

# The Story of Saffron Walden's Almshouses From 1400 to the Present Day

By Sarah Turpin April 2022

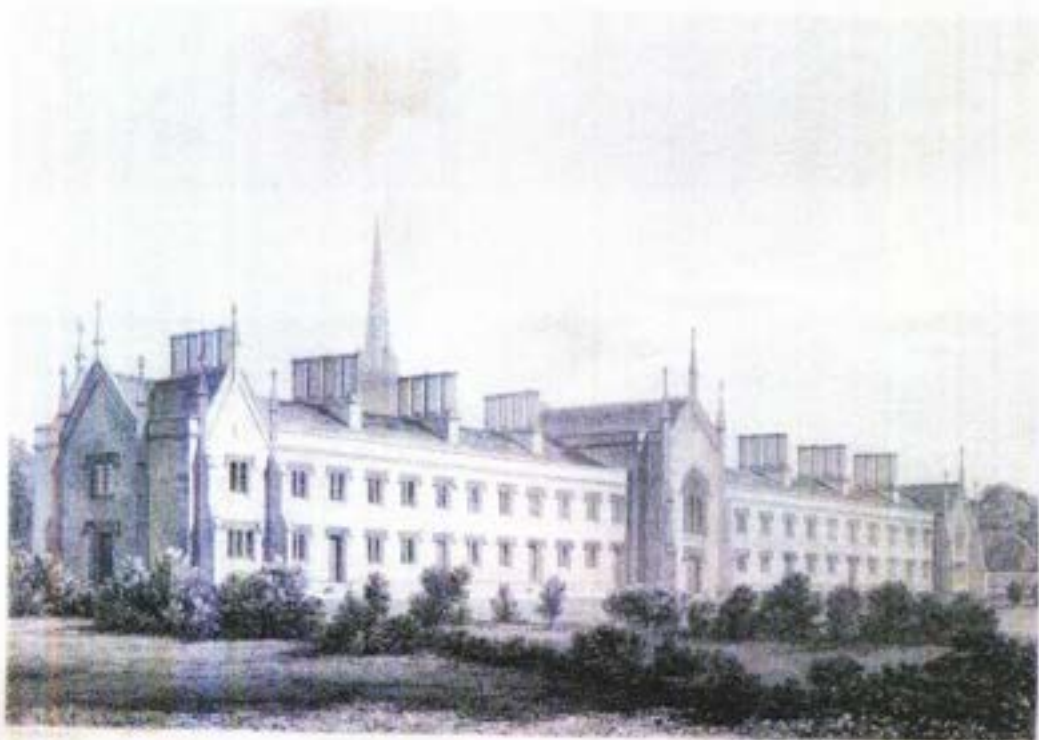


### What are Almshouses?

Alms-house is derived from 'alms' ~ "charitable relief of the poor," especially as a religious duty, also "that which is given to relieve the poor or needy," Old English aelmesse "almsgiving, act of relieving the needy," and 'house' ~ Old English hus "dwelling, shelter, building designed to be used as a residence."

'Alms' in Church Latin eleemosyna (Tertullian, 3c.), from Greek eleemosyne "pity, mercy," in Ecclesiastical Greek "charity, alms," from eleemon "compassionate," from eleos "pity, mercy," which is of unknown origin and perhaps imitates cries of pleading.

Charitable giving was mentioned in the Gospels as a duty of Christians to their neighbours, but it is also considered a moral obligation in many cultures. An important part of the town's civic pride was bound up in the charity and many local benefactors gave gifts of land and money.



## Guilds and Charters

In 1400 when a Charter was granted by Henry VI following a bequest of £40 from John and Eleanor Butler, the Guild of our Lady of Pity was founded to establish an Almshouse in Saffron Walden. The purpose of the Almshouse was to provide aid and sustenance for "13 poor men such as be lame, crooked, blind and bedridden and most at need".

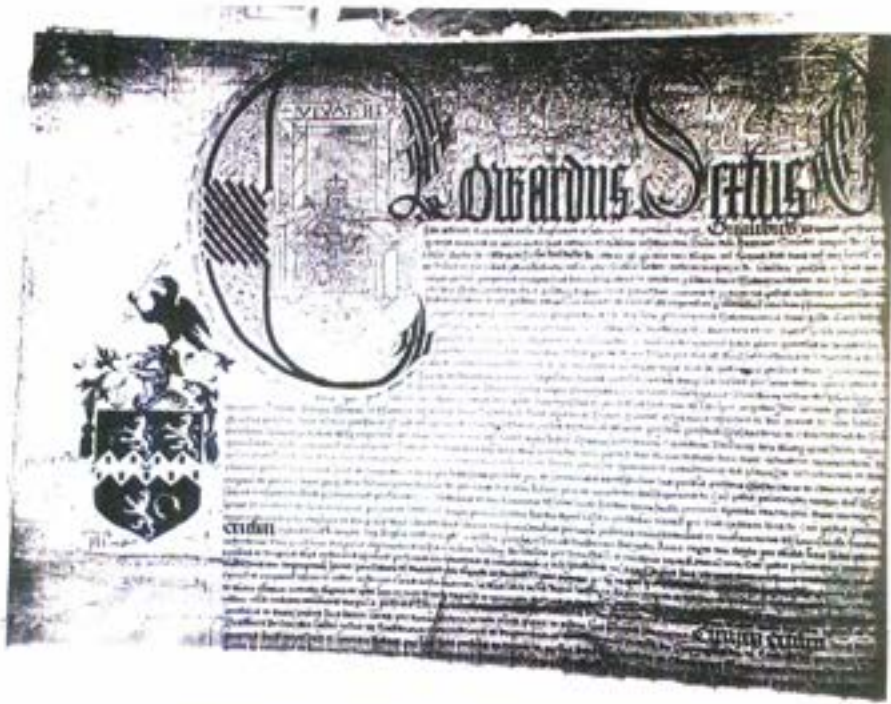
The lands were donated by wealthy gentry ostensibly to 'save their souls', which was a common religious practice at the time. It was of great benefit to the poor and the resulting Almshouses were much sort after places in which to end their days. The alternatives, such as Workhouses, were not open to the sickly or crippled as they could not work.



*King Edward VI*

In 1547 Edward VI decreed that all lands and estates should become his property, but, after considerable negotiation the King sold the Almshouse property to either John Smyth, or to his elder son, Sir Thomas Smyth. A second son, also John Smyth, succeeded in negotiating further with the King which resulted, in 1549, in the granting of a charter to set up what was the first Town Council, which gave many rights to the town. This charter also gave the right to administer and maintain the Almshouses and the Grammar School [situated in Castle Street], provided they included 'Edward VI' in their titles.

In the 19th century the Trust greatly benefitted from the Quaker Gibson family, and other units have been added since.



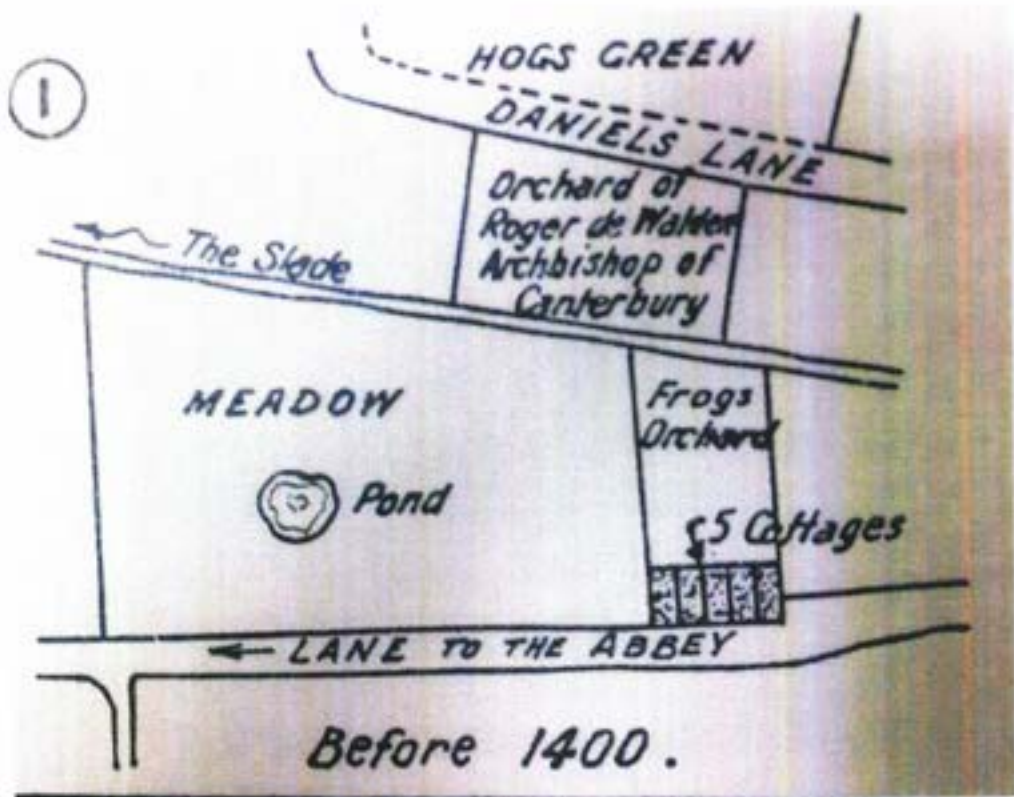
*Edward VI's Charter, 1549. The Coat of Arms in the margin is that of Sir Thomas Smyth.*

Thomas Smythe was born in Saffron Walden, a diplomat he was one of Elizabeth I's most trusted Protestant counsellors. He was instrumental in restoring the town's incorporation (a legislative area) and in negotiating the Charter that restored the Almshouse land to Saffron Walden.

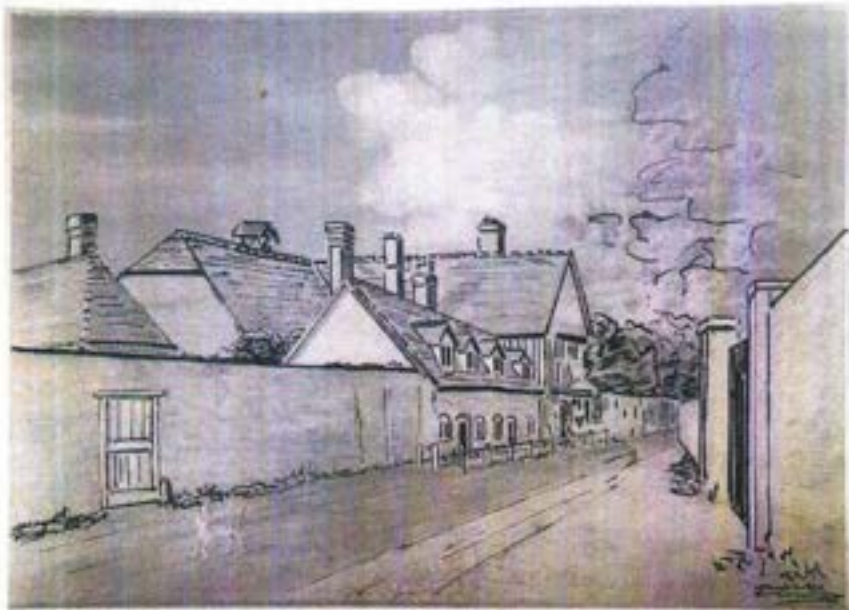


*George Stacey Gibson*

George Stacey Gibson, a preeminent Quaker, philanthropist and banker, also founded the Literary and Scientific Institute (now the Gibson Library, upstairs in Saffron Walden Library), which eventually became the town's first lending library



Orchard of Roger de Walden and Daniels Lane, site of first Almshouse



ALMSHOUSE, 1400 - 1831.

FARE LANE partly named as it went out  
 down to the Park. The original name,  
 "DANIELS LANE" should be re-established.

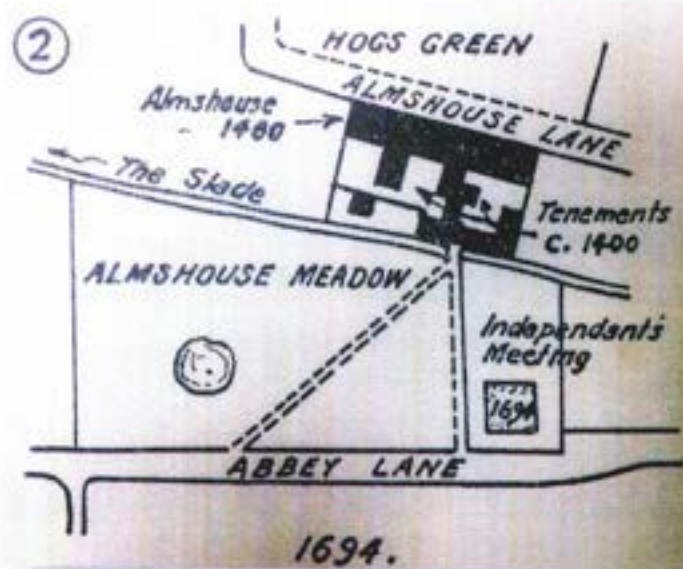
## The Almshouses ~ 1400



ALMHOUSE, 1400 - 1831

Daniela Lane now Park Lane

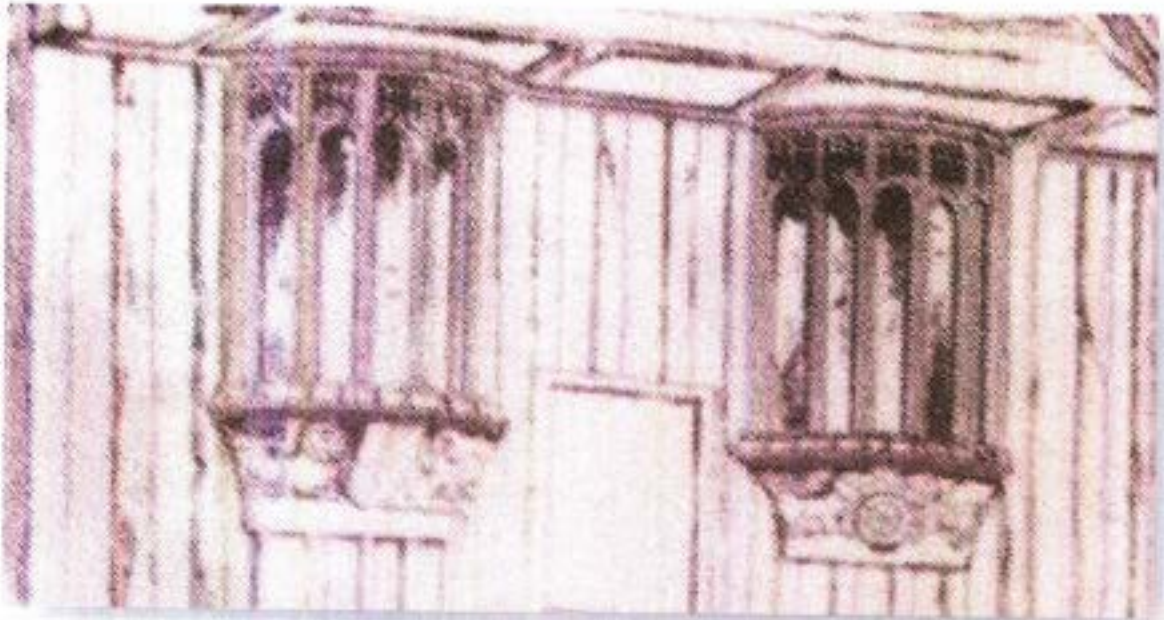
The first Almshouses were built in the orchard of Roger de Walden, Archbishop of Canterbury, in Daniel's Lane (later called Almshouse Lane and today is Park Lane). Including six additional tenements behind, following the bank of the King's Slade, reached by a bridge across the river. All the original buildings were timber-framed, a simple terrace of single-storied lathe and plaster buildings with tiles roofs and tiled gable windows in the roof. The massive wooden carvings under the windows are today kept in the existing Almshouse chapel.



First Almshouse building and Tenements



*The Chapel building where the occupants would gather every morning between 6-7am.*



*Chapel windows showing carvings*



*The original carvings now in the chapel building of the Almshouses  
~ top = left window; bottom = right window ~*



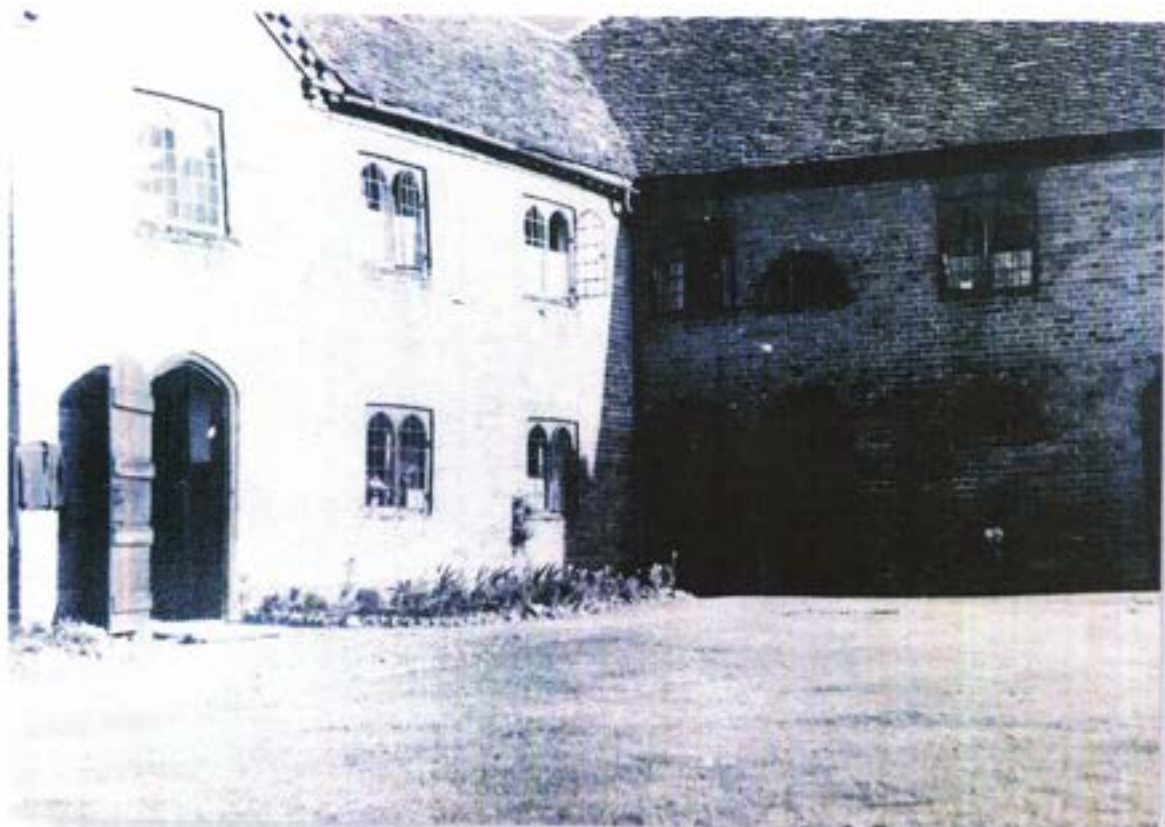
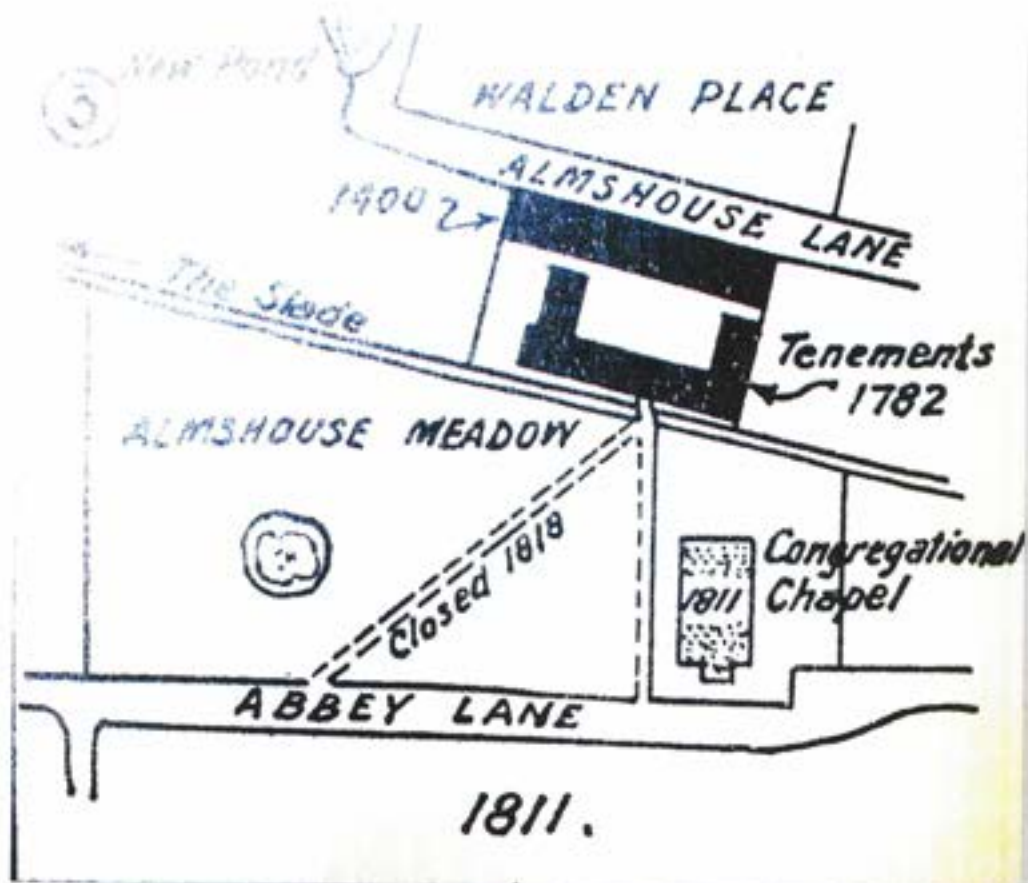


## The Almshouses ~ 1782

In time, the Almshouse property became so dilapidated that in 1782 it was decided to demolish the tenements and replace with them with a block of buildings round three sides of a square. Later a Chapel was erected in the quadrangle.



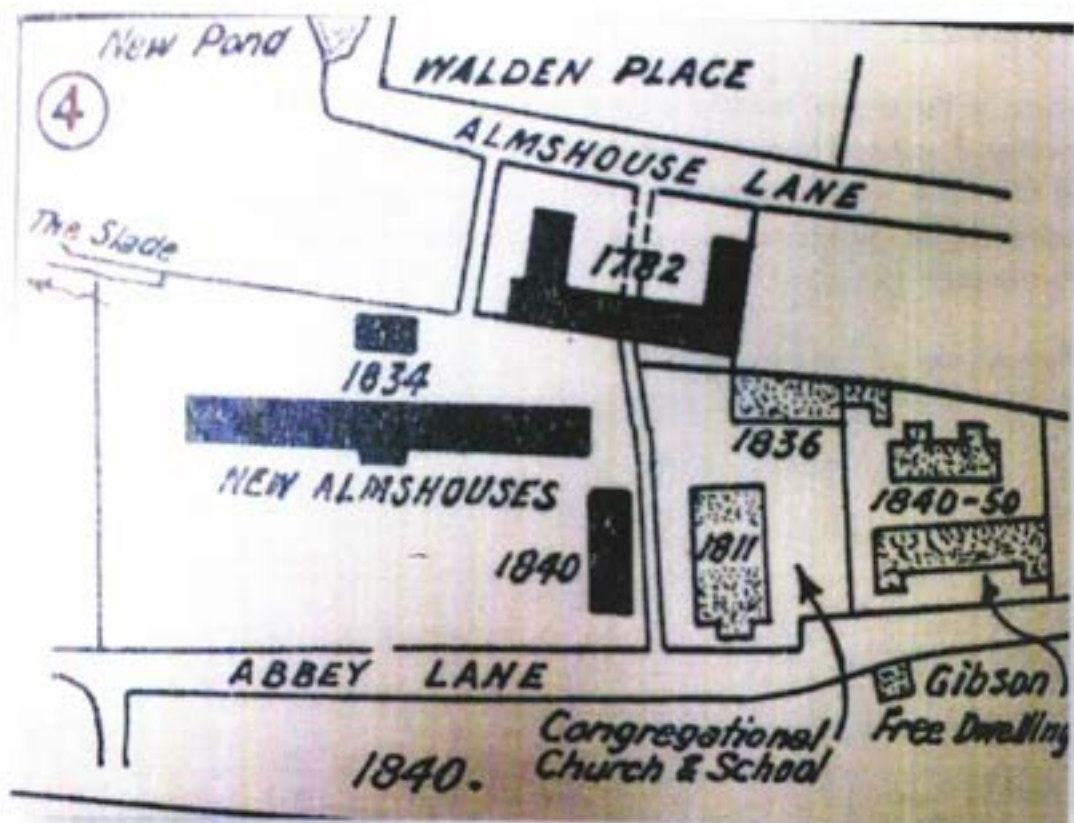
*The date '1550' on what was commonly known as the 'Old Almshouses', refers to the year when Edward VI refounded the Almshouse (although it was actually 1549)*



### The Almshouses ~ 1834

As parts of the original building became beyond repair, in 1828 the Almshouse Trustees consulted an architect to design a new brick building, in a style similar to the original timber built Almshouse, with the Chapel as the central feature. The new Chapel was to serve the new building and the Old Almshouses built in 1782, therefore the Chapel built to serve them was demolished.





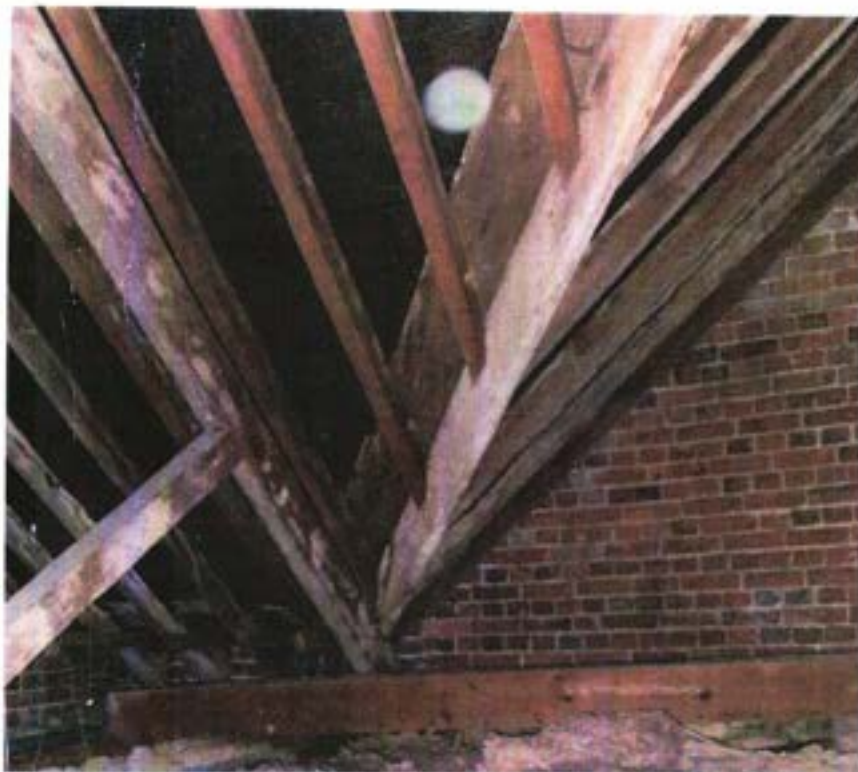


*The Chapel in 1836, with original wooden door and a door to the left*



*The Chapel in 2022, with arched windows and double door  
the door to the left is now a window*

## The Attics of the 1834 building



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 • latitudesandlongitudesociety.com

William Law	40	Agricultural Labourer
Joseph Adams	18	Bricklayer
James Clarke	70	Pensioner
Robert Miller	70	Agricultural Labourer
James Erswell	60	Greengrocer
James Duberry	25	Agricultural Labourer
William Fitz John	60	Shoemaker
Edward Gätward	17	Cabinet Maker
David Smart	45	Chain Maker
James Smart	20	Chain Maker
Charles Jeffery	25	Victualier
Joseph Jeffery	15	Shoemaker Journey
Jonathan Thompson	55	Shoemaker Journey
William Archer	50	Farmer
Henry Archer	20	Blacksmith
Francis Lagden	46	Agricultural Labourer
James Richardson	44	Agricultural Labourer
Mary Ann Watson	21	Dressmaker
John White	45	Weaver
James Barker	55	Agricultural Labourer
Joseph Bacon	40	Agricultural Labourer
Robert Barker	75	Agricultural Labourer
John Duberry	50	Agricultural Labourer
Richard Barker	45	Agricultural Labourer
William Richardson	45	Gardener
Elias Harvey	40	Carpenter
Daniel Hagger	45	Wheelwright
Samuel Hagger	25	Wheelwright
Gooden Hagger	15	Baker
Henry Lee	45	Coach Maker
Charles Lee	15	Coach Painter
William Stock	35	Agricultural Labourer
John Porter	20	Agricultural Labourer
Thomas Littlechild	25	Wheelwright
Charles Parish	30	Agricultural Labourer
James Lesley	65	Baker
James Warren	70	Butcher
Charles Warren	43	Butcher
John Marshall	40	Shoemaker Journey
Richard Taylor	30	Bricklayer
William Taylor	55	Labourer

Done  1 match

Slade was partly arched over in 1832, and in 1834 the new building, providing homes for 30 old people, was completed at a cost of £5,000. Additional separate wings were added, at the eastern end of the New Almshouses by Wyatt George Gibson and other members of the family in 1840, and at the western end by George Stacy Gibson in 1881.



## Coats of Arms

The front of the 1834 Almshouse is decorated by four crests or coats of arms.



*King Edward VI, on the Chapel above the front door*

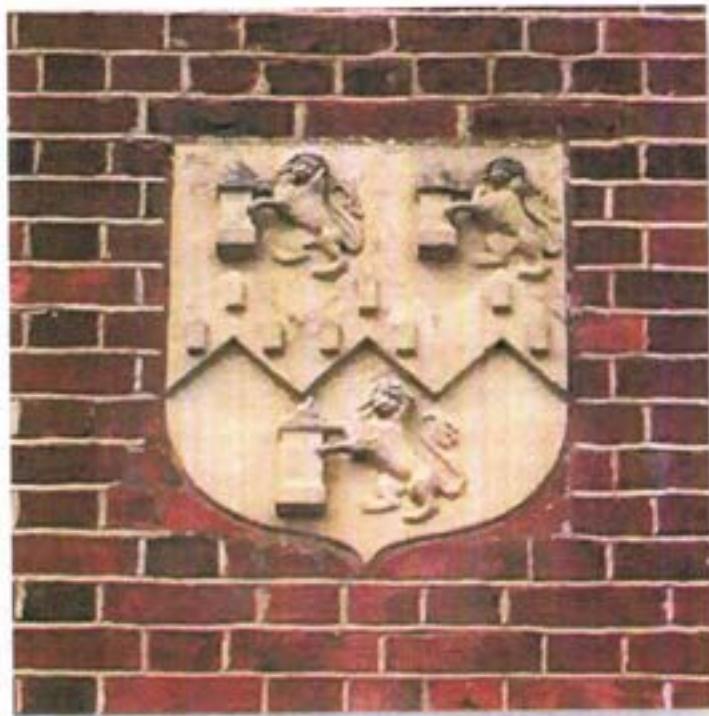


*Saffron Walden Coat of Arms, only officially granted in 1961*





*Coat of Arms on right end 'tower',  
showing walls and gate plus three Saffron crocuses in bloom.*



*Coat of Arms, most likely of Sir Thomas Smythe on left end 'tower',*

## Saffron Walden's Coat of Arms



Arms : Representation of Town Walls having a Gateway between two Towers Argent three Saffron Flowers issuant from the battlements blown and showing stamens proper.

Origin/meaning: The earliest representation of the design appears on a seal dating from 1549, which was prepared after the town was granted a charter in February of that year by Edward VI. Most probably chosen as a pun of the name Saffron Walden - saffron (flowers) walled-in.

The seal of 1836 depicted the three saffron flowers in various stages, one in bud, another in flower and the last fully open, signifying the three stages of the town's municipal history - its incorporation as a Commonalty in 1539, its flowering as a Municipal Borough in 1685 and its restructuring under the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. Although the design has appeared on a shield in the form of arms for over three hundred, albeit with variations in colouring, it was not until 1961 that they were officially granted as such. Incidentally the 'saffron' part of the town's name refers to the cultivation of the saffron crocus at Walden from the time of Edward III until the eighteenth century.

Sometimes the 'arms' were embellished with a lion for a crest, this was perhaps a perpetuation of the lion which together with a dragon supported the 'arms' on a seal which was affixed to the gilt-silver mace procured after the town became a borough with full municipal privileges in 1685, upon the granting of a charter by James II. It seems likely that the crest granted in 1961 was suggested by the earlier lion. The chapeau is probably derived from the crest of the Braybrook family of Audley End and the Ancient Mace of the Borough is also depicted.

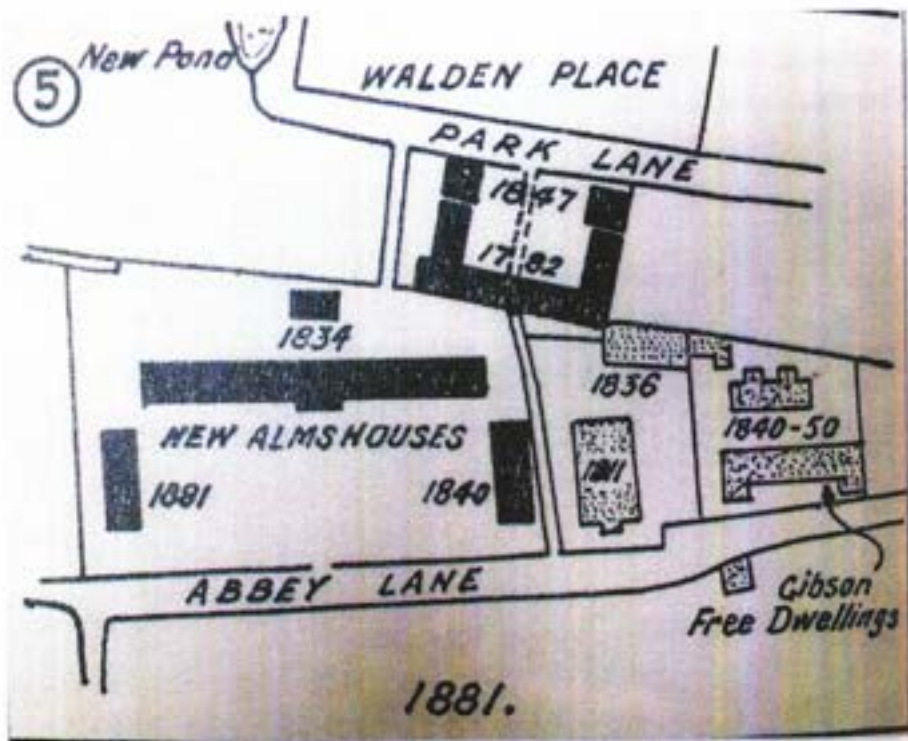
The arms are presently used by the town council.

### The Almshouses ~ 1847

Two pairs of Almshouse tenements, one at either end of the site of the original Almshouse, were added by Wyatt George Gibson in 1847.







## Almshouses Officially Opened



### Chancellor Visits Local Housing Sites

As reported elsewhere, the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. R. A. Butler) visited Wellington on Friday. He is pictured on the left with the Mayor, about to step inside one of the new buildings at Victoria Avenue. Grouped with them in the second picture are (left) Ald. C. B. Kewstree and Ald. J. Cameron. The picture was taken at the new almshouses.

### The Almshouses ~ 1950

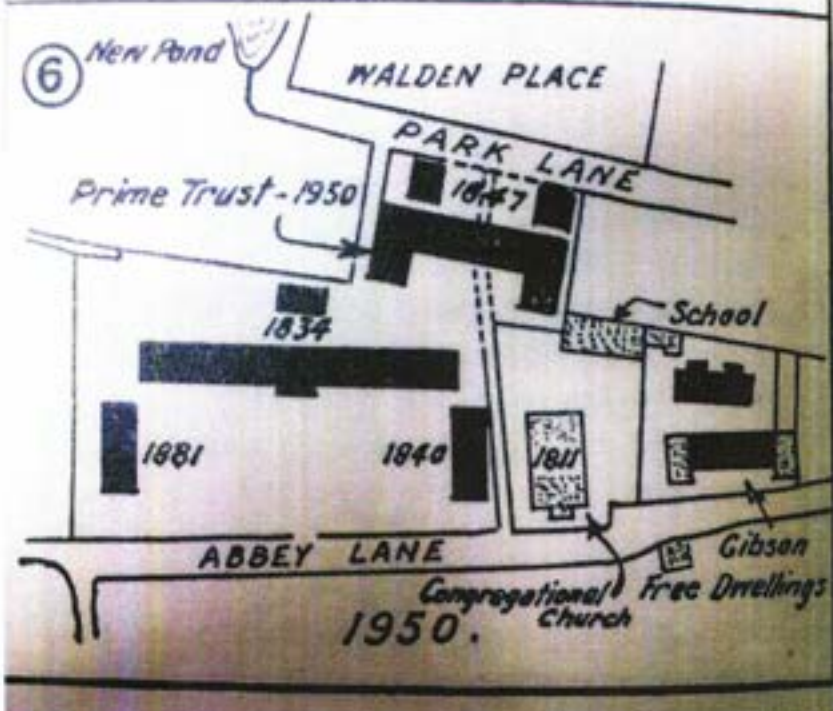
A bequest in 1950 from The Revd. Joseph Prime enabled the Trustees to demolish the 1782 buildings, replacing them with a block of seven two-bedroomed bungalows, facing south instead of north.





*Primes Close is between the two 1847 tenements.*

1881.





## The Almshouses ~ 2017

In 2017 Daniel's Cottage (the Porter's Lodge), which had been used as accommodation for a family of three, became vacant and the opportunity was taken to renovate and extend this 1834 building.



This sensitively done extension involved creating a new front door on the right to make a single occupancy space, and the left side from the original front door became a family dwelling. This was extended by another block of a similar size, which is half part of the family residence and half a garage space, the previous ugly garage having been demolished as part of this project. The space behind the extension creates a small patio and garden space for the family dwelling.



## The Mazer Bowl

The Mazer Bowl, donated by the Butler's daughter to the Almshouse Chapel, was intended for use in the sacrament but was later used for receiving donations for the poor.



*The replica Mazer Bowl on display in Saffron Walden Museum*

The original Saffron Walden Mazer Bowl was made in 1507 from maple wood and silver. The silver lip is undecorated, but the central medallion is engraved with the Virgin and Child.

The hallmark suggests the mazer was made during the reign of Henry VII by an unknown maker whose mark is a fleur-de-lys. However, the first dated mention of the bowl is in 1524 in an inventory from the Saffron Walden Almshouses:

'In the Botre a masor aot sylver gilt.'

'In the buttery a mazer of silver gilt.'

The benefactors of the mazer were listed in the parchment-bound "Ordinances" telling of the founding of the Almshouse in 1400:

'A broad cup to drink in, price of 40 shill ye wch Cupp Margaret Bregchman (Bridgeman) gave to serve in ye Forsd House perpetual for ye souls of her and of Stephen Bregchman and all their friends'.

In 1929 the original Saffron Walden Mazer Bowl was sold to raise money to fix the roof of the 1834 Almshouse building. It was a controversial but necessary sale at Christie's, seeing the bowl first go to a collector in the US and unlikely to ever return to England. Forty years later it again appeared in a Christie's catalogue in 1971, bought by a London dealer and now resides in a private collection in Sussex. The replica is permanently on display in Saffron Walden Museum, kindly loaned to us for this exhibition.

Famously Samuel Pepys drank from the Mazer Bowl when he visited the Almshouses in 1660, a common practice to raise funds for the Almshouse.

#### Monday 27 February 1660 ~ Samuel Pepys Diary

Mr. Blayton and I took horse and straight to **Saffron Walden**, where at the White Hart, we set up our horses, and took the master of the house to shew us Audley End House, who took us on foot through the park, and so to the house, where the housekeeper shewed us all the house, in which the stateliness of the ceilings, chimney-pieces, and form of the whole was exceedingly worth seeing. He took us into the cellar, where we drank most admirable drink, a health to the King. Here I played on my flageolette, there being an excellent echo. He shewed us excellent pictures; two especially, those of the four Evangelists and Henry VIII. After that I gave the man 2s. for his trouble, and went back again. **In our going, my landlord carried us through a very old hospital or almshouse, where forty poor people was maintained; a very old foundation; and over the chimney in the mantelpiece was an inscription in brass: "Orate pre anima Thomae Bird," ["Pray for the soul of Thomas Bird."] &c.; and the poor box also was on the same chimney-piece, with an iron door and locks to it, into which I put 6d. They brought me a draft of their drink in a brown bowl, tipt with silver, which I drank off, and at the bottom was a picture of the Virgin and the child in her arms, done in silver.** So we went to our Inn, and after eating of something, and kissed the daughter of the house, she being very pretty, we took leave, and so that night, the road pretty good, but the weather rainy to Ep[p]ing, where we sat and played a game at cards, and after supper, and some merry talk with a plain bold maid of the house, we went to bed.



Board Room chair on display in the Chapel,  
which can be seen in the photograph of the  
Almshouse Board Room below.



The Board Room, Almshouses.  
The carving above bookcase  
was from below one of the two  
upper windows of the Chapel  
in Daniels Lane, built 1400  
demolished 1834.

## Almshouse People

Despite the initial decision to provide alms to "13 poor men" by 1831 there were many more women than men were admitted to the Almshouse. Of 105 residents listed between 1718-22 and 1726-35 approximately 75% were women.



William Pursey (b.1.1.1811 died --1902or 3) (Verger and Church Clerk before Mr. George Moss Taylor) the father of Alfred Pursey who lived at No. 9, Castle Street and whose daughter married Mr. Frederick J. Pitstow.

Although entry to the Almshouse was often due to a degree of nepotism, they had kinship with those that ran the institution or for political reasons, many were there because they had no offspring to look after them. Being ill or frail was a common reason for living in an Almshouse and about 20% of inmates would die within the first year.

However, many were energetic and male inmates were paid extra to fetch, chop and saw firewood, repair minor damages and clean the yard. Women acted as nurses, cleaned the chapel and rang the bell.

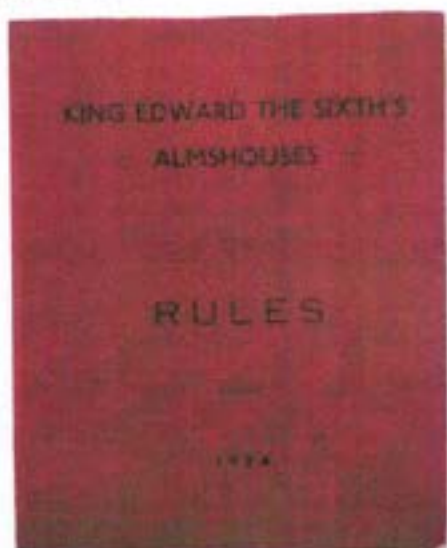
In 1530 Hog's Green House (now Walden Place), the mansion opposite the Almshouse, across Daniel's Lane and Hog's Green, was the first port of call for several of these more "lusty men" on their rounds to solicit alms, much to William Myddylton's chagrin.



Almshouses, Park Lane  
L. to R. Miss Sarah Warren; John Banks;  
Mrs. Mary Clark; Miss Hephzibah Newton;  
Mrs. Ellen Burrows; Miss Fanny Butcher; ??

By way of alms, the thirteen poor men were given 6 gallons of ale a week to share, 4 loads of faggots for their firing, a quarter of oats and 4 bushels of peas for potage. They had to be in good order and clean living, not ribald, no chiders, drunkards nor hate-makers, and the healthy were required to come to church.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century residents were given weekly one bushel of wheat for bread; two bushels of malt for drink and 2/2d with candles for winter, fish and peas for Lent and butter for summer with 700 faggots of wood annually. They lived there rent free, although they could be kicked out for not abiding by the rules.



In the 19<sup>th</sup> century residents were provided with firing, seven quarts of beer, 5/6d a week and special treats at Christmas.

Today residents must be on a low income, with limited savings, and resident in the former borough of Saffron Walden or its immediately adjacent villages or have clearly demonstrable very strong connections with Saffron Walden. Unlike many Almshouses there is no lower age limit, and residents range in age from 30s to 80s, the average age being 47.

In exchange for a Maintenance Contribution to the charity (effectively an affordable rent), today's residents live in the heart of a warm and caring community. Many grow their own vegetables in the garden troughs in the back garden and, although they no longer receive gallons of ale or bushels of wood, they do get Easter eggs and Christmas biscuits.



KING EDWARD VI ALMSHOUSES

Photograph taken on the occasion of Mr & Mrs Edgar Wisken's  
Golden Wedding Day, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1927

Back row: Miss Start, Miss Sarah Marshall, Miss C.Theobald,  
Miss W.Bacon, Miss E.Saunders, Miss M.A. Drayton;  
Second row: Mrs Cowell, Mr & Mrs J.T.Newman, Mrs Bunting,  
Mrs Joshua Marsha ll, Mrs Bartlebury, Mrs List, Mrs Alfred  
Richardson, Mrs Bacon, Mrs Goodwin, Miss Wilkinson, Mrs Watson,  
Mrs C.Start, Mr E.Downham, Mr G.Beavis; Third row: Mr J.Taylor,  
Mr D.Miller (Master), Mrs J.Taylor, Mrs Harris, Miss Edwards  
(Matron), Mr & Mrs Edgar Wisken, Mr G.Moss Taylor (former Mace  
Bearer), Mrs Nathan J.Pitstow (widow of Bellringer), Mrs A.Bird,  
Mr John Reed (father of Chas. who ... Collin & Adams);  
Fourth row: -, Mrs ... Wren, Miss G.Theobald, Miss H.Theobald,  
Miss Hazel, Mrs E.Downham, Mrs List





**DAME HOLGATE** - Matron of the  
Almshouses until her death in 1894.  
She was Miss Carter, Housekeeper  
at Shortgrove until she married  
Mr. J. Holgate shoemaker of the  
Corner House and Shop Abbey Lane.  
She was buried by one of her  
former lodgers Rev. Piers Cloughton  
son of Bishop Cloughton and some  
time Curate of Saffron Walden.





Alongside all the work needed to maintain an historic building into suitable accommodation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Almshouse Charity Trustees (Directors) put a lot of time and effort into raising community awareness. Opening the grounds to the public as a music venue for events such as the Fete de la Musique in 2021 is one such event.



Giving pleasure to vulnerable residents during the pandemic

## The Almshouses ~ Present Day

Saffron Walden Almshouses is a member of the Almshouse Association, formed in 1946 to support the work of the nation's Almshouses.

There are approximately 5000 Almshouses in England, many dating from medieval times and each with its own set of rules and regulations, as laid down by the founders (often monastic orders). The quirkiest that we know of is in Nantwich, where the founder Edmund Wright ruled that preference be given to local candidates with the name Wright!



Today King Edward VI (Saffron Walden) Almshouses consist of 43 dwellings in Abbey Lane and Prime's Close, a mixture of flats and bungalows, and four flats in Freshwell Street, two of which are suitable for mobility-impaired occupants. Our Almshouses continue to offer housing to residents of the "Old Borough of Saffron Walden", who are "of good character" but whose financial situation makes it impossible to find affordable housing. Historically, residents were elderly and retired. In the 21st century, however, our residents are a mix of ages, mostly retired but many younger and in employment, and we take single people, couples and, occasionally, families. For older people we provide a home for life, whereas for our younger residents being granted an Almshouse is often a temporary bridge to help get back on track and a stepping-stone to the next stage of their life.

With grateful thanks to:

Jenny Oxley, Collections Officer at Saffron Walden Museum for the loan of the replica Mazer Bowl.

Victoria Duke, Estate Officer of the Saffron Walden Almshouses for additional photographs, information and the loan of the Rule book and cash books.

Donna Sharp for recent photographs of Trustees and events.

All other photographs from the Gibson Library Archives and by Sarah Turpin, 2022.



King Edward VI  
**Almshouses**