



Almshouses of Wantage

Tina Eyre, Sept 2021

What is an Almshouse?

An almshouse is a house provided by a charity to the poor, for no or minimal rent. Dating back to the 900s, almshouses are the oldest form of social housing.

Almshouses were usually set up when rich people gave money as a way of helping the poor. Once a person had been offered an almshouse he or she could normally live there for the rest of their life. They continue to provide an important service today.

75 years of the Almshouse Association

For 75 years, the Almshouse Association has been providing guidance, support and representation to over 1600 almshouse charities across the UK.

All almshouse charities are independently overseen by a board of local volunteers (trustees) who manage the day to day running and maintenance of the almshouses. There are or were several sets of almshouses in Wantage: the Newbury Street, Mill Street and Eagle Close and Stiles almshouses. In Childrey, there are the Fettiplace and Coventry Almshouses.

What was it like to live in an almshouse?

It is unclear how many people at a time lived in the early almshouses. They probably had one large or two small rooms each, and their rooms were their own private property. Various documents show locks for the rooms being provided or repaired.

Some people lost their pensions when they moved into the almshouses and these were probably housed for free, but others paid rent. From around 1837, the almspeople were paid pensions of £4 a year.

The governors selected people to live at the almshouses. They were described as “the respectable poor”, usually people who had previously owned their own houses, and who had never received poor relief. Often, they were tradesmen or craftsmen who, because of old-age, could no longer support themselves.

Wantage Town Governors

The Wantage Town Lands was a charity set up to help the poor of Wantage.

In the early days of the charity, some individuals were passing the charity's funds to their own families and friends, rather than those in need. Wantage inhabitants set up a petition to change this, leading to an Act of Parliament in 1598. As a result of this Act, the running of the charity was transferred to a group of 12 elected Governors, to ensure the funds were used appropriately.

Almshouses are one of the ways that the Wantage Town Lands Governors still use the charity's money to help the poor of Wantage today. They continue to provide support for the residents and to maintain the almshouses.

Below can be seen a poster from 1920 advertising a sale of property by the Governors. They were major land owners, renting out property to generate income for projects such as the almshouses.



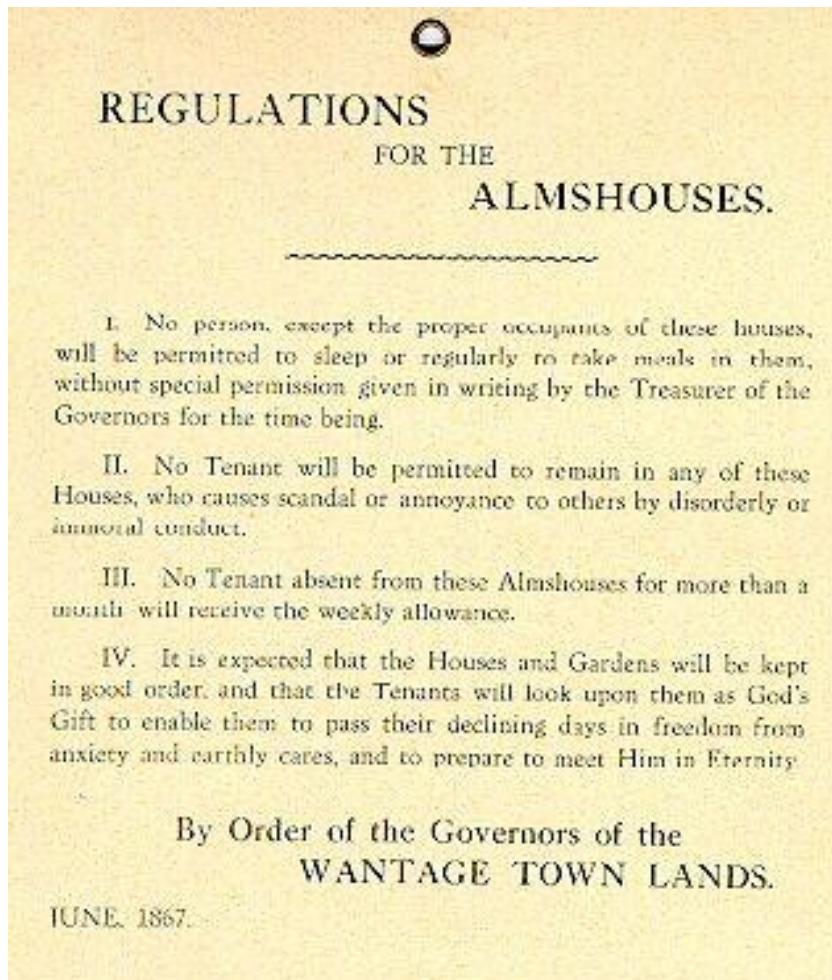
Official stamp of the Wantage Town Lands Governors

This stamp was used to emboss official documents with the seal of the Wantage Town Lands Governors. A sample of stamped paper is also shown. It has been used since 1920 when the original Elizabethan stamp was moved to the Berkshire Record Office.



Almshouse Rules

As shown in this list, there were rules that had to be followed to retain your place in an almshouse. The almshouses could not be shared, except by married couples or if a relative was require to live-in and care for the resident.



The Newbury Street Almshouses

The Wantage Town Governors have run almshouses since at least the early 1500s. Evidence can be found in various documents, the earliest being in 1526 when William Fettiplace bequeathed 20 shillings a year for its running. The building was located on Newbury Street, probably on the site of part of the old St Mary's School. We do not know who paid for its original construction. It appears to have been a substantial stone-built building, indicating a very wealthy benefactor.

The town Govenors paid for extensive repairs throughout the 1630s and for the building to be reroofed in slate in 1623. It is interesting that slate was used, at a time when the majority of local buildings were thatched.

In 1668 the Governors decided to turn the almshouse into a workhouse, so that residents would work to earn their keep. Robert Burchell, a Wantage cloth worker, was put in charge, presumably so that the poor could work in the cloth making trade. Part of the building was to be used as a house of correction for "the punishing of the obstinate poor." The use of the building as a workhouse seems to have only lasted for a short time. In 1691, major repairs were undertaken to convert the building back to an almshouse. In 1866, the 300 year old almshouses on Newbury Street, which were probably in considerable need of modernisation, were demolished and the land later sold.

The Mill Street Almshouses

From around 1720 the Town Governors were almshouses in Mill Street. They were originally thatched and have been rebuilt at least once in the 1870s.

Mains running water was installed in the Mill Street Almshouses in 1905- thankfully, since a 1902 report by the Inspector of Nuisances (a precursor of the public health inspector) found the well water to be “impure and unfit for drinking purposes.”

In 1935 the residents of the Mill Street houses were offered gas and electricity but preferred to continue cooking on a range and using oil lamps and candles for lighting.

Extensive renovations were carried out in the 1950s and 1960s. The 12 Mill Street houses were converted to 8 larger ones, with room for an indoor bathroom and extra living space.

Photograph of the Mill Street Almshouses, newly painted in July 2021.



The Eagle Almshouses

In 1832 Thomas Eagles purchased the meadow on Ormond Road and donated it to the Town Governors, on the condition that they use part of the land for almshouses. He asked that the almshouses be named the Eagles Alms Houses and be dedicated to his late wife who came from Wantage. The income from the remainder of the meadow that was not built upon was used to fund repairs to the almshouses.

The Eagle almshouses were not completed until 1867. Ten individual houses were built. They are described as having a living room, scullery and a passage with a wooden staircase to the upper floor bedroom(s) (it is unclear whether there was originally one or two bedrooms). At the back was a small enclosed yard with a 'closet', a well and a woodshed. The houses were connected to the town drainage but water was still obtained from the well until around 1920. For a short time, a nurse was appointed to live in one of the almshouses and care for the residents but this was ended in 1895 due to financial shortages.

In the early 1900s the almshouses were said to be in good repair and they were in considerable demand. It was not until 1978 when the Eagles houses were fully modernised, with the addition of indoor bathrooms, larger kitchens, gas cookers and gas central heating.

The Eagle Almshouses and their pump, taken in 1998



Stiles Almshouses

On his death in 1680, the wealthy merchant Robert Stiles donated a large sum of money for the building of almshouses. Part of the money was used to purchase other property, the income from which could be used for the upkeep of the almshouses and to provide a small allowance to the almspeople. Other people also donated property to provide an income to the almshouses.

Originally the almshouses, on Newbury Street, were designed for the use of men, but quite early on women seem to have been admitted. In 1732, several ladies were recorded in the Vestry minutes as being required to help “Old Green” out of his bed and wash his clothes. If they didn’t comply, they were to be evicted from their almshouses.

From the 1760s, a donation of £2 a year, known as the Newbury Bread money, was paid to the churchwardens and used to support the poor of Wantage and later the Stiles Almshouses. The origin of the money or reason for its payment from the Newbury Almshouse charity to Wantage is unclear. It continued to be part of the Stiles income until at least 1958.

Several charities appear to have given money for allowances for the almspeople. Through the 1800s until the early 1900s, they were given an allowance of around 4s a week, coal, plus at Christmas an extra 5s and £1 towards warm clothing by the Wantage churchwardens. The Styles Almshouses remained in high demand and priority was given to those who had been long-time residents of Wantage.

In 1958, a scheme was set up known as the ‘Almshouses of Robert Stiles’ and management of the almshouses and associated charities passed from the Wantage churchwardens to the Trustees of this scheme. The trustees set about making improvements since the 12

almshouses had no indoor bathrooms or sanitation. The 12 houses were redeveloped into 8 larger ones with indoor WCs at a cost of around £10000. This was a very large sum for charity with a small income to find and a mortgage had to be obtained. Costs were exacerbated by the fact that the properties were listed. The almshouses were reopened in 1963, with John Betjeman performing the opening ceremony.

The almspeople were charged a 'maintenance charge' to help cover the costs of the mortgage (rents could not be charged since the occupants were licensees not tenants). The residents were offered an 'Osokool' refrigeration box in 1965 and 6 accepted. In 1969, the first telephone was installed in the almshouses. In May 1989 one the chimneys was struck by lightning and damage was caused to much of the electrical equipment and wiring in the houses.

After almost 300 years the Stiles Almshouses were renamed Stiles Court in 1973. They continue to provide a comfortable home for the elderly today.

Photos of the Stiles Almshouses

These photos show various views of the Stiles Almshouses, including the court yard decorated for the Coronation of George VI in 1937.



Stiles Almshouses entrance and Knuckle bone paving

This picture, by local photographer Tom Reveley, shows the entrance to the Stiles Almshouses, with a view into the courtyard. The rare knuckle bone paving is visible to either side. A close up of the knuckle bone paving is also shown. The paving possibly covered the entire courtyard originally. The bones were probably a waste product and used to provide a cheap and durable form of paving when hammered into the bare earth.



The Childrey Almshouses

The first almshouses in Childrey, the Fettyplace, were built in 1867. The Coventry Almshouses, founded in 1911 and situated in the centre of the village, comprise of a block of three one bedroom units. The Trustees are The Rector and Churchwardens of St Mary's Church.

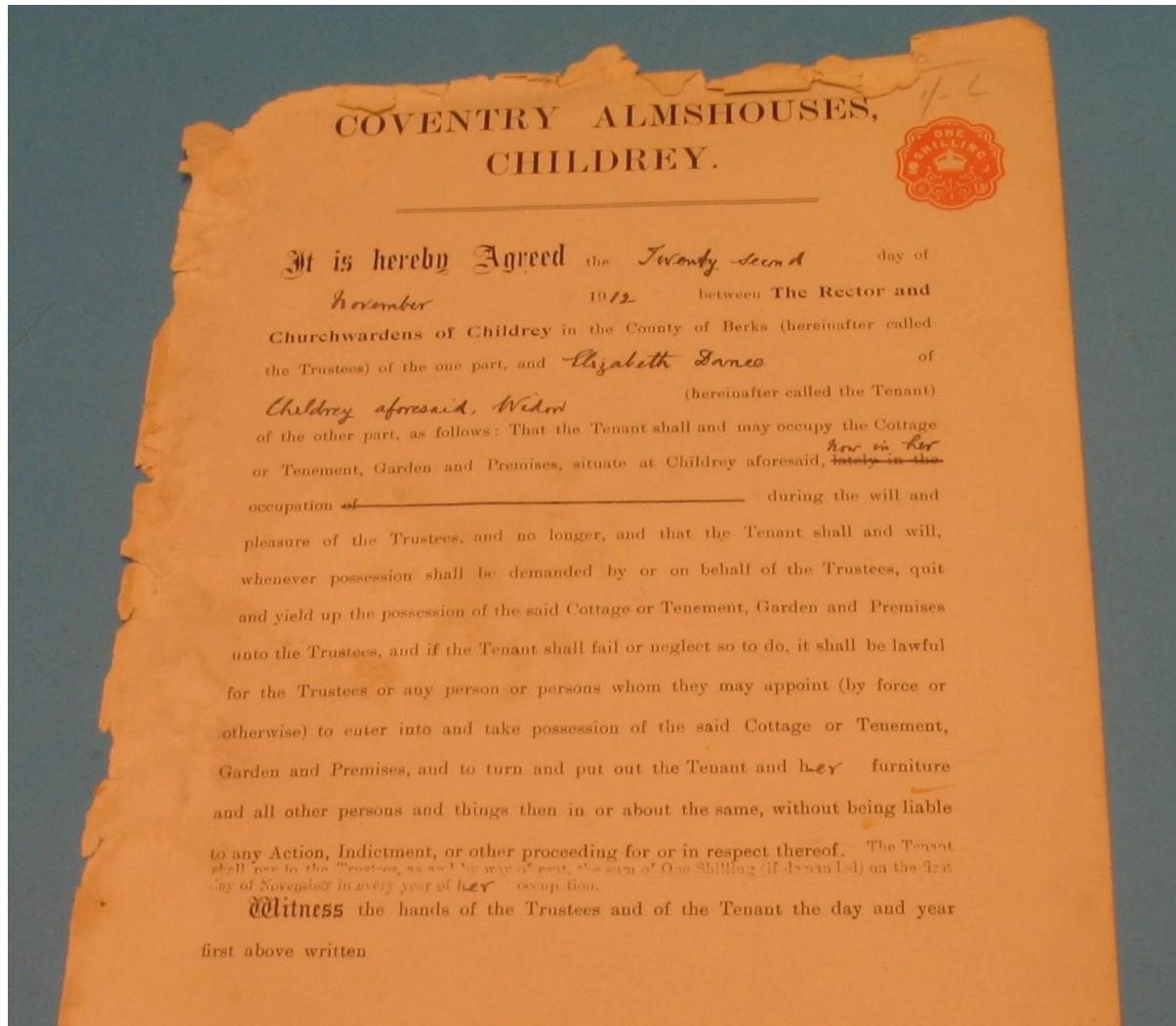
Photos of the Coventry Almshouses

The photos show the Coventry Almshouses and their opening ceremony in 1911.



Coventry Almshouse deed of agreement

Deed of agreement between the trustees of the Coventry Almshouses, Childrey and the tenant, Elizabeth Dance.



Acknowledgements

This article was created as part of a temporary exhibition in the Research Library at the Vale & Downland Museum in 2021. The items and pictures were taken from the Museum and Research Library collections or loaned from local people who work with the Wantage Almshouses, including Stephen Trinder, Stephen Dexter and Bill Jestico. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the exhibition. An invaluable source was the book *Pupils, Potholes and Poor Relief* by Hazel Brown.