

# **RETIREMENT FROM THE NOISE AND HURRY OF THE WORLD?: THE EXPERIENCE OF ALMSHOUSE LIFE 1650-1850**

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Paper presented at Voluntary Action History Society Seminar 22 April 2008

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- Almshouse living has enjoyed a broadly positive image with historians and the public alike.
- The survival of attractive ranges of buildings, bearing tablets to commemorate founders' virtues, has ensured that the architectural features of almshouses provided an early focus for study.<sup>i</sup>
- The residential experiences of occupants in the past have been less well surveyed, mainly because obvious or concentrated sources of information remain sparse. As a result almshouses have been treated as individual institutions by local historians, but assessments of their collective impact are notably few.<sup>ii</sup>
- The issue is complicated by terminology since the terms almshouse, poorhouse, and hospital were used variously by contemporaries. Other locally-derived terms include 'guildhouse', 'callis' and 'gift houses'.<sup>iii</sup> Here, 'almshouse' is a generic label to refer to a house established by voluntary charity (rather than from local taxes) with a fixed number of spaces; various formats for foundation.<sup>iv</sup>

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- First person testimonies. A closer understanding of individual lived experience is generally precluded by the virtual absence of first-person accounts of life within an almshouse. Those very few that survive tend to derive from oral history projects, perforce drawing on twentieth-century accounts, or pertain to the wealthy, high-status almshouses where the prestige of residents was in little doubt.
- Example: One that relates to the period before 1850 falls into this category.<sup>v</sup> James Lacy was probably around 62 years old when he was admitted to St Oswald's Hospital in Worcester on 1809. He began his diary thirteen years earlier, while still working as a linen draper in the city. Spread across notebooks and loose sheets, Lacy appears to have kept a record of key events in his life. Prior to his admission, the focus falls on his working life and his involvement as a witness in two legal cases. After 1809 he concentrates on matters concerning the almspeople, amongst whom he was appointed as the vice-regent (possessing at least a notional supervisory role over the other inhabitants).

Lacy embraced almshouse life with considerable enthusiasm. On admission he made a careful note of the cash and other benefits he could expect, and a detailed account of his outlay furnishing his room. It is likely that he had previously lived in furnished lodgings, with insufficient possessions of his own. This implies, though, that either his almshouse room was bare or that he deemed the existing contents to be inadequate to his needs. It also indicates his own level of resources at the time of admission, since he spent £5 19s 5d on items other than food. His shopping list is dominated by

a bed and bedding, but also features a candlestick, fire irons and cleaning brushes.<sup>vi</sup>

Thereafter he documented such diverse aspects of life as the value of the pews occupied by St Oswald's inmates, a list of inmates who died or were removed by relations, and the fabrics and tradesmen used to make the almspeople's clothing. Most startling of all he devised a scheme for an almshouse burial club, (although it seems unlikely that the idea was ever adopted). Lacy was of course privileged in occupying a position of some small authority in a well-funded almshouse, so his clear relish for almshouse life cannot be taken as representative.

- Fiction. Alternative narrative representations can only be drawn from literature, with patchy results. Most famously *The Warden*. The pathos attached to Thomas Newcombe's occupation of a place at the Hospital of the Grey Friars, for instance, is plainly a literary device to emphasise the character's fall from grace. Little can be made of this in terms of inhabitants' perspectives. By contrast Dickens' account of Titbull's almshouse carries greater authenticity as a view of the internal politics of a house he visited, but is nonetheless 'the fiction of Dickens in his 'Uncommercial' guise'.<sup>vii</sup>
- Compilation. Therefore to find a more balanced picture it is necessary to cast more widely, and draw on institutional records and the comments of contemporary observers to judge the facilities on offer.

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- Material lives. This chapter will first consider the material lives of almshouse-dwellers in the period 1650-1850. This can be assessed via a comparison of the charities' capacity to house the poor, including their physical attributes of

fabric and contents, along with the benefits they offered aside from accommodation (most importantly a stipend).

- Emotional lives. It will go on to discuss the oversight of almshouse inmates or controls on their behaviour. It will also consider the potential emotional freight attached to an almshouse place. Did people draw satisfaction and status from belonging to selected institutions? Given the paucity of first-person testimonies to draw on here, I will assess the potential for autonomy among inmates, and in particular will examine the scope of privacy for almspeople.
- It will argue that experiences were varied along a continuum that stretched from the comfortable to the impoverished. For every ancient pensioner maintained comfortably there was at least one almsperson whose entitlements and receipts were thin indeed. Evidence on the aggregate desirability of an almshouse place is slight or oblique, but suggests that the value placed on admission was higher than material receipts alone would imply.

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*Material experiences of almshouse life*

- Internal and External space. Almshouses often stood at the heart of a village or urban community; medieval foundations were often based around a central courtyard, while those founded after a facilitating Act of 1597 typically comprised a simple row of houses along a road close to the parish church.<sup>viii</sup> Individual houses consisted of one or two rooms, on one or two storeys, with

one or two hearths. This internal space was conceptualised by founders with limited variations; the almshouses founded by the Duke of Albermarle in Newcastle under Lyme provided a living room, bedroom and pantry to each woman, whereas in Theydon Garnon in Essex, the Lady Fitzwilliam almshouses had only one ground-floor room and an attic.<sup>ix</sup> It was not uncommon to find communal spaces, too, especially in houses of ancient foundation. These might include a kitchen, bakehouse, hall or washhouse, or a chapel for all the almsfolk.<sup>x</sup> External space might be entirely communal, such as the gallery ‘for walking exercise in bad weather’ in Tiverton, or it might feature a separate garden for each inhabitant (permitting an early form of allotment).<sup>xi</sup>

- Size, capacity, and occupancy. Almshouse living was defined partly by the number of the intended inhabitants. They were rarely built for fewer than four people, but were not designed for the masses. They might be substantial, with wings for both female and male beneficiaries, but they were not usually supposed to house more than around fifty people.<sup>xii</sup> Experiences of almshouse living were also conditioned by the population regarded as eligible for admittance. Almshouse foundations tried to define people who would receive a place based on their age, gender, or personal attributes. Successful applicants were identified by honesty, poverty, local residence, former occupation or marital status. Of the twenty almshouses present in York by 1740, for example, nine preferred to admit widows (three of which aimed for a closer specification, such as Catholic widows or the widows of freemen).<sup>xiii</sup> This meant that new almspeople could expect to join a relatively elderly

community, where the lowest ages were fifty or sixty, with experiences in common. This did not inevitably make for harmonious living but it did at least ensure familiarity of knowledge or pursuits. Of the thirteen almsmen in Seckford's almshouse in 1792 for example, nine had formerly followed just four occupations.<sup>xiv</sup>

Access to almshouses supplies one criterion for judgement. It is necessary to know exactly how many almsplaces were filled. Attempts to enumerate beneficiaries can be unwitting underestimates when they rely on the number of dwellings rather than the number of intended inmates. This misreading can arise either because the charity allocated each unit to two people or because almshouses for men sometimes permitted wives and children to accompany them; for example the St Cross hospital in Winchester admitted male inmates but accommodated wives as well. The census for 1801 gives the occupancy of the hospital as 17 men and 6 women.<sup>xv</sup>

But the number of almshouses places can be talked down as well as up. Houses were not always applied to their intended use. For example, when the only surviving inmate of St Mary Magdalen's hospital in Bath died in 1806, they had been the sole beneficiary for at least three years.<sup>xvi</sup> In Worcester St Oswalds hospital technically had 28 places yet in the 1820s at least 8 fell vacant when the Cathedral Dean failed to fill them.<sup>xvii</sup> Almshouses might have become appropriated to other uses including low rent or no rent accommodation for the parish poor, as was the case in many Cambridgeshire parishes.<sup>xviii</sup> Barker-Read found that in Cranbrook in Kent, almshouses were used to provide free accommodation to the master of the charity

school and the parish clerk.<sup>xix</sup> In Glentworth Lincolnshire one hospital building was apparently unclaimed so a local innkeeper installed two of his servants there.<sup>xx</sup>

As this last example implies, voluntary non-residence of a habitable house was a problem for some almshouse charities, where beneficiaries chose not to make use of the accommodation afforded them.<sup>xxi</sup> Absenteeism among cathedral bedesmen in the 17<sup>th</sup> century apparently ran quite high, particularly in foundations closest to London. The men apparently preferred to live in the capital, and fully expected to receive the charity's associated pension there.<sup>xxii</sup> Some charities tried to monitor absentees, or at least withheld the other benefits of the charity (making them contingent on the poor person's physical presence), but such conditions could be evaded by occasional residence.

- Robust or flimsy. Nonetheless it is vital to know that almshouse places *could* be occupied, that the house was built according to the founder's intentions and that the accommodation was habitable, because the fabric of the institutions displayed some important divergences.<sup>xxiii</sup> Almshouses were often purpose built but the materials and resilience of houses could vary considerably. Stone or brick could be sturdy, as was the case with Browne's Hospital in Stamford Lincolnshire, built in the 1470s of local stone and praised by Pevsner as 'one of the best medieval hospitals in England'.<sup>xxiv</sup> It was still in use as an almshouse in 2002. But even stout materials might not withstand the depredations of time or hostility. Almshouses in Flint built around 1818 of brick and thatch were condemned as hovels unfit for habitation in 1874.<sup>xxv</sup>

Numerous almshouses (such as the Hospital of St John the Baptist in Chester and Wynard's almshouse in Exeter) were destroyed in the 1640s, although both cited here were eventually rebuilt.<sup>xxvi</sup> In Sheffield, the men and women in the Shewsbury hospital were physically imperilled by a combination of the hospital building and its proximity to the river; four almspeople were drowned in 1768 when the River Sheaf flooded and part of the building was washed away.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Not all almshouses were well-built. In West Kent a shortage of local brick-making meant that almshouses were timber framed and not very resistant to the elements.<sup>xxviii</sup> Elsewhere seventeenth-century almshouses were often 'of the local mud and stud construction' with a thatched roof.<sup>xxix</sup> Furthermore, there needed to be both the will and the wherewithal to supply ongoing maintenance.<sup>xxx</sup> The inmates of the Hospital of St John in Northampton were fortunate indeed, in that their stone-built quarters (dating from the early fourteenth century) were repaired in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were inhabited by the almsmen until 1879.<sup>xxxi</sup> Most beneficiaries of an ancient charity were not so fortunate, and even many newer hospitals were in a state of physical decay. Without adequate funds for mending, houses typically fell into disrepair and become uninhabitable.<sup>xxxii</sup> In 1781, a reproachful letter to the Gentleman's Magazine delineated the neglect of almshouses in Twyford, Berkshire, allegedly owing to the death of all the Trustees; 'some of the windows are entirely broken, and the wall which incloses the garden is so decayed that it will probably soon become useless'. The correspondent hoped for the restoration of the poor 'to the *comfortable* enjoyment of what was certainly designed for their *comfort* as well as *use*'.<sup>xxxiii</sup> But human agency could do worse than to

neglect an almshouse. In Manchester, a number of almshouses were demolished to make way for the laying out of a new street in 1807. When the remainder were similarly removed twelve months later (without the supply of replacement housing) the inhabitants resisted in the only way they could by staging an effectual sit-in; they ‘remained in their dwellings; they kept possession at the hazard of their lives, amidst showers of rubbish, descending stones, and falling timber; they retreated from room to room as the work of destruction proceeded, dragging their beds’.<sup>xxxiv</sup> They were eventually persuaded to decamp with the promise of a cellar dwelling, which seems poor recompense for the loss of a house and small garden. Yet if houses became uninhabitable or were even demolished, all hope was not necessarily lost. Some communities valued their almshouses and could step into the breach. This is what happened to Brickett’s Hospital in Salisbury, where the original sixteenth-century buildings were clearly not fit for purpose by the late eighteenth century. The Hospital was rebuilt by public subscription in 1780.<sup>xxxv</sup>

- Contents. It is usually assumed that the contents of houses either had to be supplied by incoming alms-people from their own household, or were in some way ‘inherited’ from previous inhabitants. Some houses required beneficiaries to bring their goods into the almshouse for the charity to keep if they died as an inmate, while others allowed inhabitants to will their possessions away.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In either case the contents of almshouses were of necessity closely akin to the contents of people’s own homes. Inventories of almspeople’s possessions are rare, but references to thefts from almspeople suggest a potentially wide variety of material experiences. The goods of almswoman Sarah Portress

were stolen by her own nurse in 1753, but they included numerous items of silver cutlery and two gold rings.<sup>xxxvii</sup> In contrast one almsman who was a victim of burglary had a box at the foot of his bed, wherein the most valuable items were a shirt and handkerchief.<sup>xxxviii</sup> A box seems to have been a common possession, particularly for storage of clothing and other household textiles, as was the case for poor families in their own homes.<sup>xxxix</sup> It is possible that this absorption of goods into almshouse stock was resented, and that consequently people were known to dispose of property before they took up residence; in cases of theft, one defence was to allege that ‘stolen’ goods had been purchased from someone about to enter an almshouse (a variation on the old chestnut of purchasing items from a stranger).<sup>xl</sup> In Colchester, the *quid pro quo* for leaving goods to the charity was that the poor kin of deceased almsmen should have first refusal of the vacant place.<sup>xli</sup> If almshouses were completely rebuilt, or if founders were sufficiently far-sighted, the charity might stump up for furniture and bedlinen.<sup>xlii</sup> Communal possessions might be numerous, as at Heytesbury where the kitchen and buttery were well-supplied in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>xliii</sup> Nonetheless, the contents of each almsroom could be quite meagre; rooms in Browne’s Hospital in Stamford held only a bed, a shelf, a candlestick and extinguisher in 1731 (augmented with a second shelf and a cupboard by 1766).<sup>xliv</sup>

- Cleanliness. Management of the internal space of almshouses seems to have been left largely to inmates, so there is little or no evidence about the use of space, or other attributes such as cleanliness (although presumably a noisome house might have attracted the reproach of charity trustees, especially where

cleaning was enshrined in the rules).<sup>xlv</sup> One canny set of rules required almsmen's wives to take it in turns to clean the almshouse every day.<sup>xlvi</sup> Yet the internal arrangement of almshouses combined with their intended occupancy made them very different environments to institutions for the poor where people slept in dormitories (such as workhouses or infirmaries). This meant that there was much less potential in almshouses for uncontrollable disease. Workhouse fever or gaol fever (usually typhus) occasionally decimated institutional populations, whereas there were apparently few reports of an equivalent almshouse fever.<sup>xlvii</sup>

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Aside from accommodation, what could almshouse inmates expect?

- Pension. It was usual for almshouses to supply a cash pension but the value of pensions varied widely. Where pensions were sufficient to meet all normal living costs (aside from inordinate expense associated with ill-health), the result could be 'an honourable period of retirement'.<sup>xlviii</sup> Yet almspeople were entirely dependent on the scale of their charity's income; if investment yields rose then benefits might be extended but the charity operated with reference to its own capacity rather than the changing shape of poverty. Milley's hospital in Lichfield was designed in the early sixteenth century to supply pensions of just 5s or 6s per quarter to the almswomen, and this income remained unchanged for over two hundred years, by which time it was totally insufficient for the maintenance of an individual person. The value of the endowment rose sharply in the early nineteenth century, and only then were

the stipends raised significantly, to 5s per week in 1821.<sup>xlix</sup> Where almshouse property was damaged and dividends fell, the results were typically passed immediately to the almspeople. Foundations did not scruple to reduce stipends (regardless of prevailing circumstances for the poor).<sup>1</sup> The Hospital of St John the Baptist in Lichfield was the subject of a visitation in 1696, arising directly from an allegation that an almsman had died ‘in want of necessaries for his body’ and that stipends were being paid in clipped money.<sup>li</sup> Conversely, rising charity incomes were *not* necessarily passed on to poor inmates, or at least not in a timely fashion; the almspeople at Woodbridge in Suffolk felt that ‘their Conditions are become much worse than those who receive the Alms of the Parish’ in 1718.<sup>lii</sup> The Woodbridge charity was well-placed to mollify the almsmen, and by 1768 the annual stipend had risen to a munificent £20, but high revenues could prove a temptation to weak-willed charity managers. At the Hospital of St John the Baptist in Dunston Lincolnshire the leases of hospital property became very valuable, but successive Wardens (typically clergymen) pocketed the income while the hospital fell into disrepair and disuse. The situation was only investigated and rectified by Chancery in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>liii</sup> The Shrewsbury Hospital in Sheffield was very unusual in that it reduced the number of almspeople after 1768 in order to raise stipends from 2s6d to 3s6d per week, in response to the increasing cost of provisions. For once, a rigid endowment income was not permitted to fossilise the value of the stipend.<sup>liv</sup>

This evidence would tend to suggest that almspeople habitually had to earn money or approach their local overseer for poor relief, but almshouses had an unpredictable

relationship with both employment and parish authorities. Some founders required inmates to remain independent of relief, although few went so far as Arthur Winsley and required almsmen to give a bond with sureties for fifty pounds ‘not to take Alms of the Town’.<sup>lv</sup> Some forbade work, while others insisted on it.<sup>lvi</sup> Numerous foundations effectually compelled beneficiaries to either work or seek relief, given their meagre stipend, so time and again parishes supplemented almshouse incomes.<sup>lvii</sup> In some cases, vestries or overseers were given responsibility for managing almshouses, and so the charities were elided with parish poorhouses and workhouses. Parishes clearly saw the utility of free housing and so might try to ensure that charities were kept up to maximum capacity.<sup>lviii</sup> Therefore the line between charities and parishes might be rigidly observed, studiously ignored or entirely blurred.

- Clothing. Money was not the only benefit on offer, though. Clothing in the form of coats or gowns was an integral part of some benefactions. These were designed as a visual reminder of the founder’s philanthropy, usually fashioned from sober shades into a long, open gown, often sporting a badge, or buttons bearing the founder’s arms.<sup>lix</sup> The widows and spinsters of Ash’s almshouse in Leek in Staffordshire were perhaps more colourful than most, receiving a gown of violet cloth every two years.<sup>lx</sup> If the supply of clothing proved at all troublesome, however, particularly in the nineteenth century, it was quietly forgotten or converted into a raised pension payment.<sup>lxi</sup> Charity garments possessed a variety of possible meanings for almspeople. They might simply represent a warm item of clothing that could be turned to account (as apparel or as an asset at the pawnshop), but they quite possibly aroused strong feelings, either as a symbol of belonging to a high-status establishment or as a

shameful badge of dependence.<sup>lxii</sup> It has been assumed that the former sentiment was most prominent among almspeople, a view probably consolidated by Trollope's depiction of Hiram's Hospital in *The Warden* and its alleged life model, St Cross in Winchester; it is ironic that a 'gowned Trollopian worthy'<sup>lxiii</sup> should have come to represent satisfaction and stability, when both the fictional and real-life hospitals were central to scandals about benefits not paid to inmates. Caffrey suggests a time-scale for changing sentiments towards charity clothing, by emphasising negative reactions to it by the twentieth century.<sup>lxiv</sup>

- Fuel; medical aid. Wealthy foundations might also supply extras like fuel.<sup>lxv</sup> Robert Veel's almshouse in Ilchester supplied medical aid and funeral costs in the eighteenth century, including in 1772 3s for brandy for bathing an almsman's legs.<sup>lxvi</sup> Dr White's Hospital in Bristol supplied a shilling a week to pay a nurse for the almspeople in sickness, whereas Thomas Seckford's charity employed three poor women to nurse his thirteen poor men.<sup>lxvii</sup> Yet even in well-funded charities money might be misapplied or simply not spent. The Master of St John's Hospital in Bath was discovered in 1734 to have reduced the quality of gowns, failed to employ a nurse, and neglected to supply heating or make repairs.<sup>lxviii</sup> Poorly-funded houses that were not supposed to supply nursing had to face up to the fact that their charity was not capable of acting as a place of residential care for the physically unsound, particularly if fellow residents were not prepared to support their frail neighbours.<sup>lxix</sup> In Nottingham one woman was removed from her almshouse when she became unable to care for herself and likewise unable to afford a

servant.<sup>lxx</sup> Nursing was necessarily limited even where it was supplied. At Bond's hospital in Coventry, the nurse could not care for Thomas Marriot in 1872 because he was allegedly of unsound mind and required night-time supervision; he was removed to his daughter's house and ultimately to the workhouse.<sup>lxxi</sup>

- Additional charity. A lifeline was thrown to selected almshouse inmates by the foundation of supplementary charities. This seems to confirm Jordan's 'social osmosis' theory, whereby one charity would encourage the foundation of others; almshouse pensions and other benefits might rise from the gradual accretion of endowments.<sup>lxxii</sup> Extra charity could range from the munificent and formal to the token and casual. At the generous end of the scale, George Monoux's almshouse for 13 men and women in Walthamstow attracted four additional endowments between 1817 and 1842, yielding dividends on over £1585 of investment.<sup>lxxiii</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, in the first half of the eighteenth century, the Cordwainer's Company in Chester gave 1s6d to almspeople on every 11 November.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Complicated payment regimes could result where almspeople of the same charity were eligible for minor variations in allowances.<sup>lxxv</sup> Yet supplementary charity could also be withdrawn. In Burton on Trent during the 1770s there was clearly a desire to spread charity funds as widely as possible, so 10s of Mrs Almond's charity that had been given to the women in Paulett's almshouse was withdrawn.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

In this way, the material value of an almshouse place could fluctuate very widely around an ideal template. Failures by almshouse charities to support the poor, or even

treat them in line with the wishes of the founder, should not come as any surprise. 'While the system of charity and lower-class survival were deeply implicated, there was no direct or coterminous match; both had additional and different imperatives'.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Therefore the comfortable and positive image of material aspects of almshouse life needs to be revised.

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### *Autonomy and Privacy*

The practical aspects of life in an almshouse need to be contrasted with the potential emotional impact of admission. What was the value of a place over and above its cash equivalent? This can be assessed by examining the technical versus the practical imposition of controls, or the freedoms granted to or wrested by the inmates, the potential for privacy, and the enthusiasm evinced by almspeople for their lot.

- Behavioural rules. Arguably, the autonomy of residents was always regarded as one of the inherent problems of this type of charity. What might the poor get up to, once provided with a permanent appointment to an almshouse? Founders might try to govern their almspeople by imposing behavioural clauses, specifying categories of activity that were essential or that would not be tolerated. Requirements often related to religious observance, such as the stipulation that almspeople at Dyvynog should attend Church on Sundays and be present during all prayers and sermons from the beginning to the end.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Inhabitants were commonly enjoined to live peaceably together. Where almshouses were built alongside schools, the almspeople might be charged

with a teaching role; in one unusual case the rules included an injunction to empty and repair the privy.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Proscribed activities typically included swearing, gambling, overspending, petty crime, inebriation, and promiscuity. For instance, the Countess of Pembroke tried to ensure that her almswomen at Appleby were not spendthrift, by requiring ‘That none of the sisters do runne on the Score in the Towne’.<sup>lxxx</sup>

- Official oversight. In practice, the control of almshouse inhabitants was typically fairly light; the provisions of the charity might include the employment of a resident master, nurse or chaplain to minister to the poor, but rarely gave anyone a disciplinary role. Similarly there might be a notional curfew, but this was only enforceable where the almshouse was built round a courtyard with a locking gate.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Specific indulgences could be extended to almspeople; men might be allowed to continue their trade, such as at the Trinity Hospital in Salisbury.<sup>lxxxii</sup> In Bristol, seamen in the Merchant’s Hospital were even allowed to conduct trips abroad.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Therefore the problem lay in effective policing of almspeople’s behaviour, which was fraught with difficulty. Stipends could be reduced or withheld, or fines levied, but this might only exacerbate the problem.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Expulsion from the almshouse, the ultimate sanction, was rarely exercised, or only after a second, third or fourth offence (and expulsion orders could even be rescinded).<sup>lxxxv</sup> Sexual misdemeanours such as adultery, incest, or giving houseroom to women of ill fame were some of the most certain ways to court expulsion.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> The only institution found to diverge dramatically from this pattern was Charterhouse in London, where the behaviour of pensioners and staff alike

were subject to considerable scrutiny (and a higher than usual rate of expulsion).<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

- Privacy versus communality. Almshouses offered a measure of domestic privacy to a group of the poor unaccustomed to experiencing it, and combined with the usually permanent nature of the appointment residence might well constitute ‘comfort and security well beyond previous or peer expectation’.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> An almshouse place intended for single occupancy constituted an enclosed space for one person. If that person did not choose to share it, they could achieve domestic separation from all other people, including surviving children and parents. [NB Mary Barker Read found a grandfather, father and son living in neighbouring almshouses in Maidstone in Kent 1710-1720] Where houses were intended for married couples or for unrelated pairs of spinsters, widows or elderly men, a two-roomed dwelling would still have offered the possibility of a room and a bed each. This amount of space dedicated to one person would have stood in sharp contrast to most poor people’s domestic experiences, which constituted a series of shared spaces. In labourers’ cottages, tenements, garrets and cellars, the poor shared rooms with family members. In Ardleigh in 1796, for example, no paupers lived alone.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Within those rooms it was quite common for different generations and different sexes to hold multiple occupancy of the family’s beds.<sup>xc</sup> The ‘moral resources’ offered by accommodation that contained sufficient bedrooms to separate the generations were felt acutely by

philanthropists and observers towards the end of the eighteenth century, although it does not follow that the poor adopted the same sentiments.<sup>xci</sup>

Among the prosperous there was a continuous thread of commentary that praised the efforts of the poor to remain privately independent in their own home, and cited this as one of the comforts of poverty. Families were properly accommodated within separate houses because married couples had a moral right to expect them, and a failure to achieve this constituted an aberration.<sup>xcii</sup> In 1800, Thomas Bernard (admittedly an energetic and sympathetic philanthropist) protested ‘The poor man, poor as he is, loves to cherish the idea of PROPERTY. To talk of *my* house, *my* garden, *my* furniture, is always a theme of delight and pleasure.’<sup>xciii</sup>

But socially superior observers maintained a contradictory set of discourses about the poor, and idealised images of domestic enclosure stood in dramatic contrast to, for example, perceptions of the mid-nineteenth century urban poor. When *they* resorted to the indoors, for sleeping if nothing else, their choices exposed them to deep censure. The overflowing cellars, attics or back-to-backs of some cities, the lodging houses or overcrowded apartments in insanitary courts, were physical indictments of the domestic failings of the poor.<sup>xciv</sup> The ‘public’ lives of the poor, epitomised in the eighteenth century by the riotous mob and in the nineteenth century by Mayhew’s people of the London streets, were seen as similarly blameworthy. Ironically the latter were badged as ‘neither knowing nor caring for the enjoyments of home’, even where they did maintain fierce family ties.<sup>xcv</sup> This is what Patricia Meyer Spacks meant when, considering the relation of public and private to ‘privacy’ she judged ‘If

significant public functioning, except as a problem for others, seldom belongs to the bottom classes, their lives, though 'private', rarely enable physical privacy.<sup>x cvi</sup>

How should we determine the value that the poor placed on the physical independence and privacy (ultimately as individual isolation) supplied in almshouses? This must partly be read from the antipathy of the poor towards participating in communal or supervised living. This took place within any residence where there was an element of choice or self-selection for inmates, albeit notional in some cases: a workhouse, a shared lodging house, an infirmary, or a model-housing scheme would all qualify here, whereas a gaol would not (except where families chose to dwell there with prisoners). Evidence before the nineteenth century is piecemeal; in East Claydon in Buckinghamshire, four families sharing a house in 1677 operated open fires and shunned the one chimney in the building 'because every one will be private'.<sup>x cvii</sup> In the nineteenth century, it is axiomatic that some aspects of *family* privacy as independence were prized very highly. Resistance to workhouses had a long history but was at its height in the middle third of the nineteenth century. When the post-1834 workhouse threatened to make all poor relief contingent on institutional dwelling, there was an outcry that extended beyond the poor. But workhouse life did not act in opposition to privacy, so much as domestic autonomy. The family was designedly broken up on admission to a workhouse, in contrast to family togetherness but lack of privacy in the independent household.

Resistance is particularly revealing in the context of model housing, advocated by philanthropists and urban improvers in the late nineteenth century, which was in many ways the updated version of the almshouse.<sup>x cviii</sup> Model housing of course was not

free, but subject to both a rent charge and tougher moral policing, both of which were likely to render them less palatable than almshouses. Arguably, the final two thirds of the nineteenth century was the period when the poor were most likely to refuse improvement or reform and prefer squalor to surveillance by economic superiors (and by implication, were more amenable to these forces before 1834).<sup>xcix</sup>

- Sharing spaces. So family privacy was probably highly prized. Individual privacy, though, is a more complex issue. It is clear that almspeople permitted friends and family to share their room and their bed, with or without the sanction of the charity. This might constitute assistance offered to someone else who lacked accommodation, such as where Frances Jeggot allowed Mary Smith ‘to lie along with me’ because Smith’s husband had threatened to kill her. Alternatively it arose from domestic help being offered to feeble almspeople; Rachel Woodthorpe shared the almshouse and bed of her uncle Joshua Crickett, who was bedridden and could not cut up his food.<sup>c</sup> Vertical kin were probably the most common additional lodgers in almshouse accommodation.<sup>ci</sup> These shreds of evidence are slight but they open the prospect of poor people who, in the eighteenth century at least, sought out the physical intimacy of shared accommodation in preference to the isolation of lone occupancy. Caffrey’s work on Yorkshire, though, turns up sufficient proof that close communal living also aroused tensions and conflicts between inmates (which was always inherently likely but difficult to prove). Furthermore she contends that the use of communal areas in almshouses declined, implying that individual privacy became more highly prized by the end of the period.<sup>cii</sup>

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So to what extent was an almshouse place desirable?

- Competition for places. It is unlikely that anyone was forced to enter an almshouse or compelled to remain there. Therefore the fact that the poor petitioned hard to gain entry to some establishments, and that almshouse places were filled, was itself a testament to the fact that the charity was desirable at some level. The almswomen living at Jackenetts almshouse in Cambridge were chosen by rate-payers, and in the early nineteenth century the elections gave rise to some closely-fought battles; however, this might speak more reliably to the energies and interests of ratepayers than to the enthusiasm of the women.<sup>ciii</sup> More telling perhaps was the presence in a number of almshouses of waiting lists for admission. Since the number of places was fixed, would-be entrants were forced to await the death of an almsperson to secure admission, and that could entail a lengthy wait. At Christ Church in Oxford, waiting times of three years were quite usual, and some frail applicants died before they reached the top of the list.<sup>civ</sup> Similarly, wilful resignations from charities owing to unexpected good fortune were rare, although in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century some charity benefits had become so overtaken by inflation that beneficiaries found it expedient to exchange their almshouse charity for a more munificent one.<sup>cv</sup>
- Connections with social superiors. Beyond material receipts, though, there lay the benefits of association with a particular charity. ‘If charity is regarded as a form of circulation rather than a material thing, it tied all these groups into

various relationships of application .. and it created uneven relationships of acquiescence and power'.<sup>cvii</sup> In the context of almshouses, this meant the connections between the almspeople, the founder or founding body, the trustees, and with the local community. In the case of Cathedral bedesmen this involved a tenuous connection with royalty, since bedesmen's applications had to be given royal assent.<sup>cvii</sup> Charity managers or electors could encompass powerful contemporaries including landowners, clergy, town aldermen and professionals.

- Perquisites. The high-profile presence of almspeople within a parish or town could act as confirmation of belonging (especially where admission related to local residence), and special treatment could give rise to perquisites. Men elected to St Bartholomew's almshouse in Oxford were poorly remunerated for their trouble (since none lived in the almshouse, and the stipend of 9d per week was chronically low) but it is possible that admission was as much a matter of prestige as of material advancement. Public elections to the charity ensured that almsmen remained a distinct group among the otherwise undifferentiated urban poor (particularly for their electors, the town council) and the men received attention and attractive extras; for example payments to them were listed among the canvassing expenses of parliamentary candidates for Oxfordshire during the elections of 1780 and 1784.<sup>cviii</sup> These cannot have mitigated the small pension, but were possibly welcome acknowledgments of official standing.

- Marks of status. Cathedral bedesmen took part in ceremonial events and processions and yielded benefits of association, since they participated alongside senior clergymen and occasionally aristocratic families, and enjoyed an allocated pew in the Cathedral. Some events were routine, such as the arrival of assize court judges, but other one-off celebrations included royal visits, or the 1707 union with Scotland.<sup>cx</sup> Ford's and Bond's Hospitals in Coventry were patently integral to Coventry's sense of identity, and were an acknowledged source of pride. In 1844 the King of Saxony was shown Ford's hospital when on a visit to the city, while from 1784 inhabitants of Bond's hospital were treated to an annual visit by the Corporation and 1856-63 given ceremonial dinners for national events. The latter allegedly gave delight and gratification to residents.<sup>cx</sup>

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### *Conclusion*

- Varied material life. 'Neat houses and neat old people, sometimes in uniform, came to form an attractive feature in many towns and villages'.<sup>cx</sup> The propriety of this image has meant that it has dominated thinking about almshouses to date. The experience of almshouse life in the past, however, was much less consistent. The size, location, layout and fabric of houses all contributed to the nature of the space they provided. These factors determined by founders and trustees were varied further by policies concerning admissions and behaviours. The resulting material circumstances of almshouses can be partially reconstructed to indicate the comfortable or

pinched experiences of residents, and these have supplied the majority of the details in this chapter. Almshouse life *could* comprise genuinely secure retirement, with accommodation, income and extraordinary expenses all provided, within a private but not isolated setting, but this was not the standard provision. Material life was usually much less cushioned than this, with either the house or its pension being inadequate, compelling residents to maintain their acquaintance with work, begging, relief, or other forms of income. When people's circumstances became acute, either through an unstable building, a starvation-level pension or through their own decay, no amount of respectable imagery could redeem almshouses for the unmitigated misery or physical exposure imposed on inhabitants.

- Intangible benefits (and demerits). The essential character of almshouse life though, that varied from institution to institution, lay in the traditions and relationships established among inmates, or between inmates and outsiders. Was it common for residents' status to be gauged internally not by age but by length of institutional residence, or for there to be bitter dissension about the use of outside spaces?<sup>cxii</sup> What were the constraints on sharing almsrooms with relations, a practice rarely governed by statute but nonetheless critical to the retention of almsplaces by an aging population? The evidence for tackling these sorts of questions is extremely dispersed, both geographically and chronologically, but suggests subtle differences between institutions that were notionally akin. This makes long-term shifts difficult to determine, beyond Caffrey's argument that use of communal facilities declined over time.

- Persistence of positive image. One plausible conclusion is that election to an almshouse could confer a measure of status substantially out of proportion to its material benefits. Indications of esteem are most clear where almspeople became embedded in community activity such as the election to charity itself, ecclesiastical celebrations or parliamentary elections. Such occasions might carry material perquisites but these were probably secondary in importance to the marks of inclusion and respect that they carried. Arguably the emotional weight accorded to intangible benefits has substantially contributed to the intellectual coherence of the neat, respectable almshouse image that has been dominant for so long. Charities that remain operative tend to reinforce this perception; recently the Mary Feilding Guild residential home in north London was described as ‘harder to get into than an Oxbridge college’, emphasising both its exclusivity and its desirability.<sup>cxiii</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>ii</sup> For a recent exception see H. Caffrey, *Almshouses in the West Riding of Yorkshire* (Kings Lynn: Heritage, 2006).

<sup>iii</sup> E.M. Hampson, *The Treatment of Poverty in Cambridgeshire 1597-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), p. 69; P. Morant, *The History and Antiquities of... Colchester* (London: W. Bowyer, 1748), p. 9; Crust p. 5; *An Account of the Hospitals, Alms-Houses and Public Schools in Bristol* (Bristol: T. Mills, 1775) p. 14.

<sup>iv</sup> W.K. Jordan, *Philanthropy in England 1480-1660* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1959) p. 260.

<sup>v</sup> I am indebted to Eileen McGrath for the information in this paragraph and the next; see E. McGrath, 'The Bedesmen of Worcester Cathedral: post-Reformation cathedral charity compared with St Oswald's Hospital almspeople, c. 1660-1900' (PhD thesis, Keele University, forthcoming). A later diary survives for an inmate of St Cross between 1873-96, cited in P. Hopewell *St Cross: England's Oldest Almshouse* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1995), pp.128-32.

<sup>vi</sup> This shopping list is reminiscent of the goods that incomers to Bond's hospital in Coventry were required to supply upon admission; [J. Cleary and M. Orton] *So Long as the World Shall Endure. The Five Hundred Year History of Ford's and Bond's Hospitals* (Coventry: Coventry Church Charities, 1991), pp. 48, 125.

<sup>vii</sup> W.M. Thackeray, *The Newcomes. Memoirs of a most respectable family* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1855), chapter 75; C. Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1866) chapter 29; P. Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Minerva, 1991), p. 56.

<sup>viii</sup> E. Prescott, *The English Medieval Hospital 1050-1640* (London: Seaby, 1992); Caffrey, *Almshouses*, p. 27.

<sup>ix</sup> W. R. Powell (ed.), *Victoria County History of Essex 4*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1956) pp. 274-5.

<sup>x</sup> M. Barker-Read, 'The Treatment of the Aged Poor in Five Selected West Kent Parishes from Settlement to Speenhamland 1662-1775' (PhD thesis, Open University, 1988), p. 87; E. A. Heelis, 'St Anne's Hospital at Appleby', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* ix new series (1909), p. 193; Crust p. 25.

<sup>xi</sup> M. Dunsford, *Historical Memoirs of the Town and Parish of Tiverton* (Exeter: J. Brice, 1790), p. 335; Barker-Read, p.265; R. Loder, *The Statutes and Ordinances for the Government of the Almshouses in Woodbridge* (Woodbridge: R. Loder, 1792), rules of 1587 (unpaginated).

<sup>xii</sup> Caffrey, *Almshouses*, p. 31.

<sup>xiii</sup> P.M. Tillott (ed), *The Victoria History of Yorkshire: The City of York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp.421-6.

<sup>xiv</sup> Loder, (unpaginated).

<sup>xv</sup> *Abstract of the Answers and Returns made pursuant to 'An act for taking an account of the population of Great Britain 1801'* (London: 1802), Enumeration part 1: England and Wales, p. 326.

<sup>xvi</sup> J. Manco, *The Spirit of Care. The eight-hundred year story of St John's Hospital, Bath* (Bath: St John's Hospital, 1998), p. 125.

<sup>xvii</sup> McGrath.

<sup>xviii</sup> Hampson, pp. 69, 77.

<sup>xix</sup> Barker-Read, p. 289.

<sup>xx</sup> Crust, p. 18.

<sup>xxi</sup> Caffrey, *West Riding* p. 27.

<sup>xxii</sup> I. Atherton, E. McGrath and A. Tomkins, ' "Pressed down by want and afflicted with poverty, wounded and maimed in war or work down with age?" Cathedral almsmen in England 1538-1914', in A. Borsay and P. Shapely (eds), *Medicine, Charity and Mutual Aid. The consumption of health and welfare in Britain, c.1550-1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 30.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Some remained unbuilt; N. Yates and P. A. Welsby (eds) *Faith and Fabric: a history of Rochester cathedral, 604-1994* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1996), p. 107.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Crust, p. 10.

<sup>xxv</sup> Flintshire Record Office, G/B/57(c)/6, Holywell Union correspondence regarding the sale of the Flint almshouses, 1874-6

<sup>xxvi</sup> B. E. Harris (ed.), *Victoria County History of Chester 3*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) p. 182; *Remarkable Antiquities of the City of Exeter* (London: 1723), p. 210.

- xxvii J. Roach, *The Shrewsbury Hospital, Sheffield 1616-1975* (Borthwick paper 104, 2003), p. 6.
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- xxix Crust, p. 25.
- xxx C.M. Carlton, *History of the Charities in the City of Durham* (Durham: George Walker, 1872), p. 33.
- xxxi W. Page (ed.), *Victoria County History of Northamptonshire 3*, (London: 1930) p. 59.
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- xxxiii *Gentleman's Magazine* 51 (1781), 454-5.
- xxxiv *Manchester Observer* 5 September 1818, quoted in G. B. Hindle, *Provision for the Relief of the Poor in Manchester, 1754-1826* (Chetham Society Manchester 22, 1975), p. 144.
- xxxv *Caring*, p. 13.
- xxxvi *Orders Relating to the Almshouse &c of Dyvynog*, (London: J. Stephens, 1731), p. 4; M. W. Greenslade (ed.), *Victoria County History of Staffordshire 3* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 281; Lichfield Record Office, Salop Peculiar Probate Records, will of Mary Blakemore (1818).
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- xlii J. Stevens Cox, *The Almshouse and St Margaret's Leper Hospital Ilchester* (Ilchester Historical Monographs 5, 1949), p. 110.
- xliii Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office, 251/47, Heytesbury Hospital inventories of the almshouse 1656 and 1798.
- xliv Judson in Crust, p. 68.
- xlvi Heelis, p. 197; Crust, p. 26; H. Caffrey, 'The Almshouse experience in the nineteenth-century West Riding', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 76 (2004), p. 242.
- xlvii J. Stevens Cox, p. 123.
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- lxxxiii *Account...Bristol*, p. 16.
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- xc<sup>iii</sup> *Information for Cottagers Collected from the Reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor* (London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1800), p. 10.
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- xc<sup>v</sup> Mayhew on costermongers, quoted in Chase and Levenson, pp. 146-7.
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- cx *So Long as the World Shall Endure*, pp. 56, 130-1.

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<sup>cx</sup><sub>i</sub> Crust, p. 27; Caffrey, *Almshouses*, p. 28.

<sup>cx</sup><sub>ii</sub> Dickens, *Uncommercial Traveller*, chapter 29.

<sup>cx</sup><sub>iii</sub> *The Guardian* 27 January 2007, 'Family' p. 4.