



View from here

They may sound like a quaint architectural anachronism but almshouses could be as relevant today as they ever were, says **Susy Smith**

A low-rise, very modern block of flats was built at one end of our high street in 2020. As my daughters were thinking about renting their own place, we eyed it with interest. We liked its contemporary style: simple shape, pale brick construction with striking cut-metal balconies, evidence of a roof terrace and two good cafés beneath. "That would be a cool place to live," said one of my girls. "I wonder what the flats are like inside." We never found out for, when I investigated further, I was surprised to learn that the residents in these flats are probably of retirement age, with limited financial means and a strong connection to the area. They pay a weekly maintenance contribution, which is similar to rent but different in law, and less than commercial rates would be. The flats, it turns out, are almshouses.

'Surely not?' I thought. Almshouses are, in my experience, splendid historic buildings with interesting features: a clocktower here, a sundial or statue there, and always a stone plaque commemorating the benefactor who bequeathed the land or paid to have them built for the local poor. The ones I know best are the Grade II-listed Hickey's Almshouses near Richmond in Surrey, which were built in 1834 in the Tudor Gothic style. I pass them regularly and stop to admire the architectural details. With their over-tall chimneys, stone mullioned windows and impressive crenelated frontage, they certainly cut a dash amid the surrounding shops and suburban housing stock.

This new block of flats couldn't be more different. Intrigued, I decided to investigate further. It turns out that almshouses are the oldest form of social housing, with a history of more than 1,000 years, but they are also of considerable relevance today. The Almshouse Association supports more than 1,600 independent member charities across the United Kingdom and these, in turn, provide homes for around 35,000 needy and vulnerable residents. What is even more pleasing is that these charities are governed by locally recruited volunteer trustees whose motives are purely altruistic. In case you are prompted to track down your local almshouses, bear in mind that they do not always use the word in their title: they may be called 'Hospital,' 'College' or 'Homes', according to the prevailing terminology when they were established. Hence, we have the Hospital of

St Oswald in Worcester, which was founded around 990 when religious orders cared for the poor. It is still in existence today.

Aside from archbishops and the clergy, other wealthy benefactors over the centuries have included kings and queens, the aristocracy, merchants and liverymen: most donated the land or property for the greater good of the community but some, it has been suggested, might have seen it as a means to secure divine redemption!

Today, many livery companies retain their own almshouses, while there are others for retired fishermen, miners and retail workers among a host of other groups. Some almshouse charities, however, have no age restrictions and accommodate families, the disabled and key workers. I also discovered that, while around 30 per cent of almshouses were founded in urban areas due to lack of housing during the industrial expansion of the Georgian and Victorian eras, they are also built in the countryside. Indeed, in some areas today, almshouses remain the only provider of accommodation for those in need.

Residents - be they in town or country, in a bungalow, cottage or flat - are each provided with single bedroom accommodation and, usually, communal areas where they can spend time together. It was traditional to build the historical properties, such as our local Hickey's Almshouses, around three sides of a square, to give the occupants a sense of security and community, and to include a chapel where residents could worship together.

The Richmond Charities, administrators of our local almshouses, record 12 very varied developments built from 1811, through the 1920s, 40s, 80s and 90s, right up to our recent block of flats. I have walked past some of them without realising their origins. One is a neat row of bungalows built, I discover, in the 1980s. The buildings themselves are fairly unremarkable but what really draws the eye is their gardens. Every day I passed last summer, I would stop to admire the colourful and jubilant planting. Their residents clearly love having the space to express themselves.

How gratifying that, as well as providing a vital service to local parishes, even now, almshouses are of enough interest to make me, and my fashion-conscious daughters, stop and take a second look.

TO FIND OUT how you can support The Almshouse Association, go to almshouses.org/about-the-association. In the next issue, Susy muses on coastal memories. Meanwhile, follow her on Instagram @susysmithmacleod.

