

The importance of Alms-houses



Chalet-Trelour in Simmon's Park, Okehampton

Jan Goffey

13 Aug 2023 4:32 AM

The importance of Alms-houses

Did you know there are 15 alms-houses in Okehampton? Where are they, what are they, and why are they so beneficial?

What is an alms-house? – the recognised definition is:

‘An alms-house is a unit of residential accommodation (usually a house or flat) which belongs to a charity, is provided exclusively to meet the charity’s purposes (for example, the relief of financial need or infirmity) and is

occupied or is available for occupation under a licence by a qualified beneficiary.’

A recent report for the Alms-house Association has asserted that living in an alms-house increases the life expectancy of the residents by two years or more (on average!)

There have been alms-houses in the United Kingdom for more than 1000 years, with the oldest alms-house charity foundation still in existence being the Hospital of St Oswald in Worcester, founded in 990. They are the earliest form of social housing and originally set up by the Monasteries. Many were called hospitals where the frail and elderly could be safely housed and looked after. This was because many people lived with their employer or in a tied cottage (for the employed worker and his family) so when people became too old or frail to work, they were homeless if they had no family to look after them.

In the Middle Ages, the merchants and gentry would leave money in their wills for the poor, either as an annual gift of clothing or to set up and maintain alms-houses. Here in Okehampton, we have several; the oldest being in Castle Road.

The plaque on the wall states: ‘Brocks Almshouse 1847 John Crotch Mayor’. But these cottages were originally built from a bequest left by Richard Brock and his widow Grace, who also left money in her will; £10 for repairs...in 1638.

From the Town Records of the time:

‘This £10 was received by the Towne Clerke who gave Mr Mayor a bill under his hand and seale for it, for a yeare and laid out for the profit of it 16s. (16 shillings, or 80p) which was bestowed in repaying Mr Brock’s Almshouse in Castel Lane.’

Britain has a long history of homelessness. As far back as the 7th century, Hlothære, King of Kent in Anglo Saxon times, passed laws to punish vagrants. Vagabonds and vagrants were homeless people who were forced to wander and beg, picking up casual work where they could; latterly called Tramps, because they tramped from place to place.

In the 16th century, estimates put the number of vagrants at 20,000 or more. And it was then that the state first tried to house vagrants rather than punish them. It began introducing bridewells – places meant to take vagrants in and train them for a profession, but which in reality were lock ups. Okehampton had one down by the East Okement; the small barred window in the riverbank wall can still be seen. By the 18th century, workhouses replaced the bridewells. The Castle Hospital was originally the town workhouse which became a hospital in the early 20th century. (Once the Memorial Hospital opened, the Castle Hospital became a place for the frail elderly.) People dreaded being sent to the workhouse, families were split up and segregated. Men were given ‘hard labour’, women worked usually in a laundry (here, on the opposite bank of the East Okement) and children were kept separately. (Read *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens for an account of life in a workhouse).

The lucky few were given an alms-house and ours were expanded by Sidney Simmons, our well known Town benefactor who bought two fields on Exeter Road, one to become the Town Memorial Hospital (since demolished to make way for the Medical Centre) and the adjoining field. This now has eight bungalows facing a central open area. The cottages so much admired in our lovely Simmons Park and Pleasure Ground are also alms-houses, courtesy of Mr Simmons.

For elderly residents, the fact that they have company, neighbours to chat to, and their home is theirs for life, lessens the stresses of being old and infirm which enables the longevity referred to in the report. Residents do not pay rent as they are not tenants. They are residents of the Charity that owns and maintains the property. Residents do, however, pay a monthly maintenance fee which covers the costs of maintaining these homes.

Simmons Homes Charity and The Okehampton United Charities are the owners of all Okehampton alms-houses and the current residents vary widely in age but all were deemed to fit the statutory eligibility when they applied. The main requirements are that applicants live in Okehampton, own no property and can demonstrate a need to be housed. Not all who apply are successful and the Trustees often have to make difficult choices. However, we are so lucky to have these alms-houses and to be part of International Historic Charitable Organisations that provide homes all over Europe for people in need.

<https://www.almshouses.org/news/study-finds-living-in-an-almshouse-boosts-life-expectancy>