



WELLS ALMSHOUSES

Historical Context of UK Almshouses

Before the introduction of the welfare state, almshouses were an important aid to homeless people, providing accommodation, clothing, fuel and medical care whilst promoting independence alongside the support of a local community. By the early 14th century the endowment of almshouses had become a popular form of charitable bequest by rich benefactors. Whilst some bequests were given in the spirit of philanthropy - by wealthy benefactors with a social conscience - they were not always as altruistic. In Medieval times, the bequests were sometimes made in an attempt to guarantee the benefactor a safe passage to heaven - in fact almshouses were sometimes referred to as bede-houses (bede was the Middle English word for prayer) as they included a chapel, where residents were required to attend regularly to pray for the soul of the benefactor.

Early almshouse accommodation was very simple, often amounting to a single-room cell with shared washing and cooking facilities. Residents were required to wear a uniform and follow strict rules, which were supervised by a master, chaplain, lecturer, reader, Matron or mother.

Many monastic almshouses disappeared during Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-40). However, almshouses continued to be established in many towns and villages following the Reformation. Many almshouses still survive from the 17th and 18th centuries and many more were established in the 19th century. King Athelstan built the first almshouse in York in about 900AD. The Hospital of St Cross in Winchester (dating from 1132) is the earliest one still in operation today.

21st Century Almshouses

There are over 2,000 British almshouses still in existence, mainly run by charities, providing accommodation for more than 36,000 people. Over 30% of almshouses occupy listed buildings.

The Almshouses in Wells

Five almshouses are still in use in Wells. These are named after their founders – Bubwith’s, Still’s, Brick’s, Willes’ and Llewellyn’s.

The almshouse buildings have been rebuilt many times in their history but are still known by the people of Wells as Bubwith’s, Still’s, Brick’s and Willes’ (forming the complex behind St Cuthbert’s Church) and Llewellyn’s (situated in Priest Row, opposite).

Bubwith’s Almshouse

Bubwith’s Almshouse (referred to in the original Deeds as Briggstreet Hospital) is the earliest of the five almshouses in Wells. It was designed as a complete community, rather than just accommodation.



Figure 1 Bubwith's Almshouse with the back of Brick's to the left of the picture © 2017 M.Roberts

On his death in 1424, Nicholas Bubwith (former Bishop of Bath and Wells and Treasurer to King Henry IV) bequeathed £500 for the creation of an almshouse, with chapel, to provide 24 places for the poor of the town.

However, the Charity Commissioners’ Report of 1819 records that this sum in fact only supported 18.



Figure 2 The walled garden of Bubwith's Almshouse. The building with the two white doors in it is now used as a garden shed but was the original almshouse mortuary. © 2017 M. Roberts

The site was provided by the town and the building paid for by the dean and chapter. It was built in 1436, and by 1454 its estate had accumulated around 11 additional properties in the town.

By 1819, the originally harsh conditions had improved considerably for the 'inmates' (residents were referred to as this until the middle of the 20th century), and in their 1819 Report, the Charity Commissioners congratulate the management on the efficient running of the almshouse and care of the residents.

The accommodation was originally laid out as a central corridor with single room cells off each side for the inmates, a Guild room at one end and the Chapel at the other. The Guild room was used as a common room for the inmates, as the Trustees' boardroom, and as a meeting room for councillors (until the Town Hall was built in 1779). A weekly service was held in the Chapel for residents. By 1819, as reported in the Charity Commissioners' Report, the cells had been enlarged to apartments, some equipped with fireplaces. There was a shared kitchen with a fire for cooking (the fuel for which was provided by the trustees) and use of water pumps.

In 1654, the United Charity School was founded and based in Bubwith's Almshouse. The classroom of fourteen boys was the beginning of what later became Wells Blue School.

Major restoration was carried out to Bubwith's original almshouse in 1850. This building work was carried out under the direction of Bishop Bagot, and his armorial arms are depicted in the stained glass east window of the chapel, along with those of the three founders: Bishops Bubwith, Still and Willes.



Figure 3 East Window. © 2017 M. Roberts

By 1866 there were 30 occupants residing in



Figure 4 'House of Easement' - Bubwith's outside toilet © 2017 M. Roberts

Bubwith's Almshouses - 18 from Bubwith's bequest, the remainder from further bequests (Still and Willes). Each resident received 5s per week, plus annual donations from the Dean and Chapter (1s 6d) and the trustees (1s). Clothing provision for men consisted of two shirts per year and a coat and hat every alternate year; women received two shifts each year and a gown and bonnet every other year.

The 1922 Rules for Inmates (see Appendix I) give a snapshot of conditions at Bubwith's at that time, including the facilities

provided. There were two kitchens – the downstairs one available for both men and women to use, and the upstairs one restricted to women only. There was also a wash-house for women to use *‘...at times to be arranged by the Matron, but not on Sundays. As the noise of the mangle disturbs those in the men’s kitchen, it is not to be used between 1 and 4 o’clock in the afternoon.’*¹ Toilets were also segregated – women inside, men outside. The outside toilet was referred to as ‘The House of Easement’

Still’s Almshouse



Figure 5 Still's Almshouse © 2017 M. Roberts

Bubwith’s Almshouse was first extended in 1607 - Bishop Still (who had built his fortunes from investments in the lead mines around the Mendip Hills) bequeathed £500 to help support the existing residents and to provide additional accommodation for six more. Three years later the houses were built and occupied.

Brick’s Almshouse

Walter Brick (a woollen draper and burgess of the city) proposed a further almshouse for four people in 1636 – this was created within a year on a site in the garden of Bubwith’s Almshouse. “The combined Bubwith’s, Still’s and Brick’s complex was often known as the Old Almshouse from that time.”²

In 1999, a chance discovery in a local solicitor’s strong room revealed a deed box containing the archives of Brick’s Almshouse. The deed was discovered intact and sealed with the unbroken seals of the nine people who signed it. Eight of the nine documents were in small carved wooden holders. The deed states that the four residents (aged at least 50) should each receive 2s a week from the Trustees. In addition, clothing should be provided every second Christmas - *‘One gowne of a russet colour of the value of twelve shillings’* -and also 4 sacks of coal per person. It also details the items that the residents should provide: *‘one flocke bedd, one Bolster, one coverledd, one pair of sheets, one small kettle and one dish and spoon’*. These were to remain in the house

¹ Wells Old Almshouse Rules for Inmates

² T. Scrase, *Wells. A Small City* (Tempus, Stroud, 2006), p. 91.

and be sold upon the resident's death, with the proceeds distributed among the 3 remaining residents.

A striking architectural feature on the front of the building is a four-seat Sedilia. This was constructed as a place of prayer for the 4 original inhabitants, and is a rare exterior example as the Sedilia is usually found inside churches, for use by visiting clergy.



Figure 6 Sedilia, Brick's Almshouse.
© 2017 M. Roberts

Willes' Almshouse



Figure 7 Willes Almshouses © 2017 M. Roberts

The extended complex of Bubwith's, Still's and Brick's Almshouses was referred to as the Old Almshouse from 1636, and remained unchanged until 1777 when Bishop Edward Willes (a code breaker for King George II) left instructions in his will for additional accommodation for four more poor people of the city.

Llewellyn's Almshouse

In 1614 Henry Llewellyn, an alderman of the city, left £500 to build a series of almshouses on a separate site in Priest Row, to the north of St Cuthbert's Church. A further £100 was donated upon his mother's death. The



Figure 8 Llewellyn's Almshouse. Reproduced with kind permission of Wells Almshouses

dwellings were designated to provide accommodation for ten elderly women. Funding from the bequest was diverted to pay for a series of loans; it was a further 22 years before these almshouses were built. In 1629, the council bought land in Wedmore to support the new almshouse requested by Llewellyn's will, and in 1636 the almshouse

was at last built (after pressure put on the council by Llewellyn's heirs, who were suing for misdirection of funds).

The almshouses were overseen by a resident Matron, whose duties are laid out in a document dated May 1905 (see Appendix 2). She was '*...generally to superintend and look after the wellbeing of the Inmates*'³, which included visiting them each night and morning, locking up behind her at 10pm and opening up '*...at a reasonable time...*' each morning. She was responsible for cleaning the almshouses and nursing sick inmates '*...under the instruction and supervision of the Medical Officer*'. Her annual pay was £30, along with £5 annual coal allowance provided by the Trustees.

Harper's Almshouse

Archibald Harper (who was Mayor of Wells in 1702) left his house, 28 Chamberlain Street, half of his garden and £500 to build an almshouse for five poor woolcombers. This was the sixth almshouse to be built in Wells, but is no longer in use.

A plaque in a chimney stack recess with square hood mould, reads: "*Glory to God/Mr Archibald Harper one/of the eight masters & in/the year 1702 Mayor of/this city did by his last/Will and Testament settle/This house and 500 (pounds) upon/Trustees for the perpetual/use and maintenance of 5/poor men old decayed/ Wool-combers of this/City of Wells/Mr Harper died May 11/1713/Blessed are the merciful/Matt 5.7.*"

It is now a private residence, having been sold by the almshouse trust in 2005. At that time, the property consisted of: four flats with sitting room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom; one flat with Main Room and bathroom; a large garden.

The original stone mullioned windows remain and the plaque commemorating its history as an almshouse.

Charles' Almshouse

Only two further almshouse additions were made before the workhouse was established in the early 19th century. The first was in 1774, when Bubwith's Almshouse was extended for four more people, then in 1824 a seventh almshouse, Charles' Almshouse, was established for two poor women. Two cottages are the remains of William Charles'

³ Llewellyn's Almshouses Wells. Duties of Matron, 1905

Almshouse (within the Llewellyn complex), built from the sale of a large property in Priory Road.

Repairs and Re-Building

The Llewellyn's buildings we see today are not the original seventeenth-century ones but Victorian replacements. In 1886, the Charity Commissioners wrote to the Trustees of Llewellyn's requesting the provision of accommodation for five more people, and in 1887 five new almshouses were built (present day numbers 1 - 5) behind the original almshouse. The original almshouse was knocked down to give access to Priest Row.

In 1892 five more almshouses were built on the south side (present numbers 11 -15) and two years later a Matron's house (present number 16) was built. Present day numbers, 8-10, were built in 1901.

Although renovation continues today, the Bubwith site is protected by a Grade II* listing, which prevents certain modernisation, such as gas central heating. Llewellyn's is Grade II listed.

Today's Almshouses in Wells

The five almshouse buildings in the City of Wells provide 32 units of accommodation for older people (the majority are retired, however applicants over 50 are accepted). Together, they comprise three cottages and fourteen flats which are classed as 'older people's housing'.



Figure 10 the Guild Room retains some original furniture too. © 2017 M. Roberts

Today's residents (no longer referred to as 'inmates' of course!) are accommodated in self-contained units, and are responsible for their own water and electricity bills.

They also contribute a

weekly payment to the maintenance of all the almshouses.

However, residents are encouraged to live as a community and the facilities include communal areas (including the Guild



Figure 9 The Guild Room, Bubwith's with original ceiling and fireplace - now a social room for residents. © 2017 M. Roberts

Room in Bubwith, laundry and guest facilities).

Llewellyn's almshouses each have their own plot of garden and Bubwith's have communal shared gardens, which are maintained by residents and volunteers. The gardens have won many Wells in Bloom certificates. One former resident, Wilf Beer, tended the garden of Bubwith's Almshouse for over 25 years; his beautifully planted flower bed received a Level 5 award from the RHS.

Regular social events and activities are arranged to engage residents. In addition to a weekly chapel service, various outside activities are organised by Friends of Wells Almshouses (originally the Friends of Bubwith House, formed in 1982). Funds raised by the Friends have also contributed to decorating and equipment costs.

Originally built as separate unincorporated trusts, these charities were brought together in 2004 and the five almshouses became one charity - the City of Wells Almshouses Trust. A Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) was set up in 2014, and this now administers the original Trust. The Cathedral and Corporation are actively involved in the running of the Almshouses: The trustees always include the Dean of Wells Cathedral and the Mayor of Wells together with trustees nominated by the Chapter of the Cathedral and the Council of the City of Wells.

City of Wells Almshouses is also a registered housing association, regulated by the Charity Commission and by the Homes and Communities Agency. To qualify for an Almshouse in Wells, you must have a strong local connection to the city and be in housing and financial need.

In 2013, the City of Wells Almshouses' charitable status was changed from 'General needs' to 'Older People's Housing'. In 2015, the first resident was appointed to the board of Trustees, and is now able to play an active part in decision making.

The Almshouses are managed on a day to day basis by four part-time staff: the Chief Executive; the Scheme Manager; the Finance Officer/Trust Secretary and the Handyman.

The wooden door leading from Bubwith's Almshouse onto Chamberlain Street has a Benefactor's Board above (see figure 11), giving a list of everyone who has contributed over the years to the Almshouses. One benefactor, recorded as 'Mr Clement Tudway, Member of Parliament', represented the city for over 55 years.



Figure 12 Benefactors' Board.
© 2017 M. Roberts

Certain historical artefacts are still kept in the almshouses, including the Southworth Chest, which can be seen in the Chapel mezzanine. The chest is in two parts – an oak strong box (thought to date back to the early fifteenth century) and a painted wooden stand on which it rests. When Bubwith's Almshouse was first built, a Charter was drawn up (dated 1446), which refers to an alms box '*...the surplus of any over-possessiones of the said Hospital...should be placed in a common chest, with three locks and keys: one to be kept by the Mayor of Wells,*

another by the Chaplain, and the third by one of the Chapter of Wells.' Historians believe this to be the box that was used. The lid and sides are inscribed. (see Appendix 3). This painted chest is considered by furniture historians to be unique and is one of the oldest and most historically important pieces of secular furniture in Wells.



Figure 11 Southworth Chest. © 2017 M. Roberts

A book on the history of the Wells almshouses was written by Jean Imray, former Wells City Archivist and Museum Trustee. Sadly she died in 2015 before it was published, but it is hoped to bring it into print shortly

If you would like further information on the history of Wells and its buildings, you are welcome to contact or visit Wells City Archives (archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk) and Wells & Mendip Museum (admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk).

WELLS OLD ALMSHOUSE. RULES FOR INMATES.

- Rooms.** Each Inmate is entitled to a room (or, if married, to two rooms) but must provide his own furniture.
- Clothes.** A new hat and overcoat is provided when required for each man and a new bonnet and cloak for each woman, but in case of death the last hat and coat or bonnet and cloak are to be left for the next inmate.
- Linen.** Every year each inmate is supplied with material, to be made up and submitted to the Governor or Lady Visitor for inspection.
- Pay.** Each Inmate receives the weekly sum of seven shillings which is paid every Friday at 2 o'clock in the Men's Kitchen.
- Medical Attendance.** Medical attendance and medicine are provided for all inmates while in the Almshouse but not for their wives.
- Funerals.** On the death of an Inmate the sum of £5 5s. 0d. towards his funeral is paid by the Trustees to the undertaker. The Inmate's nearest relative takes his pay up to the first Friday after his death (less any fee paid for laying out). The funerals of inmates are to be attended by those who can walk and each then receives 2d. for refreshments.
- Residing.** Every Inmate must reside constantly and sleep in his house or room and keep it and himself clean and tidy, but leave of absence can be given by the Governor.
- Lodgers.** No Inmate is allowed to have any person to sleep or have meals in his room except his wife or except in case of serious illness.
- Closing Time.** No Inmate may stay out of the Almshouse after 9 o'clock in the evening from 1st November to 31st January, or after 10 o'clock from 1st February to 31st October.
- Visitors.** All persons visiting the Inmates must leave the Almshouse not later than 8 p.m. in the winter and not later than 9 p.m. in the summer.

Lamps.

No inmate is allowed to use spirit or oil lamps in his room.

Electric Light.

Electric Light is now provided in every room and Inmates must be careful to switch off the light when they leave their room; and all lights must be extinguished by 10.30 p.m. in the summer and 10 p.m. in the winter.

Kitchens.

The downstairs kitchen is for the use of all the men and for the women who live downstairs. The upstairs kitchen is for the women only, and the women may also use the Committee Room for sitting, reading and working.

Men having outside houses are not to use the inside kitchen for cooking without the permission of the Matron, but may sit there.

Chapel.

All who can do so are expected to attend the Chapel Services in the Almshouse.

Work.

All inmates who can do so, are expected to assist the Matron in garden and other work and in taking messages when required.

Laundry.

All women are entitled to the use of the wash-house at times to be arranged by the Matron but not on Sundays. As the noise of the mangle disturbs those in the men's kitchen, it is not to be used between 1 and 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

Closets.

The inside closets are for the use of the women only and the outside closets are for the use of the men.

Bath, etc.

The lavatories may be used by all inside inmates as also the Bath subject to arrangements by the Matron.

Matron's Orders.

Inmates must at all times obey the orders of the Matron and her assistant but can appeal to the Governor if they think such orders are unfair or unreasonable.

Penalties.

Any inmate, who does not conform to any of these rules or gives way to drink or does not behave properly, is liable to have all or part of his weekly pay stopped and after the first offence may be expelled by order of the Trustees.

GRANVILLE HARRIS,
GOVERNOR.

RULES AND ORDINANCES
 FOR
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE INMATES
 IN
LLEWELLYN'S & CHARLES'S ALMSHOUSES.

- 1.—THAT every person already chosen, or to be hereafter chosen, to take the benefits of these Charities shall always reside and lodge in the Almshouse set apart for such Person.
- 2.—THAT no Almsperson shall be absent from the Almshouse for a period exceeding twenty-four hours, without the consent in writing of the Trustees or some two or more of them, or of their Steward, but in special cases such consent may for any sufficient reason be given retrospectively after the absence has occurred.
- 3.—THAT the outward Door of the Premises shall be closed and locked by the Matron every Evening, at the hour of Ten.
- 4.—THAT the Almspeople shall attend Divine Service on Sundays at the Parish Church of Saint Cuthbert, in neat and clean order, unless prevented by illness or some other unavoidable cause. If any Inmate desires to attend habitually any other place of Worship, the permission of the Trustees must be obtained.
- 5.—No Almsperson shall let or part with the possession of the Room or Rooms allotted to her, or suffer any Stranger to occupy the same or any part thereof. Nor shall any Almsperson allow any Member of her Family to lodge or sleep in her Tenement or Room *without permission of the Matron.*
- 6.—If any Almsperson shall be guilty of insobriety, insubordination, breach of any of these Rules, or of immoral or unbecoming conduct, or shall become disqualified by alteration of pecuniary circumstances or from any other cause from retaining an appointment; or if in any case it should appear that any Almsperson has been appointed without having the required qualifications, the Trustees, upon proof of any or either of the before-mentioned circumstances to their satisfaction may remove such Almsperson, and take possession of the Tenement or Room occupied by her, and may proceed to appoint another Almsperson in her place, or in any such case (except that of disqualification) the Trustees may, if they so think fit, suspend the payment of the stipend to the Almsperson either wholly, or in part, during such time as they shall think fit and expedient.

**THE FOLLOWING ARE THE
 QUALIFICATIONS NECESSARY FOR BECOMING AN INMATE.**

THE Almspeople respectively shall be Poor Women of good character, who shall have resided in the City of Wells not less than three years next preceding the time of their appointment, and who, from age, ill-health, accident or infirmity, are unable to maintain themselves by their own exertions, with a preference for those persons, who being otherwise qualified as aforesaid, and not being or having been chargeable to any Parish, shall have become reduced by misfortune from better circumstances.

APPLICATIONS for admission to the Almshouses must be made to the Trustees or their Steward, either personally or in writing, and every applicant must be prepared with sufficient Testimonials (if required) and other evidence of her qualification for the appointment.

THE ACTING TRUSTEES ARE—

NAMES.	RESIDENCES.
JOSEPH GILES, Esq.	WOODBERRY COTTAGE, WELLS.
THE RIGHT HONORABLE AND RIGHT REV. BARON AUCKLAND, Lord Baron of Bath and Wells	THE PALACE, WELLS.
THE VERY REV. GEORGE HENRY SACHEVERELL JOHNSON, DEAN OF WELLS,	THE DEANERY, WELLS.
EDWIN LOVELL, Esq.	DENDER, AND CHAMBERLAIN ST., WELLS.
JOHN GIFFARD EVERETT, Esq., ...	ST. ANDREW STREET, WELLS.
HENRY WILLIAM LIVETT, Esq., ...	CHAMBERLAIN STREET, WELLS.

Steward,—MR. W. J. S. FOSTER,
 MARKET PLACE WELLS.

Appendix 2

LEWELLYN'S ALMSHOUSES WELLS.

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DUTIES OF MATRON.

-:---:0:---:0:---:0:---:0:---:-

To see the Rules and Ordinances for governing the Inmates are carried out and duly attended to.

To attend to the comforts of the Inmates so far as necessary and particularly to visit each one every night and morning.

To nurse and attend any sick Inmates under the instruction and supervision of the Medical Officer.

To properly clean and look after the Infirmary.

To see that the Inmates clean and properly attend to the Almshouses allotted to them and personally occupy the same.

To report at once to the Trustees or the Steward any breach of the Rules and Ordinances or any insobriety or insubordination immoral or unbecoming conduct by any Inmate.

To see that the ashes &c are removed periodically and not allowed to accumulate.

To attend the Meetings of the Trustees when required.

To lock the entrance gate of the premises every night at 10 o'clock and unlock it at a reasonable time every morning.

To report any neglect of duty by the person appointed to light the lamp clean the paths and remove the house refuse &c.

And generally to superintend and look after the well being of the Inmates.

TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

-:--:0:---:0:---:0:---:0:---:0:---:0:---:-

(1) The Trustees will pay the annual Stipend of £30 either weekly, monthly, or quarterly as decided upon.

(2) The Trustees will make an annual allowance of £5 for Coal.

(3) The Engagement to be determined at any time by the Trustees at their discretion.

By Order of the Trustees.

Steward.

1. Cathedral Green,

Wells.

May, 1905.

INSCRIPTIONS ON THE SOUTHWORTH CHEST

LEFT SIDE:

God and good Founders for poor hath done well
If faythe abyde wheare yt ought to dwell
But fydelbye fayling saye what be shall
The meanest must wane when ye mightye have all

INSIDE LID:

Lockes, keyes, this frame and chest
Forever in this place let rest.
As Henry Southworthes gift thought meet
Poores stocke and writings safe to keep.

RIGHT SIDE:

In yearlye accounts ye founder doth will
To rest ye gifte of ye Lord Bishop Still
Leaste by neglecte poores payments in neede
Be all but in worde and nothing in deede.

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