

## SOCIAL HISTORY

### ALMSHOUSES

Taunton has several almshouses whose buildings date from the 17th to 20th centuries, and some of which were founded in the Middle Ages. The medieval almshouses were well provided for but the dissolution of the Priory, which had maintained the St James' almshouses, and the abolition of the chantries and religious fraternities, which had maintained St Mary's, left them dependent on the parishes. Although they received some small legacies they no longer had a guaranteed income.<sup>1</sup> Post-Reformation owners refused to honour obligations previously attached to their property.<sup>2</sup> An undated 16th-century petition claimed there were 44 almshouses formerly supported out of chantry lands although only *c.* 30 can be accounted for.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately many survived and were augmented by charitable benefactions for additional dwellings in the first half of the 17th century. Post-medieval almshouses, often called hospitals, usually consisted of a building divided into rooms rather than a row of houses and were provided with a chapel and a reader. Despite the many problems that beset them most are still in use although, except for Gray's, rebuilt away from their original sites. Lack of endowments and poorhouse accommodation meant almshouses were often used to house the parish poor on relief in the early 19th century.<sup>4</sup> In 1888 the Charity Commission planned to reorganise the almshouse charities but their management was gradually taken over by the Taunton Town Lands charity.<sup>5</sup> Additional gifts such as Harriet Badcock's £900 of 1864 have been absorbed into the charity.<sup>6</sup> In 1963 the almshouse charities were combined to create the Taunton Town Charity, now the Taunton Heritage Trust. In 2017 it had seven

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<sup>1</sup> F. Weaver, *Som. Wills, 1531—58* (Som. Rec. Soc. 21), 78—9.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. TNA, C2/JAS1/W4/40; below, rel. hist.

<sup>3</sup> BL, Add. MS 30277, f. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *5th Rep. Com. Char.*, 490—542.

<sup>5</sup> R.W McDowall, and I. I. Jeffries, 'The Old Almshouses, St James' Street, Taunton (*Proc. SANHS* 106), 82.

<sup>6</sup> *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

employees, an income of nearly £700,000 and assets of nearly £7,300,000. The almshouses were regarded as sheltered accommodation for those over 60.<sup>7</sup>

### St Mary Magdalene's almshouses

Half of those were built before 1423 by the Osbern family and in 1459 the seven almshouses and adjoining chaplain's house in Easter Church, now Magdalene, Lane formed part of the estate of their successor John Bishop, who probably added the second row of six almshouses.<sup>8</sup> In 1476 John, a servant of the bishop of Winchester, assigned his Taunton property in trust until three years after his death (c. 1499) when it was to go to the chantry he had founded in St Mary's with the 13 almshouses.<sup>9</sup> In 1505 the occupants were to receive white bread every Friday, 'one lane' one week and the 'other lane' the next.<sup>10</sup> In 1548 it was said that the 13 almshouses had been supported by £2 16s. 4d. from the dissolved fraternity of St Nicholas, also known as Bishop's chantry, but later erroneously as from the Sepulchre fraternity, which supported another six almshouses. By Elizabeth's reign a smaller sum was being paid and the feoffees of what was then called the St Mary Magdalene's Chantry petitioned the court of Augmentations on behalf of the almspeople without success.<sup>11</sup>

The St Mary's almshouses were used to house the parish poor in the early 1630s and were described as mean.<sup>12</sup> In 1671 the Town Lands charity was responsible for repairs.<sup>13</sup> There were 17 almshouses in Little Magdalene Lane and two in Paul Street, the latter rebuilt c. 1810 and demolished c. 1940. Those were probably the two additional almshouses repaired

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<sup>7</sup> SHC, DD/TAC; Char. Com. Reg.: accessed 22 Oct .2018.

<sup>8</sup> TNA, E 326/5020, 5058.

<sup>9</sup> TNA, E328/180; E329/476.

<sup>10</sup> TNA, PROB 11/14/794.

<sup>11</sup> E. Green, *Somerset Chantries*, 20, G. Woodward, *Chantry Grants*, pp. 2—3; *SDNQ*, XII, 198—9; XIX, 13.

<sup>12</sup> E. H. Bates, *Gerard's Survey of Somerset, 1633*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/15 (1671).

by the St Nicholas fraternity.<sup>14</sup> By the early 19th century the borough constables rather than the parish officers decided who should occupy them.<sup>15</sup>

The six houses supported by the St Sepulchre fraternity before 1548 were also 'in the churchyard' in 1555.<sup>16</sup> Four houses, possibly the same, were vested in the Town Lands trustees when they were pulled down by Sir Benjamin Hammet as part of his creation of Hammet Street in the 1780s. In 1806 John Hammet gave the charity four one up one down houses adjoining the recently relocated Henley's Almshouse in Holway Lane in recompense for those demolished by Sir Benjamin. By 1820 it was intended that no more people in receipt of relief should be housed in the charity's dwellings.<sup>17</sup> They were described as three tolerable cottages in 1842 and were occupied until 1871 having been excluded from the sale of Henley's but were empty in 1881.<sup>18</sup>

The Magdalene Lane almshouses, also known as Osborne's,<sup>19</sup> were demolished and rebuilt after 1851 by William Shewbrooks for the Taunton Town Lands charity for £1,419.<sup>20</sup> Each of five houses consisted of four dwellings with access to a backyard. They were condemned in 1932 and sold. The proceeds went towards building the Leycroft Close almshouses. The Magdalene Lane houses were demolished apart from the southern four, since converted into commercial premises.<sup>21</sup>

### St James' Almshouses

<sup>14</sup> Green, *Somerset Chantries*, 20; SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10; A/DIF/101/11/218 [nos 33—34 Paul St].

<sup>15</sup> SHC, A/CPT/15/5; *5th Rep Com. Char.* 514—5.

<sup>16</sup> Green, *Somerset Chantries*, 24; SHC, T/PH/hps/1.

<sup>17</sup> *5th Rep Com. Char.* 514—5.

<sup>18</sup> SHC, DD/TAC/6/1/1; TNA, RG 10/2371; RG 11/2366.

<sup>19</sup> Kinsman and trustee of John Bysshop: TNA, E328/120.

<sup>20</sup> SHC, DD/TAC/5/5/51. The 1851 census recorded 17 houses with 34 residents: TNA, HO 107/1922.

<sup>21</sup> SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/79/1648, 24/1/85/1820, 24/1/86/1852; D/DC/tau.d/36/15 and uncat. plan of almshos.; below, this section.

The origins of these almshouses in St James Street are obscure but the donors appear to have entrusted the priory with their management and endowment as the canons supported the seven inmates until the Dissolution.<sup>22</sup> Although almshouse investments producing £2 2s. a year, survived the Dissolution, the money was mostly spent on the church and by the early 19th century the seven houses were used for the parish poor in receipt of relief. Following a Charity Commission investigation a sum of arrears on debentures from 1807 was paid in 1822. Nearly £32 was to be spent on the buildings and they were returned to the use of the ‘second poor’, those not on relief.<sup>23</sup> From that date the vicar appointed deserving people to the almshouse, which by 1869 had had its corner house divided into two so that seven women and a married couple were accommodated but the building was in a poor and filthy state by 1883, the inmates sharing a choked privy, and in 1886 their replacement was proposed.<sup>24</sup>

The late 15th-century, 12-bay timber-framed row had deep bracketed eaves, back and front, and four chimneys, probably a later insertion. The corner house at the eastern end was wider and had side windows on two floors, a large gable chimney stack and a rear extension. Each house had a door and window at the back leading to a small communal garden. Most had part of the lower room partitioned off to form a scullery but no. 34 had one room with a rear fireplace and no loft and the corner house had been subdivided to provide two heated rooms and two staircases. Around the corner, 16 Canon Street may have been a later addition but was structurally similar and with a large external stack standing on the pavement.<sup>25</sup> In 1888 the Charity Commission granted permission for their replacement and c. 1895 of a row of six new houses was built along the eastern boundary of St James’ churchyard, later known as St James Close. In 1902 two more were added on the garden by the street, which had been

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<sup>22</sup> *Valor Eccl*, I. 170.

<sup>23</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja/4/1/4

<sup>24</sup> McDowall, and Jeffries, ‘The Old Almshouses, St James’ St’, 82; SHC, D/B/ta/3/8/1; D/P/tau.ja/9/1/3.

<sup>25</sup> SHC, A/DAS/2 (12451—4); A/DIF/116/223; McDowall and Jeffries ‘The Old Almshouses, St James’ St’, 83.

reserved for a vestry hall, and the two to the north were remodelled as flats in 1969 to provide 10 dwellings.<sup>26</sup> The old site was sold to the Canon Street Brewery, which surrounded it on two sides. The brewery owners donated the timber frames to Taunton Corporation after demolishing the houses in 1897. It is not clear what happened to them all but two frames were given to the Archaeological Society. One decayed and only no. 33 St James Street survived, now restored with sleeping gallery, in the courtyard of the Museum of Somerset. The corner of the site was sold to the council for road widening.<sup>27</sup>

Louisa Crossman Coleman's gift of 1890 was invested in nearly £190 of government stock to benefit the residents. In 1866 William Harry Stone gave £60 for a cash distribution on Christmas Eve amongst the almspeople.<sup>28</sup> In 1979 they were amalgamated with Hugo Bonn's gift of 1949, then producing nearly £10 a year, as the St James Almshouse Benefit Fund but had ceased to exist by 1994.<sup>29</sup>

### Pope's Almshouses

On 24 November 1590 Thomas Pope the elder surrendered in trust Medeland in Holway tithing (3 a.) and two cottages, then rebuilt as six dwellings with gardens outside the East Gate. In his will of 1602 he provided that 8s. a year from the land be paid to a poor man to say daily prayers in the sixth or 'bell house' for the inhabitants. He required the deeds to be placed with those of the Town Lands, the copyhold property being held in trust for the poor.<sup>30</sup> The six cottages were replaced by one large corner house in 1637. In 1649 the land was withheld and the tenant would not carry out repairs but by 1672 5 a. at Wineard in Holway

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<sup>26</sup> SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/21/852, 24/1/27/1770; D/P/tau.ja/9/1/3, 9/2/1; inf. from the Taunton Town Charity, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> R.W McDowall, and Jeffries, 'The Old Almshouses, St James' St, 83—4; above, this section; SHC, DD/CWC.ta/unlisted box 2.

<sup>28</sup> SHC, DD/HS/2/13; A/ARG/9; D/P/tau.ja 3/1/2; DD/C/324.

<sup>29</sup> SHC, A/ARG/8; Char. Com. Reg.: accessed 22 Oct. 2018.

<sup>30</sup> TNA, PROB 11/101/226.

had been added to the almshouse estate.<sup>31</sup> By 1735 the charity held Stringland's, Stringfield's or Strickland's Charity, described as 18 a. and a linyay, variously said to have been given by Thomas Pope or by a group of nonconformists. It was surrendered in trust for the poor by William Gill in 1672 and its trustees were mainly members of Paul's meeting.<sup>32</sup> Stringlands or Poor Grounds (15 a.), south of Leycroft House between the Black Brook and the Union workhouse, was the only land owned by the charity in 1839 but Saunders charity was said to own 3 a. part of Ash Meadows, between the Black Brook and the present Vivary Park, which probably represents Pope's original endowment.<sup>33</sup> The 15 a. was let as a small dairy in the later 19th century.<sup>34</sup>

In c. 1776 it was said that only Gray's and Huish's had endowments<sup>35</sup> and in 1791 it was claimed the profits of the Pope estate had been used for electioneering. Pope's almshouse then contained 12 dwellings.<sup>36</sup> By 1816 it had 14 rooms c. 14 ft square each occupied by a poor woman who provided her own furniture and received no allowance from the charity. The £50 rent for the land, after upkeep of the almshouse, was distributed to the poor of Taunton St Mary. The trustees wished to give the money to the almswomen and the Charity Commissioners agreed but in the 1850s the almswomen still received nothing.<sup>37</sup> They worked if they could and if in need of relief or care were removed to a workhouse or asylum.<sup>38</sup> In 1860 £3 known as the Blake charity was given to the house but appears to have been lost later.<sup>39</sup> In 1870 Pope's, Stringland's and Saunders' charities were amalgamated and the

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<sup>31</sup> *5th Rep Com. Char.* 493—5; SHC, DD/SP 18/20; A/CPT/15/5.

<sup>32</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10, 30. DD/DP/116/21/1/1; DD/FJ/30. In 1647 Grace Portman held land called String. She is sometimes erroneously said to founded the almshouses, but she may have given some of their land: SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/16 (Holway tithing);.

<sup>33</sup> SHC, A/CPT/15/5; Q/RSc/3/7; *5th Rep Com. Char.* 495—7; SHC, tithe award (St Mary's). Saunders charity comprised town property: below, this section.

<sup>34</sup> SHC, D/DC/tau.d/25/17 (abstr. of title); DD/DP/116/21/1/7.

<sup>35</sup> SHC, D/D/Vc/88.

<sup>36</sup> SHC, A/CPT/15/5.

<sup>37</sup> SHC, A/CPT/15/5; Q/RSc/3/7; *5th Rep Com. Char.* 495—7.

<sup>38</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.m/9/1/5.

<sup>39</sup> *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

dwellings in the almshouse were improved and reduced to nine. Preference was given to women who had suffered misfortune who were finally given a small pension.<sup>40</sup> In 1905 the land was sold to Louisa Wall for £2,120 but the investments proved less valuable than the rent. By 1917 the total income of £65 barely covered repairs and the charity's assets were given to the Taunton Town Charity.<sup>41</sup>

The buildings in East Street at the East Gate were said to have been damaged in the Civil War. They were demolished in 1932 for road widening. Separated from Gray's almshouse by a pair of gabled houses dated 1638,<sup>42</sup> also demolished, Pope's house was of two storeys with two massive chimney stacks on the north and east fronts. Apart from a door and a pair of two light windows on each floor at the west end the front wall was blank rendered brick divided by two horizontal string course. The east front consisted of five uneven bays of two-light windows and the same heavy string courses as the north front. A large plaque, blank in 1870, was inserted in the flattened corner wall.<sup>43</sup>

The charity money, combined with the proceeds of the sales of Henley's and the Magdalene Lane almshouses, was used to build Leycroft Close almshouses on the site of Leycroft House south of the junction of East Reach and String Lane, now Leycroft Road, in 1932. The brick-faced building, designed by H. S. W. Stone, consisted of three blocks, the two outer angled out from the main range with its central turret. Thirty dwellings, 15 on each of two floors, each had a living room, kitchen, larder, fuel store, bedroom and water closet. The building was altered and enlarged between 1997 and 2001 to provide 28 flats.<sup>44</sup>

### Huish's Almshouses

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<sup>40</sup> *Taunton of Today* (1896), 47; SHC, D/DC/tau.d/36/15; DD/DP/116/21/1/3; R.W. Dunning, 'A Careful Trust', TS in VCH office, 8.

<sup>41</sup> SHC, DD/C/325; Char. Com. *In the Matter of Taunton Town Charity* (Taunton, 1941), 5.

<sup>42</sup> *Taunton of Today* (1896), 71; below, this section.

<sup>43</sup> SHC, DD/DP/116/21/1/3 (1870); A/DAS/2 (124550; A/DIF/44.

<sup>44</sup> SHC, DD/DP/C1358/24 (1931 plans); A/DIF/79/2; info. from Taunton Town Charity in 2005.

Before making his will in 1615 Richard Huish had begun to build an almshouse or hospital for 13 poor aged men in Great Magdalene or Church Lane west of St Mary's church. In his will he asked that the ablest of them, a literate native of Taunton, should be president with a chamber next to the study where the records should be kept, and that a rent of £103 out of his property in Blackfriars, London, a number of large houses, should support the hospital. He appointed 22 governors to choose the inmates examining them on their faith and circumstances as they were to live strictly without gaming or visiting alehouses. The men would receive 2s. 8d. a week, the president 3s. 4d. and each man should have a new tawny gown every two years. The hospital had a chapel for compulsory morning and evening prayers. There was no provision for the sick and any man who fell ill was to be removed.<sup>45</sup>

The president of Huish's hospital and the 12 poor inmates in 1616 appealed to the Lord Chancellor that several people, all claiming to be the next heir of Richard Huish and questioning the will, detained the London rents. Only three persisted in claiming the Blackfriars estate and they lost their case.<sup>46</sup> A clerk was appointed to receive the charity rents in London. That property was destroyed in the Great Fire and was still waste in 1671. By the 1720s the property was in a bad state again and few rents were received. Although a new agent improved the property from 1729, the number of almshouse inmates and their pay had been reduced since 1725 but the Court of Chancery intervened to secure the London income. In the 1760s there were often only five to seven inmates. In 1788 the feoffees and governors sold a house with large garden in Great Magdalene Lane adjoining their almshouse to Sir Benjamin Hammet for £240 for demolition to create his new street.<sup>47</sup> The stone and tile almshouse had 13 rooms over two floors, a chapel, and a lumber room, originally for the records. On the south front a single door gave access to the covered passage along the back of

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<sup>45</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10, 10A; *5th Rep Com. Char.* 499—503.

<sup>46</sup> TNA, C2/JAS1/G3/72.

<sup>47</sup> SHC, Q/RDd/32; DD/DP/60/1, 75/4, C3161.1, 3; D/P/tau.m/23/27.

the building and each room was lit by a pair of two-light windows and had a fireplace. Three main stacks each of four flues, stood between pairs of windows. The upstairs passage was lit on the north by six 3-light windows and there was a bell turret on the ridge. There were two gardens to the north and north-east.<sup>48</sup> Hammet was required to provide a carriage way from his new street at least 8ft wide, which survives as a passage through the side of 6 Hammet Street.<sup>49</sup>

At the discretion of the trustees, linen, shoes, blankets and coal were allowed to the almsmen and medical aid was provided. In 1817 a petition was made to Chancery that the charity funds being in surplus more money should be given to the almshouse inmates who from that date received 5s. a week except the president who had 7s. Each almsman received a coat, waistcoat and breeches of tawny cloth every two years, shoes, stockings, a shirt and a blanket every year but no coals for many years. The charity property at that date consisted of eight houses in Huish's Court, Water Lane, Blackfriars, rebuilt after the 1666 fire, and later replaced by 13 houses and two public houses.<sup>50</sup>

By the 1850s the income, from the London property and surpluses invested in consols covered medical attendance, clothing, shoes, repairs and the almsmen's pay besides payments to Huish scholars at University and the stipends of the charity's rent collector and steward. Income far exceeded expenditure, leading eventually to the foundation of two schools.<sup>51</sup> Following the sale of the Blackfriars property to the London, Chatham and Dover Railway the income was over £737 a year. The almshouse was rebuilt in the 1860s on the site of Burton or St James' Square houses in Magdalene Street at a cost of nearly £3,000. The old

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<sup>48</sup> SHC, A/DAS/2 (12460); A/DIF/44; DD/DP/C3161/6.

<sup>49</sup> SHC, DD/DP/43/5 (1798).

<sup>50</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/TN/C795/15 (1671); *5th Rep Com. Char.* 499—508; G. Baker, *The History of Huish's, Taunton* (Taunton, 1980), 32.

<sup>51</sup> SHC, Q/RSc/3/7; educ.

almshouse was demolished in 1868 and the site sold.<sup>52</sup> From 1874 the new almshouse was in the care of the Taunton Town charity.<sup>53</sup> By the 20th century the London ground rents were worth little and the remaining property was sold in the 1930s and after the war, when several houses were damaged, and the capital invested in stocks.<sup>54</sup> By 1901 the almshouse people's allowance had doubled and cost £350 a year but the same amount was paid out in 1951. The steward's £50 salary had also not increased and the total £2,300 income was not spent.<sup>55</sup> The prayer room was later adapted as the trustees meeting room and in 2004 the building was altered to provide four flats and the charity offices. The charity planned 19 flats, known as the Bernard Taylor Homes after a chairman of the charity, on the adjoining former fire station site in 1974, which were completed c.1984.<sup>56</sup>

### Henley's Almshouses

These originated as 11 two-storey houses built by Andrew Henley, Taunton's first mayor, before 1630 when he left the sum of 2s a quarter to each house for a year after his death.<sup>57</sup> His widow Dorothy (d. 1651), is credited with building 18 almshouses for the poor of St Mary's parish opposite the west end of the church in what is now the opening to Hammet Street reputedly in 1637, presumably extending her husband's work. Each almshouse comprised one heated room. They do not appear to have been endowed, although it was claimed that land called Henley's in Ash Priors and Bishops Hull had belonged to them. Robert Henley and his heirs were responsible for placing residents in the houses. A plaque commemorating Dorothy's gift was fixed to the houses in 1649. By the 18th century the

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<sup>52</sup> *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1; SHC, A/DAS/2 (12460); D/B/ta/2/1/3, p. 733; DD/DP/C3161/4.

<sup>53</sup> Char. Com. *In the Matter of Taunton Town Charity* (Taunton, 1941), 5.

<sup>54</sup> SHC, DD/DH/1/3 (1925—61).

<sup>55</sup> SHC, DD/C/325 (char. accts 1901, 1951).

<sup>56</sup> SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/5350; DD/TAC/13/1; inf. from Taunton Town Charity, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> TNA, PROB 11/159/31.

houses were used as a poorhouse for the parish and were in a bad state but accommodated 36 paupers with eight more in four nearby houses, probably the old Holy Sepulchre houses. A pump was installed by the parish in 1760. In 1788 it was reported that £100 was required to repair them but Sir Benjamin Hammet, requiring the site to build his new street, agreed that for that sum to be paid by the parish he would build a new house in Holway Lane, later South Street, to be called Henley's Almshouse and demolish the old almshouses. The new house was maintained by the parish and despite its name was used as a parish poorhouse. It was badly damaged by fire in 1793 and Sir Benjamin allowed the parish to deduct the £45 repair cost from the £100 they still owed him.<sup>58</sup> The houses were in a poor state again by the 1820s when stone floors were laid in the rooms. People were transferred out of the houses for misconduct and adult and illegitimate children could be removed.<sup>59</sup>

In 1860 the Poor Law Commissioners sold eight tenements in South Street held of the manor of Taunton Deane by Taunton St Mary parish and used to house the poor for £175 towards the parish's contribution to the cost of the Union workhouse.<sup>60</sup> Henley's charity was recorded as having no property or income by 1869 and ceased to exist.<sup>61</sup> The row of houses at right angles to the road north of Alma Street, was of two storeys and attics lit by dormers. The houses had one room on each floor but were attached to a larger house on the street which had Tudor style 4-light windows on the ground and first floors and a three light dormer on the side.<sup>62</sup> With the adjacent four houses of 1806<sup>63</sup> they were empty in 1881 and in 1882 a total of 11 houses were demolished and the site used for carriage workshops.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.m/9/1/1, 23/37; DD/SAS/C795/TN/15 (1760 and loose papers); *5th Rep. Com. Char.*, 519—20.

<sup>59</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.m/9/1/5.

<sup>60</sup> SHC, DD/FIV/10/6; D/G/ta/8a/15 (4 Feb. 1860).

<sup>61</sup> *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>62</sup> SHC, A/DAS/2 (123210); A/DIF/101/11/230; A/DIF/116/669.

<sup>63</sup> Above this section, St Mary's almshouses.

<sup>64</sup> TNA, RG 11/2366; SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/16/600; D/B/ta/3/9/1 (1882).

### Gray's Almshouses.

In March 1635 Robert Gray (d. 1638) bought from Sir William Portman a messuage and three yards of land south of East Street near the East Gate and built the extant almshouse incorporating a chapel. In 1636 he left £1,500 to the Merchant Taylor's Company to pay each of the ten almswomen and six almsmen 8s. a month and the prayer reader £6 13s. 4d. a quarter. It was said to be his intention that the reader should teach ten poor children.<sup>65</sup> Gray died before the rooms were completed and before investing a further £500 in the Taunton property to provide an income for maintenance. Owing to difficulties with the will and claims by relatives the Merchant Taylors declined the trust and in 1641 the Lord Chancellor directed the feoffees to invest the whole £2,000 in property but that was not done and the money was lent on security or invested in bonds and public funds.<sup>66</sup> The account book dating from 1659 records the payments of cash and clothing to the almspeople and also their deaths and funerals. Two feoffees were chosen as overseers for the house each year and four men were appointed as 'the keys'.<sup>67</sup> The almspeople wore a badge with Gray's rebus on their coats and waistcoats. Men had a new gown and women a new waistcoat and petticoat every three years.<sup>68</sup>

By 1661 when 17 new trustees were appointed bringing the number to 20,<sup>69</sup> the charity owned a tenement adjoining the almshouses on the east,<sup>70</sup> which was repeatedly subdivided and by the early 19th century was six dwellings and one rood of orchard and garden. In addition there were a 5-a. close called Pugsley's Mead near the turnpike gate in East Reach, part of which was sold to widen the road in 1820, and 3a. of arable called Poors

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<sup>65</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/15 (1671).

<sup>66</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10; DD/DP/205/1; *5th Rep Com. Char.*, 522—8; *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>67</sup> SHC, A/BIS/1/1.

<sup>68</sup> S. Simpson, *The Agreeable Historian* (1746), 881.

<sup>69</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/48.

<sup>70</sup> Two gabled buildings dated 1638, which formerly stood to the east: *Taunton of Today* (1896), 71.

Croft at Haydon. Additional endowments included John Cole's gift of £50 in 1774.<sup>71</sup> Concern was raised in 1817 that charity property had been let to one of the trustees under value but two trustees had left a total of £150 to add to the charity funds, which by the 1820s were £3,150 in 4% consols, four £50 turnpike bonds, and the lands producing a total income of c. £179 a year. The almspeople received 3s. a week each and the reader 6s., which with repairs and maintenance still left an annual surplus to be added to the funds. Gowns were no longer given as they were too expensive. The almspeople had their own room which they had to furnish, and a garden divided into men's and women's plots. The reader had three rooms on two floors and a separate garden. The poor were to be unmarried, over 60, free of disease and resident in Taunton at least seven years. They were not allowed to have inmates or children in their apartments. By the mid 19th century those rules were broken. In the 1850s the charity income was c. £190 most of which was given to the inmates but in 1853 the Board of Health required a well, new pump, drains and closets to be provided. The total income of £186 was used to support the almshouse in 1869.<sup>72</sup> A new scheme was drawn up for the charity in 1870 and charity money was used to develop Pugsley's meadow for housing raising nearly £2,000.<sup>73</sup> In 1896 John Hamilton Kinglake and his wife gave money to support the almshouse by replacing the capital used for the development and in 1900 the combined assets became the Gray's Almshouse Charity. The Taunton Town Charity was allowed to appoint three residents in return for paying their stipends costing £45 a year and maintaining their accommodation.<sup>74</sup> By that date the inmates were all women. The land was sold in 1917 and the two adjoining houses with their back courts in 1931. In 1933 H.J. Southey gave £450 to augment the almshouse income and there were plans to demolish or move the house. In 1949

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<sup>71</sup> SHC, Q/RSc/3/7; Dd/TAC/2/1/1 (1820); TNA, PROB 11/995/247.

<sup>72</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/48; Q/RSc/3/7; *5th Rep Com. Char.* 522—8; *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>73</sup> SHC, A/AUS [uncat.]; DD/TAC/6/1/6.

<sup>74</sup> SHC, A/AUS [uncat.]; DD/DP/97/10; *Char. Com. In the Matter of Taunton Town Charity* (Taunton, 1941), 22.

half the £300 income went on upkeep and the six almswomen received 15—20s. a week with extra payments for the reader and cleaner.<sup>75</sup> In the 1950s demolition was again threatened but the trustees refused and agreed to install bathrooms. Under a scheme of 1959 the almshouses became the responsibility of the Taunton Town Charity and in 1966 the two charities merged.<sup>76</sup>

Like many other Taunton almshouses this was a single house with separate rooms within it. In 1906 it was re-arranged to provide eight apartments each containing bedroom, living room and pantry and with shared bathrooms and water closet on each floor.<sup>77</sup> It was converted again in 1989 to provide nine self-contained flats retaining the chapel and the walled garden, recorded in 1693. The main street range including the chapel dates in part from 1635 and the rest was possibly completed in 1696, the date on the bell tower although the weather vane was said to have been set up in 1693.<sup>78</sup> It is possible that the early work was timber-framed and that the brick façade with stone string course and window surrounds was built across the entire front in the 1690s. The small chapel is panelled in oak with a painted ceiling of stars, clouds and angels, and contains a contemporary chest, Gray's portrait and his coat of arms. The main north front is arranged in a repeated pattern of three bays of windows and an entrance door with plaque above. The windows are two-light casements except for the chapel window and that of the former schoolroom above it, which are of three lights. The six massive stacks above the front wall carry pairs of smaller chimney stacks set diagonally and in the centre of the roof is a simple bell turret carrying the weathervane.

### Middle Street Almshouses

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<sup>75</sup> SHC, DD/C/325; DD/TAC/2/1/1 (1935); DD/DP/205/1.

<sup>76</sup> SHC, DD/TAC/2/1/1 (1957—66).

<sup>77</sup> SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/35/362.

<sup>78</sup> SHC, A/BIS/1/1; *PSANHS* CXXXII (1988), 279—89.

The origin of these so-called almshouses is obscure but they belonged to the Canon Street charity later known as William Dunn's.<sup>79</sup> Thomas Gale surrendered a cottage in Canon Street titling in 1689 to trustees to benefit the poor children of St James parish.<sup>80</sup> In 1791 an old house on the south corner of Canon and Middle Streets was in the occupation of the parish officers of St James for the benefit of the poor. By 1802 the houses were decayed and let to the holder of adjoining property to repair one house and replace the rest with warehouses.<sup>81</sup> The tenant paid the rent erratically and few distributions were made.<sup>82</sup> After 1839 two large, terraced houses were built on the Middle Street frontage and the Canon Street house was rebuilt. The annual £10 rent was used for clothing the poor children of St James parish and in 1846 488 shirts were bought for distribution.<sup>83</sup> By 1901 the houses belonged to Hanbury and Cotching's brewery and the £10 was a ground rent used to distribute calico for c. 400 people. No distributions were made between 1918 and 1922 and by 1941 it was administered as part of the Taunton Town Charity.<sup>84</sup>

#### Harmony Cottages

Charles Harman, cabinet maker and organist of St Mary's.<sup>85</sup> built Harmony Cottages on the south-east side of Tancred Street and registered them as a charity in 1845. Under his will of 1848 the ten tiny one up one downs with privies were left to the parishes of St James and St Mary, five to each, who were to maintain them and put in tenants of good character who were not to hang washing or damage the shrubs in the communal front garden. It does not seem

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<sup>79</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja/17/1/1.

<sup>80</sup> SHC, DD/CH/32.

<sup>81</sup> SHC, A/ARG/9; *5th Rep Com. Char.* 536—7.

<sup>82</sup> SHC, DD/CG/32.

<sup>83</sup> SHC, tithe award St James; DD/CH/32.

<sup>84</sup> SHC, DD/C/324; *Char. Com. In the Matter of Taunton Town Charity* (Taunton, 1941), 28, 36, 40.

<sup>85</sup> SHC, T/PH/bb/4; DD/CH/22.

that an almshouse charity was established and the cottages were privately owned in 1910. Despite their size and lack of sanitation they remained in use until 1962.<sup>86</sup>

## CHARITIES FOR THE POOR

There were many charities in the town and although most were lost enough survived to provide £1,850 annually in the mid 19th century. Until the Dissolution Taunton priory gave a tenth of its income in alms to the poor as required by its founders. In the 1530s priory almsgiving amounted to £27 1s. a year in addition to members of the clergy and others entitled to ale and bread from the priory or meals there.<sup>87</sup> Some of the children brought up in the priory may have been poor orphans.<sup>88</sup> Alms were also given at funerals and from chantry endowments and religious fraternities supported poor members. Those charitable provisions were lost because purchasers of priory, chantry or fraternity property considered such obligations void.<sup>89</sup> Taunton's poor must have suffered considerable hardship especially children. Studies of child skeletons across the country have shown a sharp rise in disease and trauma in the mid 16th century greater than any experienced in the Middle Ages even during civil war.<sup>90</sup>

New 16th-century charities were also lost.<sup>91</sup> Some people continued the custom of funeral gifts like Robert Hill who left 20 dozen white loaves to the poor in 1545 and regular distributions of tollcorn from his mills.<sup>92</sup> There was often no higher authority than the parish churchwardens to look after charities. In 1609 the churchwardens of St James' were given £7 10s. to buy firewood for the poor but did not do so and later an unidentified donor gave the

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<sup>86</sup> SHC, DD/DP/184/2; DD/SAS/C212/map148; D/P/tau.m/4/1/1—2; DD/IR/T/26/1, p. 11; D/B/ta/2/1/6, p. 125, 4/2/4 (1962).

<sup>87</sup> *Valor Eccl.*, I. 170; below, rel. hist.

<sup>88</sup> TNA, E134/15Eliz/Hi15; Orme, *Educ. W. of Eng.*, 212.

<sup>89</sup> TNA, C2/JAS1/W4/40.

<sup>90</sup> B. Penny-Mason, 'Children of the Reformation', *Current Archaeology*, April 2015, 27.

<sup>91</sup> e.g. Daberham's: *Som. Wills 1531—58*, pp. 183—4.

<sup>92</sup> A. Webb, *Som. Wills II*, p. 176.

churchwardens of the same parish £20 and an income of £10 a year for firewood for the poor which the wardens used in their own lawsuits and detained the money. It was agreed in 1613 that £10 should be used to buy fuel for the poor annually but it is not clear if this was done.<sup>93</sup> In 1610 another charity in St James, in existence by 1581 and possibly much earlier, was abused including £18 spent on a dinner and £20 on ‘some exploit of the officers’ as well as on general parish business.<sup>94</sup> In 1613 the parish had £14 a year from property to relieve the poor but the money was withheld so that the poor, who were numerous, had to be relieved by neighbouring parishes.<sup>95</sup> In 1623 a legacy of £100 to the parish was lost and the churchwardens failed to recover it.<sup>96</sup>

Sixteen charities in existence in 1647 had been lost before 1791.<sup>97</sup> Generous 17th-century gifts from Sir William Portman, Sir John Warre, John Slape, Admiral Robert Blake, a Mr Clarke, a Mr Warman, Margaret Cornish, a Mr Grabham and Thomas Godsall, many for Taunton St James and amounting to nearly £1,000, were among the losses.<sup>98</sup> An anonymous gift of 20 bushels of flour for bread at Christmas was lost after 1671.<sup>99</sup> Archibald Thompson’s gift of £10 provided bread for the poor of Taunton St Mary on the first Sunday of the month but by the early 1690s few poor came to church to receive it. The charity was last recorded in 1693 when 60 loaves were given with two year’s interest.<sup>100</sup> Charities that survived had no accounts. In the 1820s the Charity Commission deplored the practice of adding all charity monies together and making a single distribution and in other ways not following the donors’ wishes. They found conflicts of interests with tradesmen involved in

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<sup>93</sup> SHC, Q/SR/16/25—6.

<sup>94</sup> TNA, C2/JAS1/H19/24.

<sup>95</sup> SHC, Q/SR/16/25—6.

<sup>96</sup> SHC, D/D/Ca/235.

<sup>97</sup> SHC, A/CPT/15/5.

<sup>98</sup> SHC, A/CPT/3/1, 15/5.; DD/FJ/30.

<sup>99</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/15 (1671).

<sup>100</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10; *5th Rep. Com. Char.*, 540.

administering gifts in kind, such as tailors with charity clothing. They also found not enough care was taken in the choice of recipients.<sup>101</sup>

Sir William Portman's undated gift of £90 to bind poor apprentices including 11 in Taunton was dependent on the generosity of his descendants and seems to have been lost after the late 17th century.<sup>102</sup> Simon Stacey's gifts of £50 for four poor men in each of St James and St Mary parishes to receive a coat and £20 to the poor of Paul's meeting in 1711 never appear to have been executed.<sup>103</sup> Neither were two bequests to pay for apprenticeships given by Jasper Chaplin in 1656 and Nicholas Marke in 1722.<sup>104</sup> The latter had charged 2 a. at Haydmead with the binding out of poor children of Haydon and Holway villages but although the charge was recorded in 1798 there is no record of the charity being carried out.<sup>105</sup> The Market Act of 1768—9 provided for market profits to be used to clothe, educate and apprentice poor children in Taunton St Mary but by 1871 it was clear there would never be such a charity due to poor finances.<sup>106</sup> It had raised £95 by 1902 when it was administered by the Taunton Town Charity.<sup>107</sup>

Among the more successful charities was that of clothier Simon Saunders who left £100 in 1591 to provide the poor with woollen cloth on 17 November as well as £20 for distributing on his burial day.<sup>108</sup> His brother Christopher invested the money in a tenement called the Bird or Bread Cage or High Hall, which was converted into three ranks of 12 shambles called the New Shambles. The cloth was made into waistcoats and stockings for the poor of Taunton St Mary. The property was sold in 1769 and in 1796 the trustees bought

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<sup>101</sup> *5th Rep. Com. Char*, 490—542.

<sup>102</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10, 30.

<sup>103</sup> SHC, A/CPT/15/5; *5th Rep. Com. Char*, 532—3.

<sup>104</sup> TNA, PROB 11/253/491; PROB 11/584/201.

<sup>105</sup> SHC, DD/DP/90/4.

<sup>106</sup> TNA, C2/JAS1/G3/72; *5th Rep. Com. Char*, 533—4; *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>107</sup> *Char. Com. In the Matter of Taunton Town Charity* (Taunton, 1941), 42.

<sup>108</sup> TNA, PROB 11/77/388.

£105 of stock producing £3 3s. a year, which was laid out in stockings until 1845 then in flannel and woollens until 1871 or later.<sup>109</sup>

Bread charities included Sir George Farewell's 1622 gifts of 16s. a year to St Mary's and 8s. to St James from land in Bishop's Hull and still distributed in the 1840s.<sup>110</sup> In 1694 Hugh Prockter or Parker gave £5 a year out of a public house in London for a sermon at St Mary's on 1 May of which £4 was to be distributed in bread to the poor after the sermon, a practice that continued until 1871 or later.<sup>111</sup> The rent charge was redeemed in 1927.<sup>112</sup> An 1806 gift of over £1,000 in consols, produced £31 9s. for a bread distribution but it was later lost.<sup>113</sup>

Most charities were for cash distributions. In 1614 Thomas Trowbridge, merchant tailor of Taunton, gave the rent of land in West Monkton, then £6, to St Mary's and St James for 1s. each to poor householders attending church from 1618.<sup>114</sup> In the 1840s although the rent was over £29 only £2 was given to St James under the original bequest and the rest was given to 543 parishioners of St Mary's. Payments continued until the land was sold in 1927.<sup>115</sup> In 1638 Florence Stone left £20 to provide 1s. to each of to 20 poor women on 24 June, which was regularly distributed until 1871 or later.<sup>116</sup> In 1645 Robert Moggridge left £5 a year to the poor of St Mary's out of his land at Frethey in Bishops Hull, the same to St James and to Bampton, Devon for payments of between 5s. and 10s. to the needy and 10s. to each set of churchwardens.<sup>117</sup> Betty Dewberry who held the land for much of the 18th century regularly paid £4 8s., after deducting land tax, to each parish, distributed on Easter

<sup>109</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10; D/B/ta/31/1/1, p. 19; DD/DP/116/21/2/3—4; *5th Rep Com. Char.* 490—3; *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>110</sup> SHC, A/CPT/15/5; D/P/tau.m/4/4/1, 17/3/2.

<sup>111</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10, 30; DD/FJ/30; *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>112</sup> SHC, DD/C/325.

<sup>113</sup> *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>114</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10; A/CPT/15/5.

<sup>115</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.m/4/4/1; 17/3/2; DD/C/325.

<sup>116</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja 2/1/95; *5th Rep Com. Char.* 520; *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>117</sup> TNA, PROB 11/195/290.

Monday.<sup>118</sup> In 1690 Samuel Reynolds, clothier, gave half the profits of 3a. in Pool Mead, Holway to the poor on Easter Monday with preference being given to his former workfolk.<sup>119</sup> In 1874 £16 rent was distributed but the land, near Mount Walk, was sold in 1927.<sup>120</sup> Philip Gadd, mercer (d. 1679), asked his daughter and her heirs to pay £3 10s. out of his Holway lands to the poor of Taunton St Mary and West Monkton at the rate of 1s. each. The charity was recorded in the later 18th century but may have been lost after the death of his daughter's children.<sup>121</sup> In 1954 the five surviving Taunton St Mary charities, Farwell, Moggridge, Parker, Reynolds and Trowbridge, produced only £60 a year and the money was used for general church charity including gifts to pensioners and youth work. They have since ceased to exist.<sup>122</sup>

Several charities were charged on land in Pyrland tithing from the early 17th century by George Hooper, Joan King and a Mr Risdon to produce £6 5s. a year for the benefit of the poor of St James but the land had been added to the Yea family's park in the 18th century and later occupiers refused to pay.<sup>123</sup> Some payments had resumed by 1869<sup>124</sup> and Joan King's rent charge was sold for £60 c. 1890 and added to Taunton Town Charity but by the mid 20th century the other charities had been lost.<sup>125</sup> The Hyde Curtis gift of 1809 for the poor of St James was after 1820 transferred to the school.<sup>126</sup> In the early 19th century St James' parish had seven charities for the poor totalling £24 13s. a year, which continued to be distributed in

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<sup>118</sup> Bishops Hull, landownership; SHC, A/CIP/3/5/17; D/P/tau.m/4/4/1; *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>119</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja/17/1/1; *5th Rep. Com. Char.*, 539—40.

<sup>120</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.m/4/4/1; DD/C/325.

<sup>121</sup> TNA, PROB 4/4111; SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10; DD/FJ/30.

<sup>122</sup> SHC, DD/C/325; *Char. Com. Reg.*: accessed 22 Oct. 2018.

<sup>123</sup> *5th Rep. Com. Char.*, 508—9, 535—6, 538—9; SHC, D/P/tau.ja 2/1/9.

<sup>124</sup> *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>125</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja/17/2/1; *Char. Com. In the Matter of Taunton Town Charity* (Taunton, 1902), 36—7.

<sup>126</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja/17/1/1; *5th Rep. Com. Char.* 537; *educ.*

the mid 20th century.<sup>127</sup> From 1886 to 1901 the St James' district visitors were entrusted with £20 a year to distribute.<sup>128</sup>

There were also many nonconformist charities. In 1805 Elizabeth Moore left £200 to be distributed among dissenting ministers and their families in distress and £300 to benefit the poor of the Mary Street meeting, distributed at Christmas to up to 40 people annually. By 1872 £5 was given to lady visitors for casual payments to the needy.<sup>129</sup> In 1841 Elizabeth Noble gave £200 to the chapel and both charities provided coal for 16 recipients in 1902 and for a minister's purse to benefit poor members of the congregation. The funds were last recorded in 1925.<sup>130</sup> Paul's Meeting charities for the poor included John Clitsome's gift of £448 for bread in 1821<sup>131</sup> and the Ackland, Davey and Heudebourck charities for cash distribution to poor members of the congregation. By the 1930s Clitsome's was given in beef to 42 people and bread to 36 but only part of the c. £28 income from the other three charities was distributed. They had all ceased to exist before 1996.<sup>132</sup> The Baptists had the Powell and Stephenson charities to provide warm clothing and bedding to poor members and in 1904 27 people benefited but by the 1920s only an average of 20 a year. They have ceased to exist.<sup>133</sup>

The work of the Charity Commission in helping to recover charity money and ensure it was properly applied may have encouraged later charitable giving.<sup>134</sup> In 1839 Peter Martin Carey gave shares in the Bank of the United States of America to provide coal for the poor of St James. His family replaced the investment with £1,000 consols and required that no recipient got more than 5 cwt. In the 1880s between 180 and 240 people received 3 cwt each

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<sup>127</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja 3/1/2; 4/1/4; DD/ARG/9; below, rel. hist.

<sup>128</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja/17/1/1.

<sup>129</sup> SHC, D/N/tau.mst/1/3/19, 5/2/26; *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som.* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>130</sup> SHC, DD/C/325.

<sup>131</sup> SHC, D/N/tau.pm/4/3/1.

<sup>132</sup> SHC, D/N/tau.pm/4/2/6 (1908), 1/5/1 (1929); DD/C/325; Char. com reg [250297—9]: accessed 11 Oct. 2019.

<sup>133</sup> SHC, DD/C/325.

<sup>134</sup> *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

but by the 1940s the increasing cost of coal reduced gifts to 1 cwt and gradually the number of recipients shrank to 15 in 1975 and the charity was amalgamated with other parish charities.<sup>135</sup>

Charities fell victim to inflation and were wound up in 1994 including those of Mary Pettit Davis (d. 1905) and others to provide for elderly Taunton residents, of Caroline Mary Tite (d. 1932) and her relatives to provide dowries and higher education for Taunton girls and pensions for tradesmen, and the Taunton Benevolent Society, formed before 1896.<sup>136</sup> Rent charges for charities in St James' parish were redeemed in 1942 and in 1979 the surviving charities of Carey, Curtis, Farewell, Moggridge, Reynolds, Stone and Trowbridge were amalgamated as the Taunton St James Relief in Need Charity with an income of nearly £50 a year.<sup>137</sup> That charity was also wound up in 1994 and the capital distributed to other Taunton charities and the ten occupants of the St James almshouses.<sup>138</sup>

### Taunton Town Lands

The most important of Taunton's charities was the Town Lands, later the Town Charity and now the Taunton Heritage Trust. Its origins are obscure but it was in existence by 1512 with feoffees and a common seal. It is possible that some of its later property was former parish chantry and fraternity land as it took over some of their responsibilities for almshouses and some of its estate was claimed by purchasers of chantry and fraternity property.<sup>139</sup> No evidence has been found for the statement that the lands belonged to plague victims.<sup>140</sup> Before 1612 the Feoffees of Taunton Town Lands, who were required by a decree of Chancery to be townsmen, held two burgages on either side of Fore Street, three on the south

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<sup>135</sup> SHC, A/ARG/1—10.

<sup>136</sup> Char. com. reg.: accessed 22 Oct. 2018; *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1897* (Taunton, 1896), 130.

<sup>137</sup> SHC, A/ARG/18.

<sup>138</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja/17/2/1; Char. Com. Reg.: accessed 22 Oct. 2018.

<sup>139</sup> TNA, C2/Jas1/W4/40; SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/15 (1671).

<sup>140</sup> *The Agricultural Gazette Guide to Taunton* [1875], 12.

corner of North and St James streets, five others in North Street, nine north of East Street and four on the south side, four east of High Street and two on the west, five with additional houses on land called the Stawl, now the north-west corner of Mary Street, and several west of the Stawl on Paul, now Mary, Street, five houses in North Town on what is now the junction of Bridge Street and Station Road, and the Hop Yard, east of St Mary's churchyard.<sup>141</sup> Some of those properties formed large blocks.<sup>142</sup> In 1610 they also had more property near both St James and St Mary's churches and in Ottery St Mary and Upottery in Devon given by unnamed donors.<sup>143</sup> In 1665 Richard Saunders, clothier, gave several houses in Taunton and land in Grasscroft for a £40 annuity to Margaret Saunders.<sup>144</sup>

In 1614 the total income was £55 5s. most of which was distributed in bread to the poor at Christmas.<sup>145</sup> The borough constables were responsible for distributions and in the mid 17th century issued farthing tokens.<sup>146</sup> In 1715 the feoffees dinner was restricted to £5 and money was to be give to the poor in place of bread.<sup>147</sup> It was said in 1724 that three-quarters of the income of c. £200 should be distributed to the poor on St Thomas' day and the rest used for other charitable purposes but that the charity was mismanaged, tenants did not pay rent and that loaves worth 4d. each had formerly been distributed to every house keeper in the borough but had been discontinued. The Lord Chancellor decreed that the tenants pay arrears of rents and legal costs and that the constables distribute the charities in clothing to the poor but a century later mismanagement was still evident.<sup>148</sup> It was also said that poor electors were chosen to receive charity because that would disbar them from voting. In 1769

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<sup>141</sup> SHC, DD/X/LI/1; DD/SAS/C795/TN/10.

<sup>142</sup> SHC, DD/DP/97/5.

<sup>143</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10; DD/TAC/5/5/2—3.

<sup>144</sup> SHC, DD/BR/py/121.

<sup>145</sup> SHC, A/CPT/15/5.

<sup>146</sup> *PSANHS*, LXI (1915), 124; Toulmin, *History of Taunton*, rev. J. Savage (Taunton, 1822), 114—5.

<sup>147</sup> SHC, DD/TAC/2/3/1, p. 42.

<sup>148</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/10, 47; D/B/ta/31/1/1, p. 19; DD/TAC/9/1.

the property in Groping Lane was sold for demolition by the Market House trustees.<sup>149</sup> The portreeves refused to give security for funds given for distribution in 1779, which caused problems. It appears only a quarter of the charity income was given out by the trustees with the rest by the constables who were accused of improper distributions in 1797.<sup>150</sup>

By 1820 the charity held c. 40 houses in Taunton and 160 a. in Upper Ottery and 32 a. in Ottery St Mary, Devon. The trustees also held three closes at Grasscroft or Grassgrove in Taunton St James bought with the £400 gift of mercer John Meredith of 1677 to clothe the poor of the borough but to be administered by the feoffees of the Town Lands.<sup>151</sup> They also held three houses, probably including a former workhouse and common brewhouse, and a coalyard in the same parish bought with £100 left by Margery Ackland,<sup>152</sup> possibly including North Town wharf, which they owned in the 1870s and rented out for £120.<sup>153</sup> In c. 1820 the total charity income was £361 but the Charity Commissioners objected to the manner in which it was given away in public houses with up to 600 people applying for money. The trustees issued their quarter of the funds as tickets raising fears of electioneering. The income from Meredith's money was given in cloaks and coats with buttons bearing the Meredith crest and that from Ackland's was given to poor widows of St Mary's parish. The Charity Commissioners wanted reform of the charity distributions, control of the cost of the dinner provided for the officers, who were sometimes the providers of the charity clothing, and the keeping of proper records for each charity as the donors often required.<sup>154</sup>

Following these rebukes accounts were kept, which show that in 1853 the steward, legal advice and other bills accounted for a third of the revenue, the constables used the rest with Meredith's and Ackland's charity income to buy 142 cloaks and 75 coats for the poor

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<sup>149</sup> Toulmin, *History of Taunton*, rev. J. Savage (Taunton, 1822), 238, 259, 574.

<sup>150</sup> SHC, DD/TAC/2/3/1, pp. 166, 214, 233.

<sup>151</sup> TNA, PROB 11/356/385; below, rel. hist., St James.

<sup>152</sup> SHC, DD/MT/3/25; DD/TAC/2/3/1, pp. 13, 28, 80; 9/1.

<sup>153</sup> SHC, D/B/ta/13/1/1; DD/SAS/C795/TN/47; DD/TAC/5/5/18.

<sup>154</sup> SHC, DD/TAC/9/1, 2/3/3, p. 37; TNA, PROB 11/356/385.

and distribute money to 45 widows and 479 other poor people.<sup>155</sup> The combined income had risen to over £432 by 1869 and was all distributed in clothing and cash.<sup>156</sup> In 1872 the Town Lands, Meredith and Ackland's with Badcock's charity became the Taunton Town Charity, which contributed towards the hospital, Bishop Fox's school and maintained the almshouses.<sup>157</sup> Although four representatives of the Board of Health were trustees the remainder were self-elected.<sup>158</sup> Despite some losses most of the 1612 property and Grasscroft still belonged to the charity.<sup>159</sup> A steward of the charity was paid £50 a year. In 1900 the income had risen to £2,586, mostly from rents. Grants continued to be given to the hospitals but also to the nursing association and to the council for a recreation ground. The almspeople received £566 in weekly allowances but coal, medical care and nursing were also provided. Most of the property was sold between 1902 and 1924 when the income then mainly from investments totalled over £4,775 and the allowances had increased to £841 and the steward had been replaced by a clerk paid £200 a year.<sup>160</sup> By 1941 cash investments totalled c. £105,000<sup>161</sup> but the charity still retains some commercial property in the town, maintains all the surviving almshouses and makes grants to other charities; £104,000 in 2016.<sup>162</sup>

#### Non-endowed welfare charities

Churches and charities continued to fill gaps in the state provision of poor relief. The St James District Visitors Society used £15 from church charity and subscriptions and in 1894

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<sup>155</sup> SHC, Q/RSc 3/7.

<sup>156</sup> *Gen Digest of Endowed Chars. Som* (1869—71), 60—1.

<sup>157</sup> Char. Com. *In the Matter of Taunton Town Charity* (Taunton, 1941), 5, 17, 19, 22—3; inf. from Taunton Town Charity, 2005.

<sup>158</sup> 'Proposed Incorporation of Taunton' in *Report of Several Cases conducted by James Cook* (Taunton, 1895), 37.

<sup>159</sup> SHC, DD/DP/97/5.

<sup>160</sup> SHC, DD/C/322; Char. Com. *In the Matter of Taunton Town Charity* (Taunton, 1902), 28—37; D/DC/tau.d/25/12, uncat. deeds.

<sup>161</sup> Char. Com. *In the Matter of Taunton Town Charity* (Taunton, 1941), 36.

<sup>162</sup> Inf. from Taunton Town Charity, 2005; above, this section, almshouses; Dunning, 'A Careful Trust', TS in VCH office, 9.

its 28 female visitors supplied the parish poor with tracts, meat, bread, coal and cash.<sup>163</sup> The St Mary's District Visiting Society had at least 24 visitors in 1881 each visiting a number of streets and courts but by the 1920s were short of funds to distribute.<sup>164</sup> The Taunton Relief Fund, started in the 1840s and revived in 1861, ran a winter soup kitchen in Magdalene Street with several distribution points throughout the town and issued bread and coal tickets until 1914.<sup>165</sup> In the 1900s it opened on two days costing £4 a day and supplying 2,200 quarts of soup a week at ½ *d.* each. Many people were turned away when soup ran out.<sup>166</sup> After the war it ceased to function and was formally wound up in 1938.<sup>167</sup> In 1912—13 the Taunton Fresh Air Fund provided holidays for needy and disabled children.<sup>168</sup> Among charities established in the later 20th century, one of the most important was The Open Door, which had an income of over £108,000 in 2017 to provide care, meals, clean clothing and washing facilities for up to 300 rough sleepers a year.<sup>169</sup> By the early 21st century other gaps were evident in welfare provision. The Trussell Trust started its Taunton food bank in 2012 used by nearly 500 households by the end of 2017 and 4,900 people in 2019.<sup>170</sup> In 2021 food charity Fareshare started a budget food supply scheme from Rowbarton Methodist Church.

## FRIENDLY SOCIETIES

The earliest Taunton friendly societies were trade bodies such as a weavers' club in 1707. The Friendly Society of Fullers established in 1751 as much to regulate the trade as to provide help to needy members. As their industry declined it opened its ranks to other

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<sup>163</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.ja/2/8/1.

<sup>164</sup> SHC, A/AUS, uncat.; D/P/tau.m/9/3/1.

<sup>165</sup> *Taunton Courier* 3 Feb. 1847, 15 Jan. 1868: BNA accessed 2 March 2020; *Taunton of Today* (1896), 45; SHC, A/DIF/95/33 (Jan. 1914); S. Minnitt and D. Young, *Tickets, Checks and Passes from the County of Somerset* (Taunton, 1990), 21.

<sup>166</sup> SHC, DD/BLM/27/2/9 (undated cutting).

<sup>167</sup> *Taunton Courier* 29 Oct. 1938: BNA accessed 2 March 2020.

<sup>168</sup> SHC, A/DIF/95/33.

<sup>169</sup> Char. Com. Reg.: accessed 22 Oct. 2018.

<sup>170</sup> Data from Trussell Trust: [bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45971686](http://bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45971686): accessed 26 Oct. 2018; [taunton.foodbank.org.uk](http://taunton.foodbank.org.uk); [tauntonopendoor.org.uk](http://tauntonopendoor.org.uk): accessed 18 Feb. 2020.

craftsmen and labourers and became more of a benevolent society.<sup>171</sup> One of the oldest benevolent societies was the widows' annuitant society established in 1765 which in 1790 provided £15 to each of 15 annuitants and £10 to another, proportionate to the number of years their husbands had subscribed to the fund.<sup>172</sup> It continued until 1824 but with few members as the funds proved insufficient. It may have been succeeded by 1831 by the Somerset and Dorset Annuity Society to provide for widows and relatives.<sup>173</sup>

In addition to national societies such as the Oddfellows, Foresters and Ancient Shepherdeses, Taunton had many local self-help societies. At least 35 Taunton friendly societies were recorded between 1794 and 1837, four of them for women and others for tradesmen, labourers, craftsmen, carpenters, weavers and woolcombers, the last possibly succeeding much older societies. Paul's Meeting had its own friendly society.<sup>174</sup> It was said in 1806 that 16 friendly societies were accustomed to attend the election canvas with banners, drums and fifes.<sup>175</sup> In 1815 only 90 people were in friendly societies in St James parish but 1,028 in St Mary's.<sup>176</sup> In the 1860s the Foresters staged elaborate fetes with maypoles, bands, and people dressed as Robin Hood and his men or shepherds and shepherdeses.<sup>177</sup> In the later 19th century friendly societies seem to have been at least partly replaced by co-operative and building societies, which allowed working people to save and borrow money. By 1896 all the friendly societies active in the town were branches of national societies except for the girls' friendly society connected with St Mary's church.<sup>178</sup> In 1904 c. 3,200 members of

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<sup>171</sup> M. Fuller, *West Country Friendly Societies*, 4, 98.

<sup>172</sup> SHC, A/CPT/15/5.

<sup>173</sup> SHC, Q/RSf/1, 10; Toulmin, *History of Taunton*, rev. J. Savage (Taunton, 1822), 587—9.

<sup>174</sup> SHC, Q/RSf/1.

<sup>175</sup> SHC, PAM 428 'parl. elections 1800—74', [27].

<sup>176</sup> *Abridgement of the Abstract of the Answers and Returns...so far as relates to the poor* (HC 1818), 394—5; *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1897* (Taunton, 1896), 130.

<sup>177</sup> SHC, C/E/4/220/1, 38.

<sup>178</sup> e.g. TNA, FS 6/195/2, 7—8 SOMERSET; FS 8/12/351, 1181; 8/25/1181; 13/219; 15/1049, 1309, 1614, 1621; *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1897* (Taunton, 1896), 118—19.

lodges and courts of national societies were recorded, mostly men but a few women and juveniles belonged.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1904* , 133, 135.