

Providing a safe haven over the centuries

In the second of his features looking at Wiltshire's almshouses Gary Lawrence visits the county's largest organisation and discovers it provides housing, security and, just as importantly, hope, for a huge variety of people of all ages.

SUSIE COEN'S desk is awash with a sea of files, letters and slips of paper that appear to ebb and flow like an incoming tide as her hands swish through them looking for a particular document. "It's always like this," she confesses but that's no wonder when you consider she is responsible for the wellbeing of more than 200 older or vulnerable people.

She is the clerk of Salisbury City Almshouses and Welfare Charities an umbrella charity that oversees 13 separate groups of almshouses dotted around the city

that are home to not only the older people you'd might expect to find living there but also younger families and those in between.

"We actually look after the whole age group," she says. "Primarily we are for the elderly but we have our general needs housing for young families and in Wilton where we have five bungalows and are building six one-bedroom houses we are focusing on the 40s to 50s age group.

"Younger people and old people can get housing relatively easily but for those in their 40s and 50s when they have no capital and

their landlord wants to sell, we are the only place they can get help."

The charity is an example of how almshouses are evolving to meet the needs of the areas they serve. Demand may hugely outstrip supply but that doesn't stop bodies like Susie's from trying to provide homes for those who have run out of options – whatever their age.

The reason, in part, for today's desk disarray is that it has been interview day. People who have been referred to the charity, or have referred themselves, are assessed for eligibility. In the case of the older peoples' homes they have to be over 60 (though younger people with a disability are considered), retired (although working up to 15 hours a week is permitted) and in the kind of financial situation that necessitates an almshouse.

They are then interviewed to gauge their level of independence, character and whether they will be a good fit. "Our aim is to get it right so that when somebody moves they are happy ever after," says Susie.

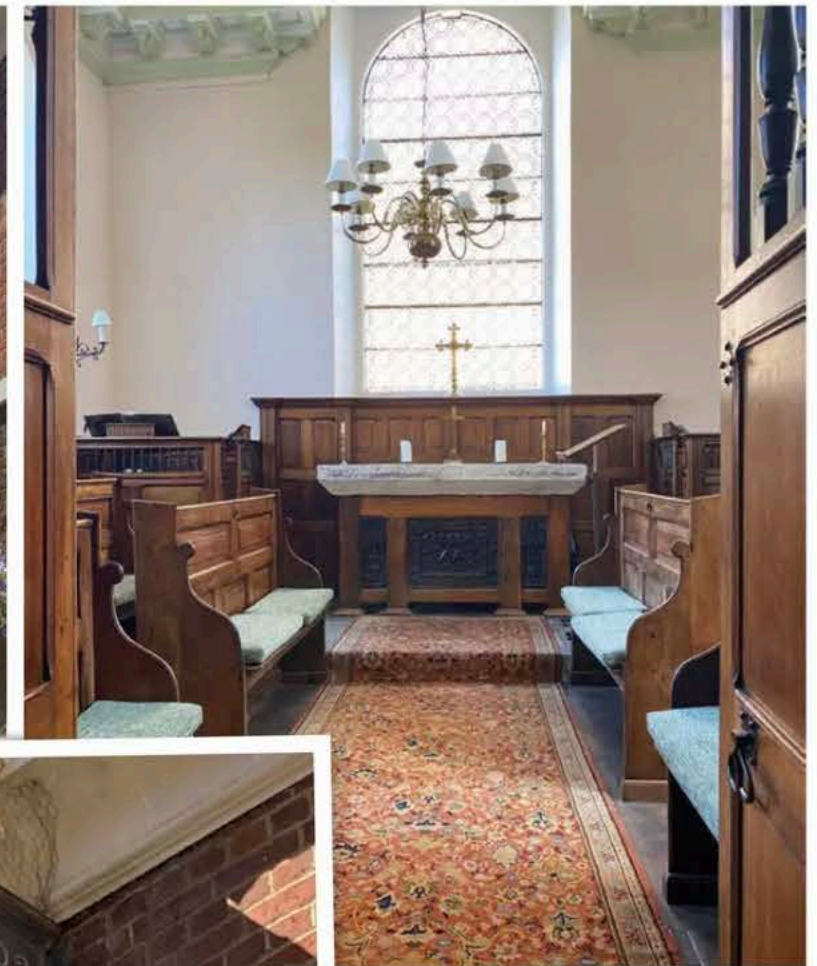
Younger families fall under the auspices of the charity's Buchanan Housing Charity, which has 24 units providing much-needed housing for young families and individuals who cannot afford private rented accommodation.

Because of the desperate shortage of housing of this type residents are reassessed each year. Says Susie: "Every year they have to reapply and if the trustees deem they can afford to rent privately they are given six months' notice. But if their finances haven't improved then they stay and they have that security."

A number of recent residents have been nurses from India who have been brought over to plug the desperate shortage of nurses in the NHS. Their salaries leave them unable to rent anywhere to bring their spouses and children over. With a rent of less than £500 a month they can afford to rebuild their lives.

"We've probably housed half a dozen, which means they can apply for a visa to bring their family over and get settled. After a

The picturesque Hussey's Almshouses in Castle Street, provides homes for single women.



year they reapply and quite often the husband has a job by then and they can afford to move on. It works well because it means we can house more."

As most of the sites have been gradually acquired from other charities they have inherited many of the original benefactors' eligibility criteria. The picturesque Hussey's Almshouses in Castle Street, which has eight houses and seven flats gathered around a beautiful courtyard garden, is only for single women who have been christened in the church of England.

When she isn't shuffling paperwork Susie can often be found out chatting to residents and wardens to keep an eye on how things are running. "I haven't done it as much as I'd like to since Covid but I do love to catch up with them all," she says.

She is based at the charity's, indeed the city's, oldest almshouse – Trinity Hospital in Trinity Street. It exists because of another woman who sought to care for others, though perhaps for different reasons. Agnes

Keith a former hospital kitchen worker and his wife Becky in their home at Trinity Hospital, built in the 1700s, it has a chapel which holds regular services and is open to visitors.

Bottenham was the landlady of The Rydedore Inn – now the Rai d'Or – and also owned and ran the brothel next door. Legend has it that this was the red light district of the city and gave nearby Love Lane its name.

Around 1379 Agnes appears to have had an attack of conscience and either formed or donated the land to found Trinity Hospital to house 12 poor residents and offer hospitality to 18 poorly travellers. Legend has it that her former prostitutes were among those who were taken in. Trinity became so popular with travellers the city eventually banned it from taking in any more in for fear it was attracting too many vagrants.

By that time Agnes was already dead and in the eyes of the church her efforts were deemed too little, too late. The famous Doom painting above the chancel in St



Jill Kraik at Thomas Taylor's Almshouse in Bedwin Street and Barry Ascough in his garden at Blechyndens Almshouse in Winchester Street.

Thomas' Church in the city centre, which depicts the day of reckoning, is said to show poor Agnes, risen from the chill of her coffin, being led to distinctly warmer climes down below.

Today the Grade I listed Trinity Hospital has 22 flats, having been rebuilt in the 1700s extended in the 1980s. An impressive entrance looked over by a sundial opens onto a courtyard dominated by a clock tower. A doorway leads to the hospital's chapel, which still holds regular services and is open for visitors.

Among Trinity's residents are Keith and Becky Wilson, who were desperately trying to get out of a damp rented house that was affecting 70-year-old former hospital kitchen worker Keith's health until a chance conversation with a friend who knew about Trinity led to an application for a vacant flat.

An invitation to come and view it arrived just ten days later and Keith was so overcome with relief at finding such a perfect home he cried when he saw it for the first time. "I just lost it," he recalls on the sofa of their neat living room. "It is cosy and just enough for us, the staff here are really good and they look out for all of us."

The sense of community and the support of staff and neighbours is an important factor in the wellbeing of residents. "We have people who are incredibly lonely and really need company from people of their own ages," says Susie. "I would say that loneliness is one of the biggest diseases of old age."

"To see somebody in the morning and are able to just chat about the weather or share a problem they have, or being able to go down to the communal rooms where they can see someone, is invaluable."

It is a sentiment echoed by Jill Kraik at Thomas Taylor's Almshouse in Bedwin Street, Salisbury. "The lovely thing about being here is that you feel safe," she says. "There are nice people living all around and the staff are wonderful."

Her home is within the Grade I listed walls of the almshouse built in 1698 with £1,000 left in the will of alderman Thomas Taylor for the provision of homes for poor single men. The charity has recently refurbished the building, making seven flats into six.

There are even fewer at Blechyndens Almshouse in Winchester Street, built in 1628 with £566 1s. 3d left in the will of Margaret Blechynden for six poor women. Today Barry Ascough's tiny but well-appointed flat is one of three.

The 74-year-old former builder moved in five years ago after a relationship break-up left him homeless and penniless. "I ended up going to Age UK and they sent me here," he recalls. "I went to see the people there and explained my situation and they offered me a property so I took it straight away because I loved it."

"We are secure here, we don't get people wandering in. We are left to our own devices, but we know the warden's close by if you need them."

The keen gardener has gradually transformed the pretty courtyard into a riot of colour. "I love doing it, and it keeps the place looking lovely," he says.

Like many of the charity's residents, no matter what their age, Barry will often marvel at his good fortune to have ended up somewhere so idyllic. "I sometimes scratch my head because I used to work at an aerial fitters just along the road and I never even knew this place was here and now I am so lucky to live in it." WL

• *Next month: Two rural almshouses and what does the future hold for the sector? Find out more about Salisbury City Almshouses and Welfare Charities at salisburyalmshouses.co.uk and about the almshouse sector at almshouses.org.*