, with a further five one bedroomed flats and two two-bedroomed flats in the converted 16th century town house next door.

The 339 year old College of Matrons building.



Above: Former Bishop of Salisbury Seth Ward.
Right: The College is found just beyond the High Street gate.



Hers and her neighbours' world is both secluded and secure. Stepping through that main door leads the visitor into an entrance hall with a front door on either side. Continuing through takes you into a beautiful garden, resplendent with flower beds, lawns on either side of a central path that are sheltered by trees.

"I feel very fortunate to live here, it is a beautiful building and it has so much history" says Winifred gazing across the lawn to a stunning view of the cathedral spire. "I feel secure, I don't have to worry about the upkeep or maintenance of a home and there are people close by should they be needed."

The college came into being, maybe for not entirely philanthropic reasons, in 1682 when then Bishop of Salisbury Seth Ward decided a home and pension was needed for widows of the clergy's diocese. It is said that he had one particular widow in mind when he turned over the site of a former chantry – just a short stroll from the cathedral – and granted buildings and farmland to the venture so that it would have an annual income.

Ten cottages were built and filled with widows from the diocese, which then stretched as far as Exeter. The widows were expected to attend services twice daily and considered so delicate they were never allowed into the city without a chaperone.

The matrons received a weekly pension of 6s and to qualify for living there had to be at least 50 and have an income of less than £10 a year.

Over the years the criteria was extended, possibly due to a shortage of widows, to include unmarried daughters of the clergy and, whenever that still didn't produce sufficient occupancy, the area was extended to neighbouring dioceses so that now eligible folk can hail from Bath and Wells, Winchester, Portsmouth, Exeter and Truro.





Winifred Alford from Donhead St Andrew has lived at the College for the past 18 years, pictured here in its beautiful gardens.

Vacancies, says Nick, tend to come in batches – five homes became available when two occupants died and three went into a care home. The process for finding new ones differs only slightly in most almshouses.

Would-be residents' learn of vacancies either through the college, the Almshouse Association or housing associations' websites or via the Salisbury Diocese's *Grapevine* newsletter. There is often a list of people needing accommodation but, stresses Nick, it is not a waiting list as such because homes are not occupied on a first come first served basis, but according to need.

Applicants are assessed for eligibility and Nick checks medical records for any conditions that might impact on staff or neighbours. "If they can live independently they can come here. If they need carers, that's fine but if they need carers to stay overnight we can't accommodate them," he says: "We care about people, but we don't care for them."

He then interviews each applicant in person to find out more about their reasons for wanting. "A lot of people just want to live in the Cathedral Close," he says. Before making a recommendation to the trustees for a final nod, he has to be sure the prospective occupant will benefit from being there.

"We have to make sure that they are the sort of people we can accept and the sort we would want to accept," he says. "Someone who accepts that they are living in a community and that they are going to have to get on with their neighbours."

Residents are not tenants, they live at the college under a licence to occupy, similar to the rules of tied housing. They pay a maintenance contribution of £445 a month, in exchange for which they get their accommodation plus heating, electricity, water, an emergency care line, the services of a full-time warden and maintenance of the property and gardens.

Each vacant home is completely redecorated before they are re-occupied with kitchens and bathrooms replaced with more modern upgrades when deemed necessary. A refurbishment can cost up to £25,000 because of the building's Grade I listed status.

Talking to Winifred there is a sense that for those whose application is accepted, it is like winning life's lottery. She says: "I am very fortunate to live in this home because I have so little to worry about now. I have the garden where I can feed the birds and I am away from the road so it is peaceful. My life is very settled now." WL

- *Next month: The Salisbury City Hospital Charity's 13 almshouses. For more information about the Almshouses Association: www.almshouses.org*

In 1869 the building was modernised and two wings added, at the same time reducing the number of homes to eight and after the Second World War changes in church pensions and the introduction of the Welfare State made life better for clergy widows so the residency criteria was altered to "women in need – both financial and emotional".

In 1980 the adjacent town house, formerly accommodation for the St Michael's teacher training college that is now Salisbury Museum, was acquired, raising the number of units to 15. Then in 1997, thanks to the sale of a farm, the college built 12 flats at St John's priory in Wilton to bring its homes total to 27.

Nick Stiven became steward of the college in 2014 after many years as bursar at Chafyn Grove School in the city. He has seen a gradual modernisation of the historic building's plumbing and insulation but believes the real benefit remains its sense of community.

"You can expect someone to be here 20 years at least if they started off relatively young, are fit and are capable of looking after themselves," he says. "Almshouses have a reputation for prolonging life – you don't

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really have to worry about money or the building falling apart.”

Studies commissioned by the Almshouse Association show that people living independently in almshouses are healthier, happier, and live longer.

Winifred is ample proof of this, she only stopped driving just before the pandemic and used to volunteer at homeless charity Alabare'. "The age range has dropped in my time here and it affects the dynamic, but I am happy enough with it," she says. "We have a huge diversity of people here – we have a clergywoman and there's a lady who used to run a crocodile farm."