

Almshouses – a life of privilege: a comparison of almshouse life and poor relief in Chipping Campden

by Judith Ellis

The Almshouses in Chipping Campden are notable, even in a town famous for its Cotswold stone buildings. Visitors walking from St. James's Church to the High Street can be heard reflecting on the pleasant life to be had, although the residents joke that with the proximity to the church they have 'one foot in the grave'. The building comprises twelve dwellings that date back four hundred years, possibly built on the site of a former almshouse.¹ Some information about the management of the Almshouses survives but little has been recorded about the lives of the residents. However, a few years ago eight watercolour pictures hung in the Vicarage were identified as portraits of almshouse residents in 1849-50: fortunately they are named and can be cross-referenced with the Admissions Book and the census. Using the Campden parish registers, Vestry Minutes and the limited surviving records of Shipston Poor Law Union some comparisons can be made to decide whether, at this time when the 1834 Poor Law Reform Act was implemented, an almshouse pensioner had a privileged life, considering the conditions for admission, charitable benefits and any restrictions on their life, against the lives of older people on poor relief in the community.



The Almshouses in Chipping Campden

The Almshouses were built around 1612 by Sir Baptist Hicks, a mercer and moneylender to King James I, who had formally acquired the manor of Campden in the previous year and planned substantial developments to his property. He was building Campden House on adjacent land and the Almshouses complemented the design, even benefiting from the estate's piped water supply from Westington Hill. Sir Baptist Hicks endowed the Almshouses with £140 per annum, the income from his lands in Charingworth, to provide accommodation, a pension and other benefits for six poor men and six poor women from Campden and Berrington^{2,3}. In 1744 the then Earl of Gainsborough reaffirmed the order, and set out the conditions for admission, which every 'inmate' had to abide by:

“..... I do order and appoint that none of the said poor pensioners either men or women shall marry after they are admitted into the same House, should any such marriage be contracted the place of such man or woman shall immediately be void.....
Lastly I do order and appoint as far as in me lieth that the Pensioners of the above said Hospital do and shall behave themselves soberly quietly and devoutly that they may deserve the continuance of my favour in the said House and keep up to the good Ends designed by my great and good predecessor”.

Some tokens found in Campden, dated 1648, 1679 and 1680, are ascribed to the Almshouse. Christopher Whitfield points out that they were used to ensure that money was spent where the donor wished – no chance of living riotously.⁴

The eight portraits, by an anonymous painter, give some interesting clues as to the status of the almshouse residents. They show the well-satisfied pensioners, wearing what may be considered a uniform, with the remarkable brooch which had presumably been handed down to each new resident. A description was given in the *Evesham Journal* in 1888:



Richard Chamberlain was a shoemaker, born in Campden and living in the Almshouses in 1852 with his third wife Sarah. His portrait has an inscription in Greek, translated as ‘thrice-married’. The painter may have wished to conceal his amusement at the three marriages, particularly as Sarah was over twenty years younger. She also died before her husband, in 1853, two years before his death

“..... The dress of these almshouse people is very quaint, the men wearing thick black overcoats with capes attached to them, and both men and women carrying silver ornaments, dating from the time of the foundress, Juliana Viscountess Campden, daughter of Sir Baptist Hicks. The ornaments consist of the coronet and stag’s head in the form of large brooches, beautiful in design and of great solidity”.⁵

There is a local memory of one of these brooches in the early 1900’s but none is to be found today. Sir Baptist Hicks’ will specified ‘a frieze gown and a hat’ to be given annually and it might be thought that these were ‘Sunday best’ clothes, to last for many years, but a surviving Receipts and Payments Book of the Almshouse Trust 1870 – 1884 shows payments being made to the drapers, Roberts, for women’s clothing £6 a year, and T. Brace for men’s clothing £5.10s a year, which indicates that they still received a fresh set of clothes annually.⁶ There is also an 1846 print of the street and the Almshouses at this time which shows a small figure in similar costume, so this may have been daily wear. If the Almshouse pensioners did wear these clothes daily then they would have been very distinctive as they walked along the High Street, even if the silver badge was only worn on special occasions, compared to the older people on poor relief who fortunately

by this time were not obliged to wear the badge ‘CP’ signifying Campden Poor.

By comparison, the Accounts of the Overseers to the Poor show workhouse payments to local farmers for flax and to the thread manufacturer for thread and ashes, presumably for the making of rough cloth for

clothes.⁷ Campden was a flax and hemp growing area and local place names such as Rope Walk and Twine Cottages, part of the property of a farmer and sack manufacturer, indicate that there were cottage industries to make goods for local use which probably included the weaving of cloth for clothes. The Vestry made awards of smocks and shoes and occasionally material to make clothes. Two old Campden charities provided coats for 'poor decayed men', handed out once a year by the Vestry, but according to the Charity Commissioners this practice had fallen into abeyance by 1835.⁸ Four other charities provided bread, two of which specified that the bread was handed out after church, ensuring that only the godly derived benefit.

The other benefits to the Almshouse pensioners were a ton of coals yearly and a weekly pension of 3s 4d, which with free accommodation must have made the position very desirable indeed in the early 1600's, compared to scraping an uncertain living in the community.⁹ However, according to the Receipts and Payments Book, in 1884 the pension was still the same, which drastically reduced its value in real terms.¹⁰ By this time married couples and families were permitted and they had to share this amount, as only the head of the household qualified for the allowance. The allowance was still supposedly being given in 1898, because the *Evesham Journal* printed a letter to the Editor:

"Sir, - Can any person answer the following? How is it that the old people living in the Almshouses of this town did not obtain, or rather receive, which is by law theirs, viz. - their weekly allowance for four weeks during the spring time? If so, I should be glad and many others. Also why it is that they do not receive it regularly, and at the proper time, now? Here is a distinct case for the Charity Commissioners and the sooner an enquiry is made the better for all concerned. Why it has been so quietly passed over I cannot understand; surely some light can be cast on the affair and let us know the reason. I should be glad of an answer if any one can bring any reasonable and lawful excuse, if not, then let the case go before a proper authority".

Campden, August 15, 1898. ANON.



Margaret Emms is listed in the 1851 census as the widow of a butcher, aged 67. She was born in Evesham and there are no records of any family in Campden who might have supported her when her husband died. In the 1841 census she is living with her husband and both are listed as having 'Independent Means'. It is therefore surprising that she was accepted into the Almshouses in 1842

No further information is available about how this particular issue was resolved, but it is known from local memories that the allowance and free accommodation continued until the introduction of the state pension.

In the 1851 census, Campden had 2352 inhabitants, of whom 110 were aged 60-69 years, and 75 were over 70 years old. Of these 185 older people, 36 were listed as paupers or on parish relief, and of these 18 were also listed as labourers (mainly in agriculture) including three men over 80. The Almshouse pensioners were listed as 'Occupants of Almshouse' and not as 'Paupers' - so there was a clear distinction in status as

well as the form of monetary support between those on a pension and those who claimed poor relief to supplement their wages. There are no surviving records for the amount of money given to individual claimants on outdoor relief in the Shipston Union at this time but the 1822-35 Vestry Minutes for Campden show varying awards dependent on family circumstances and other sources of income, but similar to the Almshouse weekly allowance.

Sir Baptist Hicks decreed that the places were for six poor men and six poor women (taken to refer to older people) and his successor confirmed that they should remain single and lead sober and devout lives – a restriction that did not apply to older people in their own homes. The Admissions Book for 1739 – 1961 contains the signed statements by new residents:

“Be it remembered that I being put into the almshouses at Campden in the room and place of Deceased for one year and so from year to year so long as I shall behave myself well Do hereby promise and agree with The Right Hon The Earl of Gainsborough to submit to obey and abide by the rules orders and constitutions of the said almshouses and not to keep or entertain any dweller or dwellers in my apartment of the said almshouse without a licence obtained from the said Earl of Gainsborough or his Steward for the time being for so doing upon pain of forfeiting my weekly allowances to the poor of Chipping Campden for every and each weeks offence contrary to the above mentioned agreement”.¹¹

Although admission statements continued to be signed throughout this time the rules were clearly relaxed later, as the 1841-1901 censuses show that not only married couples but also a range of relatives occupied the Almshouses, with the younger members of the family bringing in wages. These supplements from



Richard Cooper entered the almshouse in 1839, having been supported for many years on poor relief. The Vestry Minutes show him applying for, but not always getting, help in the form of an allowance, smock frocks, shoes and linen. In the Almshouses his son Francis, aged 25, was living with him. Both of them are listed as agricultural labourers in the 1851 census.

wage-earning relatives may have been seen as a way of maintaining the weekly pension at the level that it had remained for the past two hundred and fifty years. According to the 1851 census just four occupants were living alone - Ann Hartwell, William Gardiner, Margaret Emms and Elizabeth Sandford. One dwelling was empty, Martha Nobes having died in the previous month, and three contained married couples. William Wilson had a brother with him, aged 69 and working as a flax dresser; Richard Cooper's 25 year old son, Francis, was an agricultural labourer; Sarah Penson's daughter was a schoolmistress and one dwelling had no head of household listed but two granddaughters aged 19 and 12, the elder being a shoe binder.

From a reconstruction of these families using the parish registers and censuses it is found that only three of the pensioners had other adult children living in Campden, and the lack of family support for the others may have been a contributory reason for admission.

Of the 36 older people on parish relief in 1851, three were living alone and 13 were with a spouse; three were living in a household headed by an unrelated person and eight were head of the household with sons and daughters

and their families. In addition, four of the older paupers had only grandchildren with them, ranging in age from three to sixteen years old. The caring situation could work both ways and the Board of Guardians may have seen this outdoor relief as a way of keeping both old and young out of the workhouse. At this time, according to the Shipston census, only seven people born in Campden were in the workhouse, four of these being over 60 years old. This may not be totally accurate, as Campden people may have been accommodated in workhouses outside the Union, but it appears that outdoor relief was still seen as preferable for maintaining older people in the community. It seems, therefore, that at this time the importance of family support applied equally to Almshouse residents and those receiving outdoor relief.

The recommendations may have been influenced by the history and status of the applicants: the sample of the eight pensioners who had their portraits painted in 1849-51 shows that they included a schoolmistress, the widows of a butcher and basketmaker, two gardeners, and a shoemaker. The other two who were portrayed were an agricultural labourer and a widow of one, as were the other four residents, so there were equal numbers of unskilled and skilled people represented at this time. This would not be a fair representation of these groups in the population, indicating that the Vestry recommendations to the Earl favoured those people who might be sober and devout. One interesting exception is Richard Cooper, who was a regular applicant for poor relief in the years prior to his entry into the Almshouses. The 1822 Vestry Minutes detail applications for a sheet and an amount of 1s a week for his son Charles, indicating that the family was already on a regular allowance.¹² His petitions continued through the years and in April 1835 he applied for a pair of shoes for himself and a smock for his son Francis, but was only allowed the smock. He followed up in December with a successful request for shoes for Francis.¹³ The decisions for poor relief then passed to the Shipston Union Board of Guardians but the Campden Vestrymen may have felt that such a long-standing petitioner deserved a recommendation for an Almshouse place in 1839. William Wilson was another Almshouse resident who had previously applied for support: in 1835 he unsuccessfully asked for relief for time lost and later was awarded 'labour'.¹⁴

Life in the Almshouses must have compared quite well with life in the community in the mid 1800's: there was no obligation to work, as there was under the poor law; the accommodation was well-built and probably well-maintained with space at the back for a garden and animals; clothing and fuel was provided – and there was the occasional treat. The Evesham Journal reported on 11 January 1862:

“Our alms houses, which were built and endowed by one of the Noel family, and which are sure to gain the admiration of all who see them, not more for the beauty of the buildings than the pleasantness of their situation, were visited by Viscountess Campden and her daughter the Hon Miss Noel on Christmas Day, when the inmates, twelve in number, were each presented with ¼ lb tea, 1 lb sugar and 2s 6d in cash – gifts which excited the most grateful feelings in the hearts of the recipients”.

And in 1888:

“TREAT TO ALMSHOUSE INMATES – On Tuesday week Mr. and Lady Constance Bellingham, who have been passing the summer at Campden House, entertained all those inmates of the almshouses that were able to come, with a substantial dinner. After the dinner they went over the house and grounds. They were brought up to the house in brakes, provided at the Noel Arms Hotel, and seemed to have enjoyed themselves greatly in spite of the weather, which was somewhat damp and cheerless. After a good tea, they were all re-conveyed in the same manner to their homes.... Those persons, who from age or infirmity were unable to attend, were provided with a meal at their own homes. It is said to be some eight years since they had a similar feast”.

This was repeated in 1891.

All the townspeople were able to participate in major events, regardless of status: when Queen Victoria's Jubilee was celebrated in 1897 there was a 'Grand Procession with a Public Dinner' in the Market Square,

with gifts for the poor. The workhouse inmates in Shipston were also allowed to celebrate the Jubilee, according to the Master's Report:

"I beg to report that the aged inmates and children were invited to tea and sports on Jubilee Day, they enjoyed the treat very much, and I am pleased to say the old people behaved themselves very well indeed.....

...The inmates had the extra fare allowed for the Jubilee yesterday (Friday) they wish to thank the Board for the same".¹⁵

The Shipston workhouse also received gifts throughout year of tea, sugar, sweets and parcels of papers from the good ladies of the town, which was more than that received by those on outdoor relief, who only had occasional handouts of bread.

The Almshouse pensioners who were portrayed in 1850 look very contented with their situation – this may have been artist's licence, but it does seem likely that the position was desirable and gave them a sense of privilege which would not have been felt by those on poor relief. The advantages were the rights to the benefits of a regular allowance, clothes and fuel compared to the situation of the other old people who had to ask for their needs to be met and might be refused, upon examination by the all-powerful Vestry. All the older people were apparently expected to show gratitude, as reflected in the various reports, but these days we might question whether this was really felt or was an expression of the times.



Elizabeth Sandford was the widow of Joseph Sandford, the town basketmaker. He was buried on 19 May 1845, aged 63 years, and she entered the Almshouses about a year later. There are no records of any children baptised in Campden or any family who might have supported her when he died. Her aged is given on the portrait as 74 years

References

¹ Lease for 81 years, 10 Oct 1590; Sir Thomas Smith leases to W, Edwardes a house & building on the Cawsey Way in Berrington adjoining the alms house with barns and backsides; consid. £105. DE3214 41/110 p.25 (Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland)

² Berrington was the original parish in which the Almshouses were built, now part of Chipping Campden.

³ Deed of Foundation of the Almshouses 25 August 1635 DE 3214 194/19 (Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland)

⁴ Whitfield C. *History of Campden* (Eton Windsor, Shakespeare Head Press, 1958) p.142

⁵ *Evesham Journal* (Evesham Library)

⁶ Receipts and Payments book 1870-84. (Sir Baptist Hicks Almshouse Trust)

⁷ Accounts of the Overseers to the Poor 1805 Gloucestershire Archives (hereafter GA) P81 O/V 2/3. Wood ashes were used to make a solution of lye, for bleaching the yarn before weaving.

⁸ Report of the Commissioners concerning the Education of the Poor, Gloucester 1835 p.468 (Gloucestershire Archives)

⁹ This amount would equate to a spending power today of £14.86. (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency)

¹⁰ Receipts and Payments book 1870-84. (Sir Baptist Hicks Almshouse Trust)

¹¹ Almshouse Admissions Book 1739-1961. (Sir Baptist Hicks Almshouse Trust)

¹² Campden Vestry Minutes GA P81 VE 2/1

¹³ Campden Vestry Minutes GA P81 VE 2/5

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Shipston Union Workhouse Master's Report Book 1897-98 CR51 1084. (Warwick Record Office)

The portraits are included courtesy of the Vicar of St. James's Church, Chipping Campden.



Cover picture. The almshouses in Chipping Campden founded by Sir Baptist Hicks in 1612

[Image from front cover]