

More about the Almshouses

The Life of a Medieval Almsman

In return for their modest home, Almsmen were required to lead a semi-monastic life and obey strict rules enforced by fines. Twelve of the Almsmen received a stipend 14d a week, the thirteenth almsman was appointed as a 'minister' to monitor the behaviour of his brethren, and so received 16d per week. The dwellings consisted of two rooms, one up one down, with 2 hearths (one a cooking range) and a sink. (Perks consisted of free candles, and firewood). On the west side was a communal bath house, lavatories and a mortuary. Outer clothing consisted of a hooded tabard with a red cross sewn on it.

The function of Almsmen was to pray [chant] for the souls of their benefactors their intercessory prayers ensuring their souls did not linger long in Purgatory but sped swiftly to heaven. Their day was full of devotion. They were to pray on waking then attended Matins at 6 am, Prime at 9 am. Daily Mass in St John's Chapel. Evensong at 3 pm in the Church where they had to stay until Compline. The Lady Psalter had to be said three times containing 50 Hail Marys, 25 Our Fathers and three Creeds. Every day, after Mass and Compline, everyone had to gather round the tomb of Thomas and Maud Chaucer for more prayers. After that they had to attend None, the last office of the day. Lateness at services resulted in fines.

Almsmen's Rules enforced by Fines

Almsmen were not allowed to roam abroad more than a mile, associate with outsiders or leave for more than one hour without permission, sublet their cloister or bring in women. Penalties were also applied to insubordination, arguing, idle talk, working for money, begging, dancing and alcohol!

The Almshouses in later centuries

The Tudors allowed the Foundation to remain in place, and fortunately Henry VIII did not dissolve the Chantry in 1536 and take the money into his treasury.

King James 1st sought to favour Oxford University by altering the original foundation and giving the position of Almsmaster to the University's Regius Professor of Medicine. Gradually the supervision lessened and through mismanagement and neglect, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries the almshouses declined. Rules were ignored, church attendance ceased. Almsmen moved their families into their cramped two-roomed dwellings or sublet to live and work elsewhere.

After 1829 newly appointed Almsmaster Dr Kidd and Rector Burton mainly restored the Almshouse function. Wives were allowed to remain, but a widow had to leave, unless she could marry the incoming almsmen. Mary 'Granny' Hutchings was the first widow to be allowed to remain, dying in 1965 aged 94, and finally, in 1976, Minnie Harris appointed the first almswoman in her own right.

In the mid-1970s the Cloisters were modernised and enlarged to make 8 units. Suffolk House in The Street was built with 5 homes receiving the first occupant Lucy Thomas in 1977.