



Almshouses

Care of the poor

Some of the displays in this exhibition feature East Meon residents who accumulated considerable wealth and property. During the same periods of history, there was grinding poverty in the village. In the eighteenth century, it was the responsibility of the parish to support its poor. In 1722, an Act was passed authorising churchwardens and overseers to buy or rent buildings for the lodging, maintenance and employment of the poor. East Meon had its own workhouse by 1727, was situated in what is now Workhouse Lane (then Cross Lane) and its exterior resembled Kews Cottages, which still exist to the west (pictured, below). In 1910, the workhouse, by then derelict, was set on fire by a spark from a passing steam wagon. The overseers' account books are preserved in full, providing a vivid picture of the care for the 'goodies' and 'goodmen' who lived there, in the care of the parish, and of the work they did in return.



By the 1830s, poverty was so widespread that small village workhouses were no longer viable. Larger units were established in Petersfield and nearby towns and East Meon's paupers were consigned to these distant and very forbidding institutions.

Establishment

On 19 December 1863 Mrs Joanna Agnes Forbes of Bereleigh House transferred to trustees a piece of land "containing 19 perches with almshouse buildings

thereon” upon trust to be occupied by persons “above 65 years of age and a parishioner of [East Meon] parish or irremovable from the same, of good character and reputation, but in indigent circumstances”.

Mrs Forbes had purchased the land on the west of Church Street, shown on the 1852 East Meon Tithe Map as “cottages and garden” owned by James Lock and others. She demolished the cottages and built the almshouses in memory of her late husband George Forbes. She endowed the trust with £800 3 per cent consols and £300 new 3 per cent annuities. After running expenses and repairs the trustees were to pay to the “inmates” in addition to the use of the dwelling allotted, the sum of five shillings a week or seven shillings and sixpence to a married couple.



On 10 August 1904 an additional site, opposite the existing five almshouses, on the east side of Church Street was purchased by the then trustees and in 1906 two additional almshouses were built by a Mr Read of West Meon. They paid £80 for the land (24 perches in size) and all building costs and architects' fees amounted to less than £1000. This sheds some light on the buying power of money in those days.



Mrs Forbes’s niece, Miss Errington, whose trustees had sold the plot of land to the Trustees, performed the unlocking ceremony of the two new almshouses with a silver presentation key suitably inscribed.

The Oxenbourne Fuel Allotment and the S.H.Colverson Charity, two small and virtually defunct local charities, were amalgamated into the Forbes Almshouses in 1995. The first of these was established in 1851 and allowed local occupiers of small cottages not exceeding an annual value of £4 to grow and cut firewood on land on Oxenbourne Down. It also provided for land to be provided for recreation of the neighbouring population. This became East Meon Recreation Ground. The 1937 Samuel Henry Colverson Will Trust was a gift of £50 to the vicar and church wardens to be invested and the income applied to the purchase of coal for distribution to the “deserving poor” of East Meon at Christmas.

A number of changes to the original trust terms of the Forbes Almshouses have been introduced over the years by means of Schemes of the Charity Commission. However the trustees of the charity remain, as originally specified by Mrs Forbes, the vicar and church wardens of East Meon Church, the owner of Bereleigh and one nominated trustee.

From the records

In 1899 the doctor was paid £10 10s a year for attending the occupants of the almshouses and the parish nurse £2 10s. The doctor’s pay remained the same until 1940 when he asked for it to be increased to £18.

The last time an occupancy agreement was signed with a cross was 1923.

In 1918 the seven occupants were paid a weekly allowance of £5 4s between them. They were given a ton of coal a year and at Christmas £1 of tea and beef but in 1941 due to rationing they were given 12/6 cash instead of beef and tea. In 1918/9 they were paid a monthly war bonus of 5/- and during the coal strike of 1921 Major Nicholson of Bereleigh provided firewood for the houses. People living alone who needed assistance were paid an extra 2/6 a week. In three cases grand-daughters (one aged only 15) did this and they were awarded 10/- at Christmas.

In 1901 there was a problem when the landlord of the George Inn’s fowl trespassed into the Almshouses’ gardens and a few years later he claimed £1 (but was paid 10/-) when his cow was injured when the closets were being emptied.

In 1908 privies were to be emptied twice weekly by a scavenger for 1/6 into the new cesspit built against the garden wall of the southernmost cottage. The next year the water was undrinkable from the water tank and the doctor was to test the cesspit for a leakage. In 1910 all houses came to be supplied by the parish water supply. The cesspit was filled in in 1928.

In 1909 Old Age State Pension of 5/-introduced so over the years the stipend paid to the occupants was reduced.

In 1911 occupants had to be reminded that they couldn’t receive visitors without permission and that children were not permitted to stay. However, in 1941 this rule was relaxed when the occupants were allowed to receive relations from bombed areas as visitors and such permission was to be reviewed 3 monthly.

From 1926 until 1950 one of the Almshouses was rented out for 1/- a year for the use of the district nurse. In 1948, as there was a bath and water heater, occupants could pay 1/- to have a bath by arrangement with the nurse.

From time to time the occupants and their carers had to be reminded that they must attend church.

In 1931 a new occupant was told that wirelesses would not be allowed but the following year they could be used with earphones with the vicar's permission.

In 1936 all houses were to get electricity for lighting from new village supply but the nurse's house was to be on a separate meter. An experimental charge of 7d a week was fixed for the first year.

In 1950 the Christmas gifts stopped and the last coal payment was in 1975.

In 1957 coal ranges were replaced by electric cookers.

There was a great deal of repair work and modernisation in the 1960s and 70s and combined with the inflation at the time it was necessary for the weekly stipends to stop. The occupants of the almshouses are, of course, no longer described as "inmates", nor do they receive allowances from the trustees – on the contrary, although they are not tenants and pay no rent, they do pay a monthly maintenance contribution without which the almshouses could not possibly have continued in being.

