



### What are almshouses?

Caroline Roberts explores the history of the almshouses that provided housing for the poor before the welfare state



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Almshouses represent the oldest form of social housing in the UK. They have provided charitable shelter for poor elderly people since medieval times, and these historic buildings can still be seen across the country. Some are grand structures; others consist of cottage rows or groups of dwellings clustered around a communal courtyard or garden. They often have an integral chapel, attractive architecture and traditional features such as statues of the founder, coats of arms, clocktowers and sundials.

## Medieval origins

The origins of almshouses lie in medieval 'hospitals' set up by religious orders to care for the sick and to provide refuge for travellers and pilgrims. By the mid-16th century, there were around 800 of these across the country. Many were sold or fell into ruin after the dissolution of the monasteries, though some early examples survive today.

In subsequent centuries, almshouses were more often founded by merchant and craft guilds or trade associations for members no longer able to work. The rise of the merchant classes also resulted in more individuals with the means to establish charitable institutions. Wealthy industrialists, church dignitaries, aristocrats and even royalty funded almshouses through endowments of money, property or land. One of the most famous, the Royal Hospital Chelsea, was commissioned by Charles II to care for army veterans. Opened in 1692, today it is home to some [300 Chelsea Pensioners](#).

Founders often set out criteria governing who could be admitted to their almshouse, as well as the principles on which it would be run. Applicants generally needed to be over 60 years old and unable to afford rent, of good character and living in the local area. Some almshouses were single sex; others accommodated both men and women in separate areas, while some admitted married couples.

Almshouses were governed by groups of volunteer trustees, often comprising people with a connection to the founder, local worthies and clergy. A resident master or steward, often a retired clergyman, was responsible for the day-to-day running, sometimes assisted by a matron who oversaw the domestic duties.

During the Georgian and Victorian eras, people flocked to towns and cities in search of work, and urban housing became a major social problem. The Victorian age, in particular, was a time of great philanthropy, when many almshouses were built. Of around 2,000 groups of almshouses occupied today, about a third date from Victorian times.

For many people in distress, the almshouse was a welcome alternative to the [workhouse](#), which was a place of last resort for the destitute. Workhouse conditions were harsh, with families separated and inmates living in prison-like conditions and forced to do long hours of menial work. Almshouse residents, though, were seen as the 'deserving poor' who had fallen on hard times. As well as a roof over their heads, they received a weekly living allowance. Unsurprisingly, places were highly sought after; there were long waiting lists, and contemporary local newspaper reports cited instances of more than 100 people queuing to apply for a vacancy.

Residents of early almshouses were often referred to as 'brothers', 'sisters' or 'bedesmen', reflecting those institutions' religious foundations. However, by the 19th century the term in common use was 'inmates' – a word that perhaps had fewer negative connotations than today. Each resident usually inhabited one room containing some simple furniture and a fireplace used for cooking, and was given a small allowance of money and fuel. Some supplemented that income by taking on domestic duties such as acting as a keyholder, supervising comings and goings, and ensuring that curfew was observed. Many almshouses also provided a new 'gown' at specified intervals – a cloak, perhaps adorned with the badge of the almshouse – to be worn by inmates when processing to church, where they might pray for the soul of the founder.

## Strict rules

Residents often had to abide by a strict set of rules or face possible eviction. One such list set out in 1850 by the committee of almshouses in [London's](#) Southwark district required almswomen to attend church punctually and to sweep outside their dwellings each morning before 10am. It was also specified that "None of the Almswomen shall at any time make use of blasphemous words, or any railing, bitter or uncharitable expressions", and none should get drunk, pilfer or "behave herself in any respect unseemly".

Unfortunately most residents left few or no personal records. Some occupant lists are available in local record offices or in the keeping of the relevant charity, and names appear in [census records](#). However, these were often compiled for the census taker by the almshouse master, not by the residents, so their accuracy isn't always reliable.

Individual personalities are more often brought to life in records of bad behaviour. For example, the minutes of an 1840 committee meeting of Southwark Charities records that: "Mary Scarr... was charged again with coming in late, intoxicated, and wantonly hazarding the burning of the place, by refusal to secure her light." She was duly expelled from the almshouse.

Sadly, some elderly people were evicted from almshouses through no fault of their own. It was all too common for a wife to be expelled when her husband died. It was a condition of residency that inmates were able to live independently, because few almshouses were able to provide care when residents became ill. The workhouse, on the other hand, had an [infirmery](#) – the final destination of many who became unable to look after themselves and had no family to fall back on. Those who developed dementia were removed to the workhouse or the local lunatic asylum. By the mid-19th century, the situation was improving somewhat as an increasing number of almshouses employed a resident nurse and the services of a doctor on a retainer.

During the 19th century, it emerged that some almshouses were financially able to support their elderly residents in comfort but chose to divert the money elsewhere. This resulted in a number of public scandals. Endowments made centuries before, particularly those involving land, increased in value over time, often generating significant income for charities. Yet some residents struggled on meagre allowances, sometimes specified long before by an original benefactor and not increased to account for inflation, while the master used the remaining income to fund his own comfortable lifestyle.

It was this scenario that inspired the plot of Anthony Trollope's 1855 novel *The Warden*, in which Rev Septimus Harding is shamed when it is revealed that he pays almsmen at the fictional Hiram's Hospital just £24 a year, taking £800 for himself. It's believed that Trollope was inspired by a real-life scandal in Winchester. Such cases were catalysts for the foundation of the Charity Commission in 1853, created to tackle corruption.

Not all almshouse charities fleeced their residents; many genuinely struggled to provide inmates with an adequate living allowance. Charity Commission reports from the second half of the 19th century show that many occupants received poor relief from the parish. Others worked or had working family members living in their accommodation; some even provided board and lodging for profit.

The 20th century and the advent of the welfare state brought many changes in provisions for almshouse residents. The introduction of old-age pensions in 1908 and the increasing availability of [healthcare](#) and social care prompted a shift to residents being supported by the state.

Nevertheless, almshouses continue to provide security and a strong sense of community. Today around 1,600 almshouse charities house about 36,000 residents, each paying a weekly maintenance contribution that is lower than commercial rent.