

# A History Of *Almshouses*

Olivia Greenway explores the history of these buildings and how they continue to help those in need to this day.



The Almshouse Association.

**Y**OU may have come across a small cluster of pretty buildings in our towns and cities, clustered together around a patch of green, and they may very well be almshouses.

According to a YouGov survey, 64% of people had no idea almshouses exist.

However, there are around 2,600 almshouses in the UK, providing homes for over 36,000 people in need and involving over 1,700 individual charities.

It's interesting to consider how they came

about and how attitudes to being poor have changed.

From the Middle Ages, poverty was seen as the individual's fault.

Vagabonds or those without work could be put in stocks for three days and then driven out of town.

During the Elizabethan period, the Poor Law devolved power to the parishes, which decided between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor.

Poverty was seen as a driver for work. By the early 19th century, the workhouse had become the only way for the poor to obtain relief.

Workhouses were made deliberately unpleasant to make sure they were a last resort. One only has to read Dickens and Trollope to know of the conditions.

Everything changed, though, in 1948 when the Poor Law was abolished



Louisa Cottages in Tring were built as almshouses between 1893 and 1901.

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and the welfare state came into being. For the first time, the state would offer assistance to everyone who needed help, as a right.

However, with state priority given to the young and those with families, almshouses continued to provide a much-needed permanent home for older people finding themselves alone in later life and with limited means. This is still the case today.

The first almshouses in the UK date from the 10th century, and were often attached to religious orders or hospitals.

Early almshouses were called "bede houses" or prayer houses. The main aim was to provide hospitality for those in need, which eventually included accommodation.

The three pillars of almshouses are safety, security and warmth, the warmth being both physical and emotional.

The deal was that if you were given accommodation, you had to pray regularly for the founder. Many were dissolved during the Reformation, but some survived and many have been established since.

Private benefactors left provision in their estate so almshouses could be built and their name live on.

Tradespeople recognised the need to look after their own communities when things go wrong, so they built almshouses, too.

All almshouses are now set up as charities, led by a board of trustees.

Almshouses support a neighbourhood community but residents live independently, paying a contribution towards the accommodation, usually at below market rates.

As they have been built over the centuries, around a third of almshouses are listed buildings of historic interest.

## "It was like winning the Lottery"



Norman May had been living in a bedsit for three years and his future felt bleak.

"When I heard that I was being offered an almshouse, I danced around my room," he

says. "When I viewed the flat, I was left speechless – it was like winning the Lottery."

"I moved in in October last year and it still feels like I am on holiday! I'm looking forward to the future again, making new friends and just enjoying life."

Another resident comments, "The very best thing about living in an almshouse is the fact I know my neighbours for the first time in years."

Aside from accommodation and friendship, almshouses usually organise activities for their residents, too.

Juliet – responsible for 140 almshouses – tells me they have a group that is looking at residents' family trees, a film club, an art group, a cookery club, and a whole raft of other interests, often suggested by residents.

She told me there is evidence that people's mental wellbeing benefits from social activity, not just physical activity.

Although almshouses only form a tiny fraction of housing provision in the UK, they play an essential role in so many older people's lives, enabling them to enjoy privacy at home but at the same time companionship. And that alone makes them something to treasure.



Hickey's Almshouses in Richmond.

Juliet Ames-Lewis

Of course, the fortunes of the charities running them have changed over the years. This is where the Almshouse Association comes in.

Celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, the Almshouse Association was set up to be a central body to support almshouses, to promote their work and liaise with government in the charities' best interests.

The association works closely with the Charity Commission, so is involved with all sorts of training, guidance and advice.

Nick Phillips, chief executive, says, "In the last decade over a thousand almshouses have been built, more than in any other time since the Victorian period."

It's not all good news, though. A few almshouse charities are struggling, mainly the smaller ones, which are sometimes reliant on voluntary staff.

They could join a larger group to get financial support or they may get help from the association, if it is felt to be for their long-term benefit.

The association has given over £1m this year in grants and loans to support

organisations in need.

There is no doubt that the almshouse model is highly successful. Research commissioned by the association has shown that people live on average four years longer in an almshouse than in other forms of social housing.

Juliet Ames-Lewis is Chief Executive of the Richmond Charities in London, which is a member of the Almshouse Association.

It's one of the "lucky" charities to have seen their fortunes improve over the years.

Richmond's association with royalty has always attracted the wealthy and they in turn wanted to

leave a lasting legacy in their town.

Although the Richmond Charities have some beautiful buildings, such as Hickey's, a new development of flats, with more planned, is found in nearby Twickenham.

"We have to build flats as land in Richmond is now prohibitively expensive," Juliet says.

"In any case, we need level accommodation (with lifts) with all the latest health and safety measures and wheelchair access so our residents can enjoy a home for life."

The flats are near shops and on bus routes and all have a communal open terrace with planters. ■



The new Wright's Almshouses in Twickenham.

Chantal Richards

## Trustees

Almshouses are available to anyone in need who fits the criteria of the particular charity. If you are in "housing need" or know someone who is, it is always worth contacting your local almshouse, according to Nick Phillips.

You usually need to be over an age threshold, capable of looking after yourself and have connections to the area and limited savings. The criteria vary from charity to charity.

One of the biggest issues they have nationally is finding good trustees, who help with deciding on the strategy and governance.

Few people know about almshouses and so their need for trustees is also overlooked. If you are interested in helping your local almshouse, it's a valuable thing to do and only need take up a little of your time every month. Find out more at [www.almshouses.org](http://www.almshouses.org) or call 01344 452922.