

TALES FROM THE ALMSHOUSES

The little seventeenth-century almshouses built by Robert Wilmot in St. Mary's churchyard were truly tiny, with only around 270 sq ft of available space in each property. Some accounts incorrectly state they were built in 1638, but this is actually the year Wilmot drew up his will. That the almshouses had been built some years previously is evident by the wording of the bequest he made to the 'four men and two women of good life and conversation now placed and hereafter to be placed in six little houses in Chaddison aforesaid which I long since built ...' The relevant section of his will can be seen below.



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The Almshouses as seen from Church Lane c.1920.

people that is to say to four men & two women of good life & conversation now placed & hereafter to be placed in six little houses in Chaddison aforesaid which I long since built for the said number to dwell in and to be maintained by such a weekly allowance and I do further will & appoint that no man nor any of the said six people do die: my said sonne Robert, & his heirs shall within one month after

Robert Wilmot's will of 1638 proves that the Almshouses had been built some years previously.



Modern residents of Chaddesden frequently express their amazement that the six diminutive cottages could have been squeezed into such a small area of land. This 1:1,250 scale Ordnance Survey map was published in 1961 – the same year the almshouses were demolished – and clearly shows just how close the cottages were to St. Mary's Church. Map reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland (<https://maps.nls.uk/index.html>)

Back in 2013 I took this photograph while leaning rather precariously out of the ringing chamber window in the church tower. The area of tarmac represents the approximate site of the six almshouses, with the paved area of blue bricks being the path which once led to their front doors. Church Lane is over to the right of the picture



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Until their demolition in 1961 the Chaddesden Almshouses had been in constant use. Over the three centuries and more of their existence they would have provided a home for perhaps 500 to 600 people who would otherwise have been hard-pressed to find somewhere to live. Included amongst their occupants were several members of my own family, and I well recall my grandfather, John Robert Cholerton, telling me the following two stories.

The first tale concerned my grandfather's own uncle (i.e. my great-great uncle) John Cholerton (1850–1936), who in his later years lived in one of the almshouses. Apparently he was something of a connoisseur of the liquid refreshments served at the Wilmot Arms, and sometimes partook of a little more than was good for him. On these occasions he somehow always managed to make his own way back to his almshouse and climb the narrow stairs before collapsing fast asleep on the bed.

Sleeping off the effects of the night before would leave my great-great uncle John slumbering well into the next morning, and when this happened his neighbours – fearing he might be ill or even have died in his sleep – sometimes sent for my grandfather to see if all was well. If his uncle's almshouse door was bolted, my grandfather had to beg the use of a ladder, place it against the tiny dormer window of the bedroom and then, balanced precariously on the top rung, rap on the glass and shout in an effort to rouse his dozing uncle, who, when fully awake, must have wondered what all the fuss was about.

The village pub also plays a role in this second anecdote which concerns another resident of the almshouses, Sarah Allsop (née Clarke), who had been born in Chaddesden in 1841 and was well-known throughout the village. Sarah's one little extravagance in life was her weekly trip along to the Wilmot Arms to get a large jug filled with ale, which she would then very carefully carry back to her almshouse.

The 1911 and 1921 Census returns for Chaddesden both show Sarah as a resident of the almshouses, and for a while she was a neighbour of my great-great uncle John Cholerton, who played a rather unusual part in helping Sarah balance her meagre weekly budget. Unfortunately for Sarah, when it came time for her to pay the landlord of the Wilmot Arms for her one luxury – the jug of ale – the small pension she was entitled to as an occupant of the almshouses somehow never seemed to be quite enough, so she arrived at an ingenious solution. She would borrow sixpence 'beer-money' from my great-great uncle John Cholerton, always paying it back the very next week when the alms-people received their pensions from the charity trustees, however, a day or two later Sarah would inevitably be knocking on his door to ask if she could borrow the sixpence back again!



This last story was told to me by my grandfather sometime around 1971 and it was to have a most unexpected conclusion. About a year or two later my father was shown a watercolour painting of Chaddesden Lane dating from 1916, and what he saw so intrigued him he asked if he might borrow it for a short while to show his father. My grandfather took one look at the painting and immediately exclaimed, 'Why there's old Sarah Allsop carrying her mug of ale back to the almshouses.' Sure enough, the only detailed figure in the picture – her back to the artist and her head and shoulders covered with a shawl – was making her way down Chaddesden Lane towards Church Lane with a walking stick in her right hand and what appeared to be a large tankard or jug in her left.



Naturally I photographed this most interesting painting, but over the intervening years I have unfortunately lost the name of its owner at that time, so my apologies for not mentioning them by name here.

Now whether the figure painted by the artist, W. Hopwood, in 1916 was really intended to be Sarah Allsop is by no means certain, but it does seem quite likely. In her later years Sarah left the almshouses to live at The Grove, Shardlow, but after her death at the age of 94 she was buried here in St. Mary's churchyard on 7 January 1935.

In a newspaper article published in the *Derby Evening Telegraph* on 18 February 1954, Robin Smyth somewhat whimsically described the setting of the almshouses as follows:

The approach to Chaddesden Church is like no other I have seen in Derbyshire. The 14th-century tower looks down on a small encampment of half-timbered almshouses which stand so close to the west door that the coal used by the old people is almost on the church steps. It looks like some decayed, cheerful university quadrangle where the students through an administrative error, have stayed on half a century after their course has finished.

Within a few years of this article it had become apparent that the days of the almshouses were numbered unless they could be brought up to modern standards. Some enquiries were made about saving them and the likely cost of their renovation, but in the end it came to nothing. By March 1959 the remaining occupants had all been rehoused by Shardlow Rural District Council and the six little cottages were demolished in the autumn of 1961.



Mrs. Daisy Chambers, the church vergger, stands in the doorway of Almshouse no.6 just a few months before all six cottages were demolished. Photo courtesy of Leonard Greenwood.

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