

## Almshouses in Kent - ancient and modern

27th September 2014

KENT LIFE



**By Sarah Sturt**

**The idea of an almshouse seems rather old-fashioned but for thousands of people throughout Kent their services are just as relevant today as they were hundreds of years ago.**

CAPTIONS

1302/5/8/9: Blair Gulland, new National Chairman of the Almshouse Association with Caroline Gambell, the charity's Clerk

1311/14: The latest Cutbush & Corrall houses

1317/1327: Older Cutbush & Corrall Almshouses in Maidstone's College Road

P1030523; The Foord Almshouses in Rochester

There are more almshouses in Kent than in any other county. And, as a group, almshouse charities are one of the biggest providers of long-term housing for people in financial need, yet their activities are surrounded by notions of the past and occur largely unnoticed.

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Blair Gulland, the new National Chairman for the Almshouse Association, explains that one of the reasons for this is that each individual charity is as unique as their original benefactor, making their overall concept difficult to summarise and therefore hard to publicise.

Blair gives the French Hospital in Rochester, whose residents need to prove they're of direct Huguenot or French Protestant descent, as a prime example of their publicity predicament.

"You think French Hospital – French? What are they doing in Kent? Hospital? What does that mean, is it NHS? Hospital is the old word for hospitality, for looking after a guest and not purely a medical term," he explains.

"As for needing to be able to prove your Huguenot descent – well, the immediate reaction is that there is no chance of an almshouse like that carrying on because it sounds so antiquated, but in actual fact they are full and have a waiting list."

There are 88 almshouse charities in Kent, who hold between a handful and several hundred properties, and each one was typically formed by a wealthy individual who wanted to help a particular sector of their local community.

St John's Hospital in Canterbury is one of the oldest almshouses in Britain and was set up just after the Norman invasion to house dispossessed, raped and pillaged Saxon women.

Others, with much more typical terms, were created to look after 'six poor parishioners' or 'widows and spinsters over the age of 50 in reduced circumstances.'

As National Chairman of the Almshouse Association, Blair now oversees 1800 of these unique charities which, having adapted their application criteria along with the times, now provide homes for approximately 40,000 people.

Due to the current economic climate, these privately funded organisations are finding themselves in great demand so it's fortunate that, although many of the original charities have folded due to a lack of funding, others are flourishing and even expanding.

One of these is the Cutbush and Corral Charity based in Maidstone. Set up in 1865 by Thomas Robert Cutbush, a Freeman of the Borough and a farmer from Yalding, the charity began life with the six terraced almshouses he'd built in the back garden of his house in King Street.

These were provided to look after 'decayed tradesmen or journeymen mechanics who had lived or carried on business in Maidstone for at least 20 years' and were bestowed alongside 47 houses in north-west London and some shops and houses based in south-east London. The income of these was to be used for maintenance purposes and for the provision of £52 per year to each resident.

In 1867, he created a second charity to build another six almshouses and provide additional charitable support. The solid financial investments provided by Thomas Robert Cutbush and his widow Mary have enabled the charity to fulfil its obligations and in recent years, grow significantly.

Having taken over four other, less financially secure, charities in the local area, Cutbush and Corral now owns 149 properties and, surprisingly, not all of them are old buildings.

As well as recently spending in the region of £500,000 refurbishing some existing properties opposite the museum in St. Faith's Street, the charity has also been busy creating new homes in the area.

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The most recent of these include Vinters Park, which won a Patron's award for Development, Design and Sustainability from HRH The Prince of Wales and, at the beginning of this year, a small development of six flats in collaboration with Golding Homes.

This development has been named Thomas Robert Gardens in honour of their founder and, bizarrely, shares a brick wall with the charity's very first terrace of almshouses.

Daphne Borer is one of Thomas Robert Gardens' new residents and says she first heard about almshouses about two years ago.

"Someone mentioned it to me because I was talking about the flat I was in and that it was getting expensive. I didn't know how I was going to manage if the rent went up and she asked whether I'd thought of applying. It didn't really occur to me. So I made some inquiries, had an interview and got on the list which was lovely."

Daphne's now had a chance to settle in and adds: "The people who actually live here are all very nice and the fact we have a garden so we can all come out and chat if the weather is nice is also good."

Caroline Gambell, the charity's Clerk, explains that although the charity provides the properties they are not, technically, landlords and the residents are licensees rather than tenants.

The residents are visited once a week by a scheme manager but live independently and are able to bring all their own belongings to their new home.

When the charity first began all the residents lived rent free and received a weekly allowance but, over the past few years, this has had to change and now all residents pay a weekly maintenance contribution.

The trustees of the charity are now committed to a period of refurbishment and Caroline believes that being able to be thoughtful and responsive is what makes the Cutbush and Corral Charity so special.

She adds: "A lot of people don't know what an almshouse is and if they are actually referred to one, they assume it's something they wouldn't be interested in.

"I also think it's a sign of the times that so many people find themselves in need of our help and qualify for our help at such a young age. We have people in their fifties now. Some of them have nothing and I think 'how has life got you to this stage?

"For one reason or another they've got no furniture, nothing, and they are just being housed in bedsits by the local council. That's what gives me a sense of satisfaction, when you can help somebody like that."

Not every almshouse charity is so financially secure, however, and the Almshouse Association has recently launched an appeal to raise funds. These will be used to provide small grants and interest-free loans to almshouse charities scattered across Britain and hopefully this, together with other incentives, will allow the almshouse movement to carry on their good work.

But whatever the future brings, it's incredible to think that the action of a few individuals centuries ago are making such a difference to our future.

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