

230524 SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED
The Highgate Almshouses
by David Lascelles

The neat row of almshouses at the top of Southwood Lane are a warming sight with their air of history and philanthropy. One might think that they had outlived their usefulness, but this is far from the case. Nearly 400 years after their foundation, they still offer shelter to those with limited financial resources, and are actively managed by local Trustees.

Their history goes back to the 1650s when Sir John Wollaston, a City merchant and Lord Mayor, built six almshouses for men and women “of honest life and conversation” on the site. When he died in 1658, he entrusted them to the care of the Governors of neighbouring Cholmeley School, as Highgate School was then known.

But the almshouses fell into disrepair. They were rescued in 1722 by one of the Governors, Sir Edward Pauncefort of Lauderdale House, who paid to have them rebuilt, increasing their number to 12 and including a school for girls in the middle of the row. These are the buildings we see today, and they celebrated their 300th anniversary last year. They are listed Grade 2.

Highgate School ended its governorship of the houses in the 1980s, though it continues to contribute to the upkeep of the buildings. The almshouses are now an independent charity officially known as the Wollaston and Pauncefort Almshouse Charity, without any connection to any religion or local authority, though in the past the chairman of the Trustees was frequently the vicar of St Michael’s. Residents do not have to profess a religion.

As part of that restructuring, the Trustees decided to enlarge the accommodation by knocking two flats into one and get rid of the shared toilets, though this would mean halving the number of residents to six. As you pass the almshouses, you will notice that half the doors do not have handles or knockers.

A typical unit now consists of a living room, a kitchen, a bedroom and a small lean-to at the back for bathroom and utilities. Behind the building, unseen from the road, lies a narrow strip of garden which traps the sunshine, providing the residents with a quiet outdoors

To qualify, residents must be over 60, connected to Highgate or Haringey, and in financial need. They also have to be able to care for themselves. At the moment there are four women and two men. Vacancies are advertised in local churches, though as Sarah Wrightson, the Clerk to the Trustees tells me, this does not happen very often. The rent or “maintenance charge” depends on the level of improvement of the individual houses, up to a maximum of £550 a month. Residents pay their own taxes and utility bills.

The rent income does not cover the cost of running and maintaining the almshouses, so the charity depends on grants and donations to fill the gap, and on the fact that all

those involved in running it are volunteers. The charity also belongs to the Almshouses Association, a nationwide organisation which supports the 1,600 almshouses that still exist in the UK, providing shelter for an estimated 35,000 people.

I visited one of the residents, Earl Johnson who has been living there since 2003. Earl's career was in the theatre and his walls are covered in posters and pictures of his theatrical days. Over a glass of home-brewed sloe gin, he told me of his good fortune to be living there after a difficult period in his life. "It's an example of a higher power at work!" he said.

Richard Sage, a barrister who chairs the Trustees, says there have been times when it would have made sense commercially to sell the valuable site and move the almshouses to the country. "But our aim is to serve local people with local connections. That was the founders' ethos. We are not mercenary landlords. We aim to be charitable". An admirable attitude in today's hard-nosed world.

David Lascelles loves the High Street, quiet village square and beautiful views.