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The Old Almshouses of Watford.

BY HELEN RUDD.

IN the Spring of 1931 a long-forgotten manuscript book¹ was sent back to Watford from Australia, where it had been found in the library of a former Watford resident. His daughter (Miss Emilie Vaughan) has now restored it to its native-place after an absence of many years at the other side of the world.

On the first page there is a brief summary of its contents :—

“ A Yearly Rental of the Estates and An Account of the Annuities, Government Securities and sums of money respectively belonging to the Church and Parish of WATFORD in the County of HARTFORD and Diocese of LONDON, as the same stood at Lady Day 1771, and of the several pious and charitablouses to which they are respectively applicable, as nearly as they can now be ascertained.

Compiled from the several Wills, Deeds and writings, and other the most authentick Evidence, which could be procured by EDW^d. WOODCOCK Vicar.”

Foremost among the “ Charitablouses ” are those which have been so much in the public eye during the last year, being the oldest inhabited houses left in Watford, and the chapter thereon is headed :—

“ 8 ALMSHOUSES ”

with a marginal note

“ Taken from the original feoffment of 21 Feby 1580.”

¹ A substantial little volume, 7ins. x 8ins, bound in marbled boards, with a bookplate lettered *S. B. Vaughan* (a lawyer of Watford). The book is in excellent preservation and clearly written on lined paper, with a tinted plan of “ Loates or Lofts Lane leading to Bushey Mill ” from Watford High Street. See footnote 15.

There are seven pages replete with detail beginning :

“ Francis Earl of Bedford & Brigitte Countess of Bedford his wife, by Deed of Feoffment bearing date the 21st day of Febry 1580 with Livery and seizen endorsed, did enfeoff and confirm unto Arthur Lord Graye, Sir Hy Nevill Knt., Sir John Souche Knt., Anthony Tarrell, Miles San.² John Busshye, Cha^s. Husey Sen^r., Charles Husey Jun^r. Esq^{rs}, and John Husey Gentⁿ. All that peice of Land more or less as it then lay enclosed with hedges and ditches in a certⁿ. place there called the Parsonage Barn Yard.

“ And also all those 8 tenem^t. Houses & appurt^s. of the s^d. Lady Brigitte lately built with 8 crofts. To the Intent that they their heirs and assigns sho^d. permit from time to time in future for ever 8 Poor Women (Almswomen) to be maintained and dwell in the s^d. Tenem^{ts}. during their life, in each one poor woman. To which uses and intentions the s^d. 8 houses were built by the s^d. Earl and Countess.”

These “ 8 Houses ” have fallen into a sad state of dilapidation and were lately in danger of demolition, but their restoration is now assured. In 1832 the Report of the Charity Commissioners thus describes them :—

“ The Almshouses are a lathe-and-plaster building, containing 16 apartments on the ground-floor (being two for each Almswoman) together with a large common room on the upper floor. There is a garden behind the building, which is divided into eight portions. These are at their own option either cultivated by the women themselves or let at small rents by them for their own benefit.”

In 1930, Mr. A. R. Powys, Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, reports as follows :—

“ Of considerable interest and beauty, being buildings of the late 16th century, they were



THE ESSEX ALMSHOUSES, WATFORD,
which have been in constant occupation from A.D. 1580 to the present time.

replastered and very slightly modified (as regards the windows and some doors) in the 18th century. With the adjacent Church, the School and the open ground to the Churchyard, they form a beautiful portion of Watford, which would be sadly harmed by their loss. They are so completely an example of their period, including roof, walls, partitions and floors. The roof, particularly, is a good example of Elizabethan carpentry, constructed of fine, sound, oak rafters."

The Inventory of National Monuments refers to "the five gables in front, the original window-frames repaired, and four original chimney-stacks with two shafts each, which also remain."

Returning to Vicar Woodcock's further interesting details in the old book, we find:—

"The Poor Women should be taken and chosen from time to time of the poorest and most neediest within the Parishes of Watford, Cheyneys, or Langley, and that every poor woman sh^d. not be removed during their natural lives except she sh^d. willingly depart, or except it be for some notorious crime or cause to be tho^t. meet by the heir of the s^d. Countess."³

A later marginal note by the Vicar is taken "from a printed copy of the Act of Parliament, in the 12th year of the Reign of his pres^t. Majesty King George the 3^d," when the Ceometry or Churchyard was to be enlarged. For this purpose the eight old ladies were deprived of the whole of their courtyard, "abutting on the road near the Wall of the orig^l. Churchy^d." They also lost "that small part or nook of a Garden belong^g. to one of the s^d. Almshouses in the possⁿ. of Anne Bowden, contg^g. one Perch little more or less, and the small peice or Nook of a certain Close called Almond Wick Yard⁴ bounded by the Alms Yard."

³ The Almswomen were afterwards nominated by the successive Earls of Essex, heirs of the donor.

⁴ *Almond* was probably the name of a former owner (there are several examples in Hertfordshire wills, such as John Almond's Barnyard, Royston), and the A.S. suffix *wick*, Latin *vicus*, signifies a small village, or owner's seat. The name is still retained in the vicinity.

And here we have another marginal note by the Vicar:

“ From my own knowledge of the facts.”

E. W.

and he records that “ the sd. Court Yard hath been since accordingly appropriated and duly consecrated by the Right Rev^d. Rich^d. (Terrick) Lord Bishop of London on Monday the 3^d. day of Aug^t. A.D. 1772.” But I think that Anne Bowden and the other ladies were sighing for their lost Nook of a Garden, for the kindly Vicar tells us later that “ in order to provide a reasonable recompense for the 8 Poor Women, the Overseers of the Poor are authorised to pay out of the rates the sum of 40 shillings yearly for ever, to be p^d. to and equally divided among the sd. 8 Poor Almswomen on the 24th day of Dec^r. in every Year, the 1st paym^t. thereof to begin on the first 24th day of Dec^r. next.”⁵

It would seem that there was some friction: the Vicar observes:—

“ At that very remote period, it was apprehended that it w^d. be very difficult if not impracticable to discover which of the original feoffees was the survivor whose heir could be found to authorize the conveyance of the Alms Yard and other the prem^s. comprised in the Ancient Deed.”

The necessary sanction was eventually given by “ Ann Holles, (4th) Earl of Essex, the heir and descend^t. of the sd. Brigitte Countess of Bedford,”⁶ and later the Eight Almshouses merged their name in that of Essex by which they are commonly known still, despite efforts to alter it to Bedford or Russell Almshouses.

The old Table of Benefactions on the Vestry wall in the Parish Church of Watford, records this Charity as “ The Eight Almshouses,” and in the Report of the Commissioners for 1832 we find it thus:—

“ The Earl and Countess of Bedford’s Almshouses commonly called—

⁵ And this “ recompense ” is still paid.

⁶ Her great-grand daughter, Elizabeth Morrison, married Arthur, Lord Capel of Hadham, and she was the mother of the 1st (Capel) Earl of Essex.

THE EIGHT ALMSHOUSES.

“ In respect of the great care he had that the said Almshouses and the eight poor women established in the same, and also all those that should hereafter succeed them, might be from time to time for ever the better maintained and kept,”

further provision was made in the 25th year of Queen Elizabeth by the Countess of Bedford's son, Sir Charles Morrison of Cassiobury,⁷ that ancient mansion which has recently been demolished. In his will, 20 February 1597-8, he desires to be buried at Watford “ at the feete of my lady and honourable mother.”

“ And whereas I have received of the right honourable my lady and mother the sum of five hundred poundes, to thentent that I should assure to and for the maintenance of eight poore, women in the almeshowse in Watford, in the countie of Hertford, twentie poundes a year, and sixteen loade of wood and barvyn⁸ to be yearly delivered to the said poore women; for the accomplishment whereof, I have already assured to that intent and purpose the third parte of the mannor of Bushie, in the said countie of Hertford, and one yearly rent of sixteene poundes yssuing out of the town of Darby, in the county of Darbie.”

“ And whereas I have by sufficient assurance charged my third part of the manor of Busshie,⁹ in the countie of Hertford aforesaid, and one farm called Toolies,¹⁰ in the parish of Watford, now in the occupation of my servant Anthony Cowper, with and for the maintenance and

⁷ His mother's 1st husband was Sir Richard Morrison, to whom Henry VIII granted this manor in 1546. Her tomb, A.D. 1601, was removed in 1907 from Watford Parish Church to the Duke of Bedford's private chapel at Cheyneys.

⁸ *i.e.* bavin (faggots).

⁹ Formerly the property of one George Blackwell, from whom Sir Charles Morrison purchased it.

¹⁰ The Victoria History records that Tooley's Farm was added to the Cassiobury Estate in 1628. This conflicts with the date in the Will, 1599. Trowley House and Trowley Bottom, on the county boundary near Leavesden, appear to be this “ Toolies.” Anthony Cowper is buried in the Essex Chapel, Watford Parish Church.

releife of the poore women in the almshouse in Watford aforesaid; for the better and more certayne performance whereof, and for thavoyding of all penalties which maie grow upon the premises in default thereof by reason of the said assurance, I will that my wiefe¹¹ shall during her liefе have and enjoy the said thirde part of the said manor and also the said farme called Toolies, to thintent and purpose that she, with the rents and proffitts thereof, shall truly and faithfullye maintayne the said poore women placed or to be placed within the said almshouses during her natural liefе."

Proved 20 July 1599.

This yearly pension of 20 l. was paid to the Almswomen at the four usual Feast-days ("12s 6d each to every of them") and the 16 cartloads of wood between Michaelmas and Easter Day. They received a further accession from the bounty of Dame Mary Morrison, wife of Sir Charles Morrison's son,¹² who by deed of 1629 directed

"that out of the rents and profits from tenements called Hatters: the fields called Home-field, Long-field, Great and Little Beech-fields: the moors called Hatters Moors: the sum of 20 l. 16 s. should be distributed for ever among the Eight Almswomen. Namely 52s yearly payable to every one of them on the four usual Feasts for ever."

Here the Vicar gives a "Note in writg. I rec^d. from Mr. Thos. Nicholls, Lord Essex's Agent (20 March, 1771) stating that the 8 Almswomen now receive 2/- each Weekly & 200 of large faggots yearly all from the Earl of Essex," (descendant and heir of the estates charged with the payments under the gifts of Sir Charles and Dame Mary Morrison). In 1832 an annual sum of 70 l. was paid, which comprised "the two sums of 20 l. and 20 l. 16s, and a payment from his Lordship

¹¹ Dorothy (daughter of Nicholas Clark). She afterwards founded additional almshouses for Four Poor Widows.

¹² After his death she married Sir John Cowper or Cooper, and thirdly, Sir Edward Alford. Her benefactions are recorded under all her surnames in the index to Vicar Woodcock's book.



THE ESSEX ALMSHOUSES, WATFORD,
Back view from Vicarage Road.

of 20 l. 7s. 8d. as a compensation for the discontinuance of the 16 loads of firewood under the grant of Sir Charles Morrison."¹³ On the death of any of the almswomen, her nearest relation received any money which might at that time be due to her.

More than thirteen pages of Vicar Woodcock's manuscript are devoted to another of Watford's "Charitablouses", entitled

THE LECTURER AND FOUR ALMS-WOMEN.

"A dwelling house commonly called Watford Place situate in Newe Street, together with the stables, backsides, gardens, rooms, basements and commodities thereunto belonging, And, also the Orchard there was granted by Lease dated 18 Oct^r. 11 James 1st, 1613, unto Dorothy Lady Morison for the term of one hundred Years (by the owner Michael Heydon). She placed in part of the said house one Thomas Valentine, Master of Arts, and Preacher of the word of God, and four poor widow Almswomen in divers rooms, to have continuance there during their lives of good behaviour which should be of the best and most honest life and conversation."

By deed dated 10 March, 3 Charles 1st, 1627, Dame Dorothy's son, Sir Charles Morrison (the 2nd of that name) recited the charitable intention of his mother:—

"To pay and distribute unto every of the said Poor Women the weekly sum of Two shillings apeice upon every Friday in the Year for evermore.

"The said poor Widows every year forever a week before Whitsuntide to be provided with a new Cloth Gown of the value of thirty shillings current english money. The cloth to be of such colour as the said Dame Dorothy Moryson did give in her lifetime. Every gown to be worn with a crest of silver of the Picture of a Lion upon the breast of every Gown for the Remem-

¹³ Report of the Charity Commissioners.

brance of their Founder.¹⁴ The said crest to remain in succession from one Widow dying or leaving her place unto another succeeding.

“And should likewise provide and give unto every of the said widows and Almswomen a hat at every two years end.”

For their provision and maintenance Dame Dorothy granted 50 l. for ever out of her lands and tenements, and in 1627 her son and executor, Sir Charles, continued this annuity of 50 l., “issuing out of Langley Park and other lands in the parish of Kings Langley.”

Dame Dorothy's daughter, Lady Elizabeth Russell, “a noble ladie, who dyd appli her hart to Wisdome,” had founded the Lectureship in 1610, to provide one learned sufficient Preacher to preach to the people a Sermon every Tuesday morning before the Market Bell rings.

The house “commonly called Watford Place,” in which the Lecturer dwelt with the four poor widows, was purchased by the Trustees in 1740 (Dame Dorothy's lease of it having extended for more than 100 years), and a fragment of that old house, with a well-preserved oriel window, still survives in the stone-mason's yard south-east of the eight (or Essex) Almshouses. With its gardens and orchard it was exchanged in 1824 for other property,¹⁵ the site where the Four Almshouses stand to-day being the only portion retained, “in pursuance of an agreement with Stewart Marjoribanks of Watford Place, Esq^{re}.” A note in the old manuscript book records that the four Almshouses adjoining the Lecture house being ruinous, the trustees in 1824

“rebuilt them of brick in a more substantial and commodious form nearly upon the original site, and inclosed the same with a brick wall.”

There is also an interesting note on the “Two Gates” leading out of the Estate called Watford Place into the Churchyard:—

¹⁴ These gowns and crests were regularly provided until the year 1908, when the Charity Commissioners ceased payments other than the stipends of the Almswomen and the upkeep of the Almshouses.

¹⁵ The tinted plan in Vicar Woodcock's book shows this property, which included the “Flower de Luce in Loates Lane,” an old inn also recorded in the Parish Registers of the 17th century.

“ We whose names are hereunder written, being the Vicar of the Parish of Watford and the owner of Watford Place, do hereby declare that one of those Gates, that out of the Yard next the Free School, of right belonging to the owner of Watford Place, is for free ingress and egress at all times for foot passengers only. The other of the said Gates lately made through the Wall into the Churchyard, opposite the front door of Watford Place, is made by permission of the Vicar, and upon sufferance only during pleasure of the Vicar.

Witness our hands this 22^d. May, 1778.

EDW^d. WOODCOCK, Vicar.

JOHN FRANKPITT, Owner of Watford Place.”¹⁶

And one of the pews in the Church was from time immemorial occupied by the Eight Almswomen, until in 1832 it was withholden by the Churchwardens, “ because of the want of occupancy for six or seven years by reason of infirmities or disinclination.” The pew was then let for 12s. a year, and the money divided equally among the women. The Report of that year is careful to add :—

“ Whenever the number of them attending the church require increased accommodation, then the pew in question will be immediately restored to them.”

And of the Bibles, it is recorded in Vicar Woodcock’s copy of the will of Elizabeth Fuller of Watford Place, who founded the adjacent Free School in 1704 :—

“ The Bibles now Chained in the Church shall be renewed with others having the Apocrypha and Common Prayers in them. And, as they shall grow old and be decayed, shall be removed from the Church to the School for the use of the Scholars there from time to time.”

So this old manuscript book has preserved in its

¹⁶ The house, now known as Watford Place, is an 18th-century building in King Street, south of the old Lecture House.

forgotten pages some remembrance of the care and devotion shown alike to old and young, those who began and ended their days in the surroundings of the Parish Church—a haven of “ancient peace” which still survives amid the turbulence of modern Watford.

[The writer wishes to tender her thanks to Mrs. George Green, of Watford, for her kindness in lending the old MS. book, to Mr. John Wilson, of Watford Place, and to Mr. H. C. Andrews, of Hertford, for the use of Reports; and to Mr. F. H. Barnes, of Watford, for the charming illustrations.]