

ALMSHOUSES ANNIVERSARY from Meon Matters Feb 2014

Residents of East Meon's Forbes Almshouses celebrated the 150th anniversary in November with a tea party. Delicious cake, sandwiches, champagne and plenty of happy memories brought sparkle to the special occasion. Residents together with the trustees and Canon Terry Loudon, who returned to the village for the party, attended the celebration at Ye Olde George Inn.

Here we wind back the clock to look at the history of these remarkable buildings providing much-appreciated charitable housing for a nominal charge.

Establishment

The Forbes Almshouses were established on 19 December 1863 when Mrs Joanna Agnes Forbes of Bereleigh House, East Meon, 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 1851 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 consuls and £300 new 3 per cent annuities. After running expenses and repairs the trustees were to pay to the "inmates" the sum of five shillings a week (or seven shillings and sixpence to a married couple).

On 10 August 1904 an additional site, on the east side of Church Street, opposite the existing five almshouses, was purchased by the trustees and in 1906 two additional almshouses were built by a Mr Read of West Meon. The trustees paid £80 for the land (24 perches in size) and all building costs and architects' fees amounted to less than £1,000. This sheds some light on the buying power of money in those days.

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 churchwardens of East Meon Church, the owner of Bereleigh and one nominated trustee.

There are currently eight residents living in the seven properties. In the last five years four vacancies have arisen and the trustees have advertised for applicants each time, then assessed the applications (usually two or three) to decide on the most suitable person. No waiting list is held.

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.

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 as 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 1918 the seven residents 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 proved firewood for the houses. People living alone who needed assistance were paid an extra 2/6 a week. In three cases granddaughters (one aged only 15) did this and they were awarded 10/- at Christmas.

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

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.

Rules and regulations

Original regulations banned "inmates" from taking in washing, nailing up shelves, keeping pets, hanging out laundry, carrying out a trade or being absent for more than a week without permission.

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 so that residents could receive relatives from bombed areas as visitors and such permission was to be reviewed quarterly.

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

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

In 1936 all houses were to get electricity for lighting from new village supply. 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.

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