

ALMSHOUSES IN HIGH WYCOMBE

There are still almshouses in High Wycombe today. Much of their history is closely related to the development of the **ROYAL GRAMMAR SCHOOL** which in turn owed its foundation in 1562 to the much earlier existence of **ST JOHN'S HOSPITAL**. The remains of the hospital were preserved for a long time as an integral part of the fabric of the school building and only exposed when the grammar school moved to a new building immediately behind them in 1883. In this early photograph (*SWOP ref. RHW43001*) through the ruins you can just see some of the Victorian almshouses on the other side of the road.



St John's Hospital for the sick and the poor was founded in about 1180^{AD}.

The five columns and arches of the ruins still standing today are the remains of the Hall, part of which was demolished in 1767 when the Beaconsfield to Stokenchurch turnpike came into being.

The adjacent structure with two gothic windows (of 13th and 14th century origin) probably dates from the building of a chantry chapel which the Pope permitted in 1239.

The Hospital was run by a Master and community of brothers and sisters who by 1276 were in the patronage of the Mayor and Burgesses of the town.

It received endowments of land and money from the wealthy, and new Burgesses were levied a customary half penny payment.

In 1548, following the Suppression of the Chantries, it was sequestrated to the Crown but after much negotiation the town acquired the property for a grammar school in 1562.

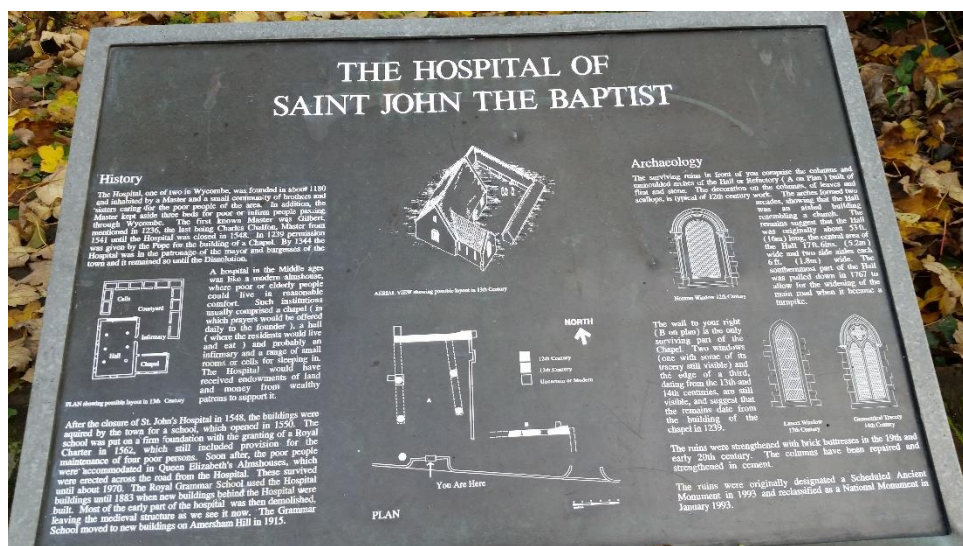


This picture taken in 2016 by David Snoxell shows the ruins of St John's hospital in front of the 1883 Royal Grammar School buildings designed by Arthur Vernon (now again renovated as office accommodation and re-named St John's Place).

In 1883, the ruins were initially saved from demolition thanks to the intervention of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society and John Parker, who was Clerk to the Governors of the School. A later campaign to prevent further degradation, after the Royal Grammar School moved to the top of Amersham Hill in 1915, was led by the artist and antiquarian Francis Colmer.

In 2015 the High Wycombe Society campaigned for better care to be taken of them and were pleased when the current owners of the site took action to clear overgrowth and present them as a desirable feature rather than an encumbrance.

As part of the 2016 renovation of their office site Morgan Lovell restored the information board. The text gives a succinct account and plans of the Hospital and its history.



THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONERS appointed in pursuance of various acts of parliament to enquire concerning Charities in England and Wales relating to the County of Buckingham (1819-1837) includes a description of the almshouses to be found in High Wycombe.

These comprised:

4 adjoining the schoolhouse – accommodating **8** almspeople

7 “the Newland almshouses” said to be built by Mr Waller MP on Pagan’s Mead – each with one room above and one below and shared wash house - **14** inhabitants

2 in St Mary St (under one roof – one above and one below) – **4** persons

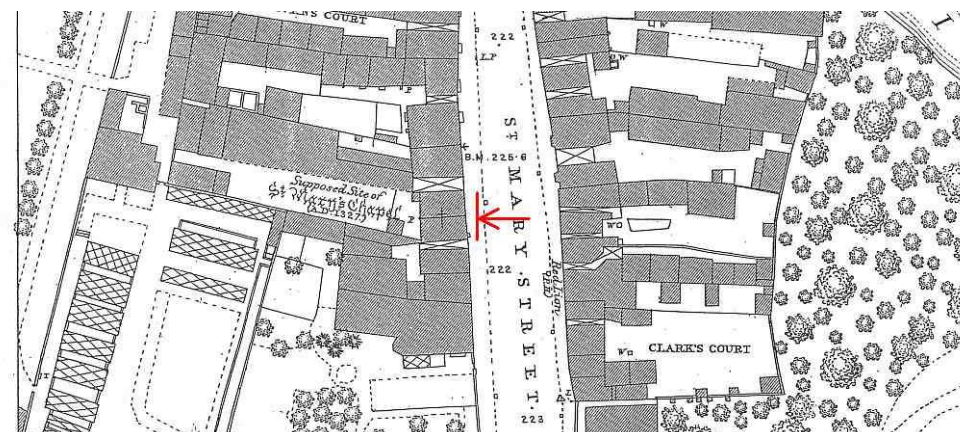
And **5** in Easton Street. Of these two were under one roof (each with one above and one below with shared wash house) accommodating **2** persons with families and the other **3** were said to adjoin the workhouse – occupied by **1** person each.

Allowances were therefore being paid by the charity to **a total of 23 persons in 14 houses (in addition to the 8 almspeople in the 4 houses** adjoining the schoolhouse).



THE ST MARY STREET ALMSHOUSES

In a letter to the Charity Commissioners, the Wycombe Charity Trustees said “whence the funds were derived out of which these almshouses were built is not known”. They were sold in 1870 to Mr Hutchinson after new almshouses had been built in Easton St.



Maps show the St Mary St almshouses were in front of the supposed site of St Mary’s Chapel.

Back in 1835, following the Municipal Corporations Act, The Wycombe Charity Trustees had responsibility for a wide range of endowments both for the grammar school and its associated almshouses; they were also responsible for managing and maintaining Rye Mead (until 1923 when it was handed back to Wycombe Corporation.)

THE HAYWARD, whose duties included attending to the cows that grazed on Rye Mead, was regarded as an Almsperson for whom they provided not only a cottage but also boots and appropriate clothing.

(Photo SWOP Ref. RHW08129 – the Hayward's cottage on the edge of The Rye)



Among the many endowments received after the school's foundation was an investment of £1000 bequeathed by **MARY BOWDEN** in her will of 1790.

To pay within six months next after my decease also I give and bequeath unto the Reverend James Bowden of the Borough of Chepping Wycombe in the County of Bucks Clerk and Vicar King of the same Borough in the County of Bucks Gentlemen the Sum of one Thousand Pounds to be by them laid out and invested in the Publick funds or in the purchase of lands tenements and hereditaments in the County of Bucks which shall appear to them most advantageous for raising the pious and liberal disposition of the said Mary Bowden into Execution upon Trust in the first place as for and returning the Sum of Twenty Pounds part of the interest Dividends or Rent and produce so to arise from the said one Thousand Pounds as aforesaid I do hereby with order and direct the same to be paid into the Hands of William Thomas the present Master and Teacher of the free and Grammar School in the Borough of Chepping Wycombe aforesaid in augmentation and addition to his present salary and after his death discharge or resignation to be paid unto such other person or persons as shall be nominated and appointed in his stead Master of the said free and Grammar School and to his Successors for ever and the remainder of the said said Dividends or Rents and profits so to arise from the said one Thousand Pounds shall be applied for the buying of Clothes and fuel for such poor widow persons as shall live in and be entitled to the benefit of the Almshouse at the bottom of the Town of Wycombe in equal shares and parts One as for and returning the rest residue and remainder of my Real and personal estate whatsoever and whosoever not herebefore by me disposed of I give devise and bequeath the same and every part thereof unto them the said Mary Bowden Spinster to have and to hold unto her heirs and the Children of her

She requested that the interest be used to increase the salary of the schoolmaster and provide clothes and fuel for the inhabitants of the almshouses "at the Bottom of Chepping Wycombe". It is not clear for certain which almshouses she was referring to.

The Wycombe Charity Trustees became The Royal Grammar School and Almshouse Foundation which was regulated by a scheme dated 29 June 1878, made under the Endowed Schools Acts (subsequently altered by schemes in 1882, 1900 and 1904.)

Extract from the Minutes of the Royal Grammar School and Almshouse Foundation in 1897

The agent reported that he had this day visited the almspeople and ascertained that the united ages of the occupants of the almshouses in Easton St were 634 or an average of a little over 69 and that the united ages of the occupants of the almshouses in Newland were 474 or an average of 79. This seems to confirm 6 almspeople in Newland and 9 almspeople in the Easton St houses at that time. It is likely that this included a married couple in Easton St.

The first **EASTON STREET ALMSHOUSES** *(SWOP Refs RHW 46050 and RHW46051)*



Nestled alongside the School Master's house in the first of these two similar pictures of the Royal Grammar School are 4 Almshouses on the North side of Easton Street. They were demolished in 1877 so do not appear in the later picture.

It is difficult to determine exactly how many almshouses there were at any given time.

Queen Elizabeth's letters patent in 1562 expressly permitted use of revenues for the maintenance of 4 poor persons. Some houses were built or rebuilt as early as 1686.

In 1856, a "Chancery scheme" allowed for 18 almspeople.

In 1866, it is on record that 4 almshouses were



to be pulled down and replaced. In 1869, 2 almshouses said to be "adjacent to Naith's Mead" and the 2 "other almshouses in St Mary's street" were sold.

In 1877 the 4 almshouses adjoining the school were deemed to be in a "dangerous state" of dilapidation – they were promptly "pulled down" and "materials stacked" for sale. In the 1878 scheme, despite some significant resistance from the Reform Association as well as the trustees, the number of almshouses was reduced to 14.

(Meanwhile at a much earlier date in 1727, one almshouse in Easton Street had been closed down and let to the Overseers as a Workhouse).

THE “NEW” EASTON STREET ALMSHOUSES – on the South side.

(Photos include SWOP ref BFP 33071)

Before the construction of Abbey Way, eight pitched roofs of almshouses on the South side of Easton Street were a familiar sight on the A40 on entering High Wycombe. In 1866 these



were known as the “new almshouses ready for occupation”. The architect was E J Payne and the builder Mr Spicer. Upon their completion it was resolved that “2 old almshouses adjoining the new almshouses be removed, that the Eastern wall of Mr Wrights house adjoining be secured, and that a hoarding be erected on the new line of frontage.”

The less well-known rear view shows their gardens backed onto the river Wye. Note the grammar school buildings can just be seen on the right-hand edge of the photo.

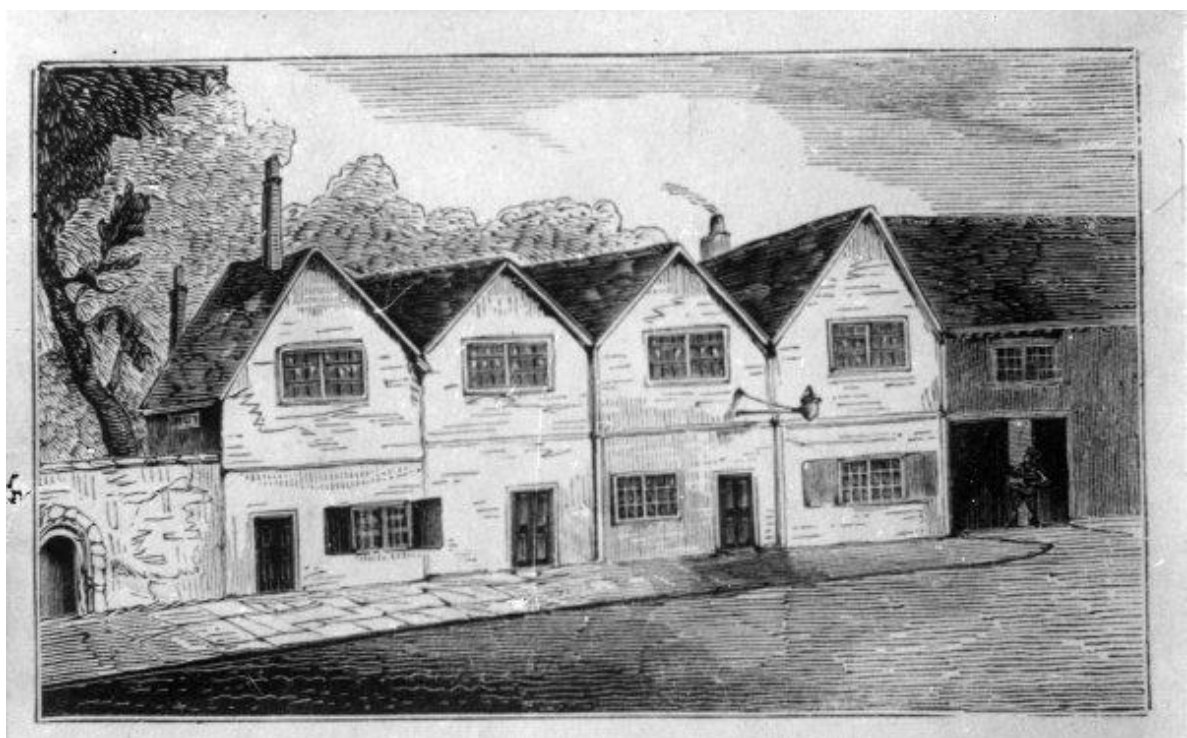


A group of almshouse residents in their back garden in 1957.

This is one of many images in the SWOP collection of the fronts of the eight almshouses on the South side of Easton Street. (SWOP Ref. RHW18001)



It has been suggested that the houses in an engraving, dated 1833, were also used as almshouses. According to Charles Raffety, these fronted the High Street near where the library gardens are now. Might these have been the two almshouses said to be “adjacent to Naith’s Mead”? or were they included in the “5 almshouses” said to be on Easton Street? (SWOP ref. RHW29010).



THE NEWLAND "WALLER" ALMSHOUSES

Until c1860 there were seven almshouses in Newland, said to have been built at the expense of Mr Waller MP for Chepping Wycombe. It is likely that one was demolished for road

widening. A proposal in 1860 to build 14 new almshouses in Newland was NOT implemented and instead, unused land was sold off at auction in 17 lots.

Six almshouses remained, repaired and managed by the High Wycombe Grammar School and Almshouse Foundation. They can be seen on the left in this photo. The building in the centre is the Elephant and Castle public house. (SWOP Ref. RHW01068).



In 1899 the minutes record that they were in bad condition *"Floors too low, tiling decayed with no damp course and too damp to be comfortable to live in. The roofs required stripping and recovering. To relay the roofs with tiles would Cost £66 with slate and boarding £97 with slate without boarding £85 and even then the houses would not be in a satisfactory condition"*.

The Agent recommended selling the properties in the Spring. The property was sold in 1900.

Another view of the Newland Almshouses

(SWOP ref. BFP33369)



THE JOHN LANE ALMSHOUSES

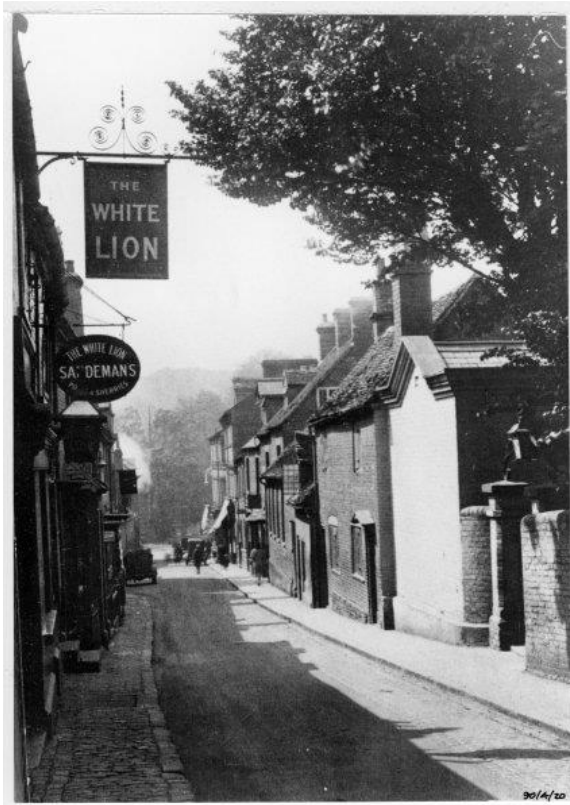
Quite separate from any of the "schemes" related to the grammar school was a legacy of John Lane of Hammersmith whose will, proved in November 1675, bequeathed: Two little tenements in Cornell (i.e. Crendon) Lane in Chepping Wicomb with their appurtenances for Almshouses for habitation of two poor widows or two other poor old people.

In the Name of God Amen The Second day of January In the year of our Lord 1674 I John Lane of Hammersmith in the County of Middlesex doe make this my last Will and Testament revoking all former wills by me made as followeth Jamprimis I give and bequeath my Soule into the hands of my Lord and God hoping in his Mercy and in and through the righteousness of Jesus Christ my Redeemer to be saved and delivered from all my sinnes and the punishment of them and to inherit everlasting life My Body I desire to be buried in Christian burrell in the Church of little Greenford alias Werrvale where I hope for a joyful Resurrection according to the scriptures And concerning my worldly Estate I will as followeth I give and appoint these my two little Tenements in Cornell Lane in Chepping Wicomb in the County of Bucks with their appurtenances for Almshouses for habitation of two poore Widdowes or two other poore old people as the major part of my friends and persons herein hereafter named or appointed to be Overseers thereof shall choose and of the poore Inhabitants of Chepping Wicomb aforesaid And I give and appoint for the maintaining of the same Charitable use my messuage and Lands therunto belonging and therewith now used in great Missenden in the County of Bucks which I bought of William Wall Flower deceased and also the little close of Land which I bought of Robert Lane in great Missenden aforesaid and my two Tenements in Osmondesham in the said County of Bucks which I bought of William Mead Carpenter and purchased in my owne name and in the name of Andrew Hall And I appoint unto each of my poore Almshouse people forty shillings in money yearly to be paid at or about the feasts of the Nativity of St John the Baptist St Michael the Archangel St Thomas the Apostle

Em
John Lane Sr

Property mentioned in Amersham and Great Missenden was eventually sold in the late nineteenth century to increase the endowment. Property in Hammersmith was passed on to his wife and family.

And I will that if my executors or heirs or their Guardian shall not confirm but doe deny or refuse upon request to confirm and make good this my Will and appointment of the said two little Tenements in Cornell Lane to the use I have herein expressed then I will and appoint Sir Iury Legard as in this Will doe bequeath to them my heirs and Guardian of Sir Iury to be void Except my Lands and Tenements in Werrvale herein bequeathed to my said heirs And all my right and title therein And then I appoint and desire the Executors of my Will to bestow on building or buying two or three such Tenements in the Parroch of Chepping Wicomb aforesaid the sume of Sixty Pounds in money to be employed for habitation of the said two poore people as aforesaid instead of the two little Tenements in Cornell Lane And I give to each of my said Almshouse people as a thankful acknowledgment of their good will undertaking the said Trust and Care forty shillings a peece Item I give to my loving wife Mary the Lease of my house and Land therunto belonging in which I now dwell in Hammersmith aforesaid And I also give unto her the sume of Eight hundred Pounds in money part of the money now remaining in the hands of my nephew John



John Lane's legacy in 1675 initially founded 2 almshouses in Crendon Lane. They can be seen in this picture on the Right Hand Side immediately beyond the white end of Crendon Lane chapel. These were demolished when Crendon Lane was widened to become Crendon Street.

(SWOP Photo reference: RHW:35010)

Another photograph (SWOP reference: RHW:03039) below shows the almshouses about to be demolished. The adjacent cottage has already been demolished.

CRENDON LANE



Prior to their demolition, in 1928, two bungalows were built to replace them in Suffield Road.

The John Lane Charity still exists as a separate charity today although it is administered from the same office as the Wycombe Almshouse Foundation. There are still two almshouse bungalows in Suffield Road.

SUFFIELD ROAD



HIGH WYCOMBE ALMSHOUSES TODAY



Today Chichester Close on the East side of Bowerdean Road is the site of the office of the Wycombe Almshouses Association, a charity which provides accommodation in the form of 17 almshouse dwellings for selected residents over the age of 50 who have fallen on hard times.

No longer associated with the Royal Grammar School, the two organisations have been managed separately since 1962.

Within the grounds at Chichester Close is a stone which commemorates the six Newland almshouses being rebuilt in 1901. This relates to their first rebuilding on the West side of what is now Bowerdean Road. The land was donated by Daniel Clarke and was variously referred to as Lower Gordon Road, Upper Gordon Road and Bowerdean Road as the Bowerdean estate had not yet been built.

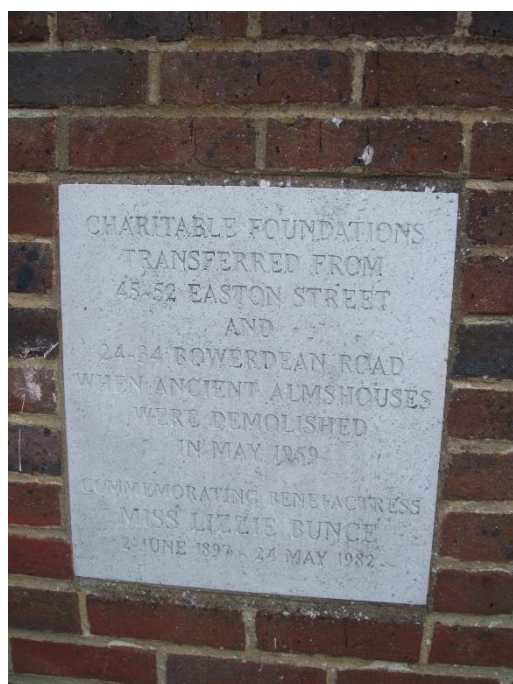


On the wall outside the Almshouses in Chichester Close are 2 tablets commemorating episodes in their history.

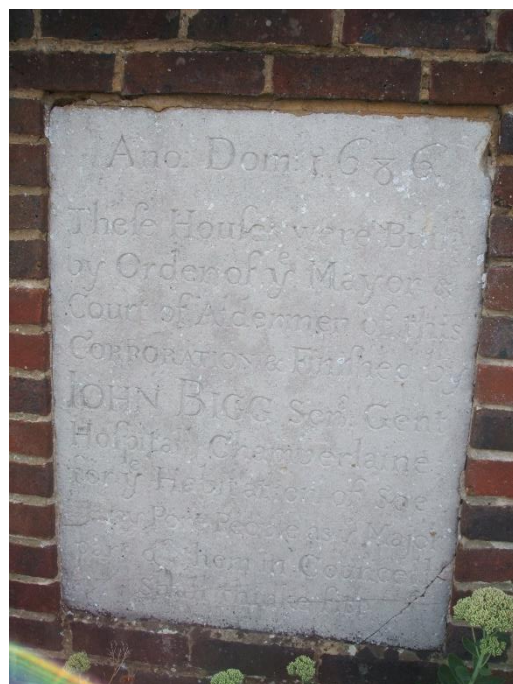


The first records the former locations of almshouses whose residents were moved to the Chichester close almshouses when they were built in 1971 or soon thereafter; they came from 45-52 Easton Street (the South Side of Easton Street) and 24-34 Bowerdean Road (the West side, opposite Chichester Close).

The second tablet commemorates the much earlier rebuilding in 1686 by order of the Mayor and completed by John Bigg Sen. Hospital Chamberlain. This would appear to have been a re-building of the original four Elizabethan almshouses adjacent to the school on the North side of Easton St. although it could have been the construction of additional almshouses.



The minutes of the Wycombe Almshouse Foundation record that this “historic stone” was moved to its current location from Easton Street at the time of the demolition of the almshouses on the south side of Easton Street.



WYCOMBE'S WORKHOUSES

In the Report of the Commissioners appointed ... to enquire concerning Charities in ... the County of Buckingham (1819-1837), the Borough Workhouse appears in a long list of the properties owned by the (School) Charity as “a large building formerly almshouses and three cottages used at the time of our inquiry as a workhouse. They had been built by the corporation and let to the overseers.” An almshouse had been let to the Overseers of the Poor for this purpose as early as 1727. There was also a Parish Workhouse at Marsh Green.

Both workhouses (and many more) ceased to exist when the Wycombe Union came into being and the whole area was served by the large new workhouse at Saunderton, seen below from a distance.



The former Borough workhouse was leased in 1839 for a period of 14 years “with the gardens thereto belonging” to William Harding who was “not permitted to remove a tablet from the front of the property”. After that, at least 2 of the new almshouses in Easton St were built “on the site of the old workhouse”.

The former Parish workhouse was converted to cottages (Box Tree Cottage and Riversdale) and the adjoining governor’s quarters enlarged and made into the rather more elaborate Dower House by Lord Carrington to accommodate his step-mother.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Research for this Exhibition was primarily carried out by Jackie Kay.

Thanks are due to Cllr Paul Turner for facilitating a visit to the almshouses in Chichester Close and for enabling access to Wycombe Almshouse Foundation records concerning their building.

Some of the material used, particularly in the sections on St John's Hospital and the Parish Workhouse at Marsh Green was previously published in articles by David Snoxell written for the High Wycombe Society Newsletter.

Grateful assistance was received from Harvey Coltman in identifying the exact locations of the almshouses in St Mary St and Crendon St. Useful material was also found in the book 'Seekers and Finders' by Hugh and Joyce Mellor.

Many of the photographs included are taken from the SWOP collection and are reproduced here by kind permission of Wycombe Library and the Bucks Free Press.

The Report of the Commissioners appointed in pursuance of various acts of parliament to enquire concerning Charities in England and Wales relating to the County of Buckingham (1819-1837) can be found in a bound volume on Wycombe library shelves.

The Minutes of the Wycombe Charity Trustees and the Grammar School and Almshouse Foundation can be accessed at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies where there are also many boxes of related correspondence, title deeds and other supporting documentation.

Several volumes of the minutes of the Guardians of the Poor who managed the Saunderton workhouse are also at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies.

Included in the exhibition is an article written by Jackie Kay for the Chilterns Aetna Magazine concerning the sole remaining building of the Wycombe Union workhouse at Saunderton.

There is also an interesting article on E J Payne, the architect of the Easton St Almshouses in the Records of Buckinghamshire in 1990.

A constant reference throughout the research on the Wycombe Grammar School and Almshouse Foundation was "The History of the Royal Grammar School" by L J Ashworth and C M Harworth, published in 1962.