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A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY BERKHAMSTED CHARITY

## The Sayer Almshouse

Last month's article, which corrected a long-standing impression that John Sayer had unjustly withheld small sums of money belonging to the church, school and poor of Berkhamsted, has prompted several readers to ask for details of the Sayer charity.

As was previously stated, John Sayer bequeathed £1,000 "for the building of an almshouse and the purchasing of lands for relief of the poor in Berkhamstead St. Peter." The will, dated July 2nd, 1681, directed that the money was to be used "as the said John Sayer shall appoint in writing," or, in the event of his death before making any such appointment, in accordance with the desires of his wife, Mary Sayer. John Sayer died in 1682, before he had prepared a scheme, and Mary Sayer not only drew up elaborate instructions for administering the charity but augmented the bequest by a gift of several hundred pounds.

### BUILDING COST £269

An almshouse "consisting of twelve rooms, designed for the habitation of six poor widows . . . allotting two rooms to each widow," cost £269. The large balance was used to purchase land at Chilton, Bucks, and a small piece of land known as Wood's Close, adjoining the almshouse, the annual income from these investments being used for the benefit of the almshouse and for the poor of the parish.

The almshouse, insisted the trust deed, "shall be for no other use but for the habitation of six poor widows," and the trustees had power to "put out any of the said poor widows for any misdemeanour . . . and to put some other more deserving widow in her room."

Candidates were not considered unless they had lived for ten years at least

in Berkhamsted or Northchurch, and were of "good fame, constant frequenters of divine service as by law established in the Church of England, and aged 55 years at the least." The widows were chosen only on the Feast of the Annunciation, "that those who are fit to be chosen may have timely notice of it, and that those who are to choose may have time to inquire, and by inquiry to find out who are fittest to be chosen."

### PEACE AND KINDNESS

Almshouses were required to "believe themselves with piety towards God and humility towards their neighbours, and with peace, amity and kindness one towards another, being in all things sober and temperate; and if any of them shall commit any notorious offence against any of the fore-mentioned duties, they shall be mulcted, according to the nature of the offence . . . which mulct shall be deducted out of the monthly stipend of the said offender."

Every Sunday morning and afternoon the almshouses were required to "repair to the parish church . . . going orderly two by two according to their several ages, the oldest going last, and there abiding shall believe themselves devoutly during the whole time of divine service and sermon, and other sacred offices there to be performed . . . and for every neglect or miscarriage in these particulars they shall have 3d. deducted out of their monthly allowance; and for every neglect to receive the Holy Sacrament of Christ's Supper, at what time soever it is there administered . . . they shall forfeit out of their said allowance 2s.; and if any one, which God forbid, shall neglect to receive the Sacrament for the space of a whole year, she shall be utterly excluded and expelled the said house for ever."

### NO LODGERS!

The almshouses were forbidden to take in lodgers. The penalty for allowing any person to "remain or lodge in any room" was 2s. per night, or, if any person remained for more than four nights, expulsion of the almshouse for ever.

Similar penalties applied if a widow "lodged out of the said almshouse in any other house whatsoever in the said town of Berkhamstead St. Peter or in the parish of Berkhamstead St. Mary." But if an almshouse wished to go away from the town to visit friends, she could apply for permission to do so from the trustees, who never granted that permission to more than one almshouse at a time or for a longer period than one month in a year. Any widow absent for more than one month, "unless surprised by sickness and so burdened from returning within the space of two months," was to be expelled for ever.

The youngest of the six widows was required to assist other almshouses in case of sickness, and if these duties were neglected deductions were made from her allowance. "If she shall not mend after admonition twice given her by any one of the governors, then to be utterly removed and expelled for ever."

### THE OUTER GATE

Especially interesting is a clause that "the youngest widow . . . shall every night shut the outer gate and bolt it at the hour of eight in the winter and ten in the summer, and shall open it every morning, at five in the summer and seven in the winter . . . and shall keep the court clean between the wall and the house."

No doubt the almshouses slept more soundly when they knew the outer gate was locked. Beyond the garden wall were lonely fields; Cowper Road was not made until 1887, and what is thought to be a post of the gateway leading to Steel's Meadow may still be seen beside the almshouse at Cowper Road corner.

### ON THE TOMBSTONE

A curious stipulation made by Mary Sayer was that each almshouse was to be paid "8s. by the month, reckoning 28 days only to the month, paid her . . . on the tombstone in the parish church of Berkhamstead, near the monument lately erected for the said John Sayer, Esq., on the Sunday after evening service." The trustees rightly claimed that this instruction was ambiguous, and almshouses did not receive their allowances over the donor's body!

Incidentally, allowances unpaid during periods when any of the rooms were vacant, as well as fines for misconduct, were spent on keeping the almshouse in good repair. To the best of my knowledge there are no records of money having been withheld from erring widows.

Every three years, at Christmas, the widows were entitled to receive new cloth gowns. Mary Sayer stated that each gown was to be of "20s. value at least," and a Charity Report of 1832 says that the previous issue of gowns was in 1528, at a total cost of £8 12s. 6d., or £1 8s. 9d. per gown.

### LATER GIFTS

The report added: "The cost is greater than the sum allowed by Sayer's regulations; but by these regulations the gowns were to be provided once in three years, and the women do not now receive them quite so often." It was further stated that each widow received 10s. 6d. at Christmas as an allowance for fuel.

The Sayer bequest has been supplemented on several occasions. In 1784, Martha Dere gave £500 to provide an extra 1s. 6d. weekly to each almshouse, and George and Elizabeth Nugent, who are better remembered for providing funds for a new workhouse, further increased the allowances in 1822.

In 1887, at the time of the housing developments in Cowper Road, the

## EMERGENCY MEDICINE

### Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

### CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

June 30—July 6: Taylors.  
July 7—13: Boots.  
July 14—20: F&G.  
July 21—27: Dickman.  
July 28—August 3: Taylors.

### LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—

Monday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.  
Tuesday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.  
Wednesday—Closed.  
Thursday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.  
Friday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.  
Saturday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m.—5 p.m.

(Continued from previous column.)

strip of land near the almshouses, known as Wood's Close, was sold, and the proceeds used for the benefit of the almshouses. Other changes to benefit the widows have been made from time to time, and since the war considerable sums—greatly in excess of the original building cost of £269—have been spent on modernising the almshouse.

Changes in the administration of this ancient charity have necessarily been made, but after nearly three centuries the gifts of John and Mary Sayer still benefit six Berkhamsted widows. And our High Street, I think, is the better for having a modest but attractive 17th century almshouse which, almost alone among the old buildings of the town, has retained its original frontage.

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