

## The Genesis of the Crawley Almshouses, 1934 to 1947

The Company had built Almshouses at King Henry's Walk, Balls Pond Road, Islington around 1837. They must have been quite worn a hundred years later and the Estate Committee report in 1934 provided a long list of repairs as well as titivations that were required. It seems there were a lot of broken slates. Also, as the Charity Committee later discovered, the minimum standards for housing pensioners had been much enhanced compared to the previous century; each resident was now required to have an internal toilet and bathroom. Some informed members of the Company must have been pondering on the appropriateness of continuing with the existing buildings.

The Committee in October 1935 received a letter from the Postmaster General offering to buy the site. It stated that the government wanted 'an extensive site as near as possible to the centre of Islington'. It was agreed to pursue negotiations and when the Government's estate surveyor asked how much time would be necessary to remove the 'inmates' the reply confidently averred they 'did not anticipate there would be any difficulty in arranging removal after consent of the Charity Commission was obtained'.

Once one inquiry had been entertained another soon followed. The Town Clerk of Islington Borough Council in April 1936 expressed interest in the site to build houses 'for the working classes'. However when the Council offered £7,500 this was considered too low and was rejected. In anticipation of further negotiations the Clerk reported that he had consulted the Charity Commission about the proposed sale and discovered that it would not sanction the payment of annuities in place of the Almhouses benefit, 'as long as the original trusts could be performed'. This complication did not deter them from deciding that they should take expert advice if any further offer was made. If they were advised the offer was adequate they would consult the Charity Commissioners whether they would sanction the sale. If they were prepared to do so the Committee would ask if they would consent to a reduction in the number of residents from the 10 financed by the Tyrwhitt and the 16 by West, Lee and Peck's Charities to allow maintenance costs and allowances to come within the income of the Charities. Finally they wanted to know if a site outside London would be sanctioned. They were now considering a much more complicated project than they had first contemplated.

Then in April 1937 Islington Council withdrew its interest due to difficulties at the Tilers and Bricklayers Almshouses which apparently were next door. It explained that it had been 'pre-empted' there by the Jewish Board of Guardians which also intended to build houses for the working classes and which would also be interested in the Dyers' site. The Committee decided to wait no longer and agreed a letter to the Board offering the site subject to Charity Commission consent and 'the price offered being sufficient to enable other suitable provision to be made for the beneficiaries of the Almshouse Charities'.

Colonel Samuel, agent for the Board, responded promptly and the following month the Committee learned what the Board was planning. They were engaged in housing the working classes in modern self-contained flats at the lowest possible rent, making them eligible for Government and Local Authority grants. He continued by saying that the Almshouses 'are not up to modern standards as they are not self-contained and soon will have to be modernised'. The Dyers could erect new Almshouses on a bungalow plan in the Country at the same cost as they would be saving the expense of modernising and the purchase price would be lower.

Finally he added that the Board was trying to avoid using Compulsory Purchase, which Islington Council had rejected. After the unsolicited advice and this sting in the tail he finally made his offer - £6000! This was immediately rejected but negotiations had begun.

In fact the Committee followed Samuel's advice for in July the Prime Warden reported on the considerations of the Committee appointed the previous December to consider the sale and its implications. Besides Prime it consisted of Colonel Hatchard Smith and Mr Goodsall, both having plentiful experience in property matters. They had concluded that outside London provision of modern almshouses would cost a minimum of £12,000. The Jewish Board was informed: the asking price was pitched at £12,000. Much work had now to be done and the Estate Committee was drawn in.

In March progress was made with the Charity Commission. It agreed two alternatives: the Company could propose a reduction in the authorised number of beneficiaries and allow the sale of some capital from the Trusts to repair and modernise the almshouses subject to a yearly repayment from income. If on the other hand they chose to sell the site they would have to purchase a new one but numbers could be varied.

In June the Jewish Board made a new offer of £8,500. This was immediately rejected with the firm rejoinder that the Dyers 'could not entertain an offer less than £12,000'. However negotiations were now in the hands of Mr Flinn who as Prime Warden in 1937 may have been a prime mover in getting the Court to appreciate the need to modernise the almshouses.

So the following month the Committee learned that after discussions with Col. Samuel Mr Flinn had proposed a £10,000 minimum price provided neither side would withdraw while the Dyers got the agreement of the Charity Commission and the Board got the support of the LCC. It was left to the Estate Committee to continue the negotiations. These were so effective that in July the offer was accepted subject to the sanction of the Commissioners and to contract. It was resolved that 'a hearty vote of thanks be accorded to Mr Flinn and Mr Cambridge for the time and trouble taken and that the Clerk write to Mr Flinn expressing the best wishes of the Committee for his speedy recovery'.

It was now their turn to move things forward. In August 1938 they reported that 'a freehold site of about 2 acres sited at Crawley in Sussex' was suitable for almshouses and that it was for sale for £1250. They recommended that it be bought promptly. The income from the Charities would be insufficient but expected that the Commissioners would sanction a reduced number of beneficiaries. Interim arrangements would have to be made to house people or to give them an allowance. Mr Goodsall, one of the Committee had offered a piece of land on his estate at Harrietsham in Kent but this had been rejected by the Estate Committee as too remote. However a vote of thanks was passed for his generosity.

In October the deposit was received after the Commissioners authorised the sale. The Committee therefore instructed SN Bertram ARIBA of 11 Haymarket to advise on the purchase of the land. He immediately expressed concern whether the sewers beneath the site were of sufficient depth so the purchase was deferred.

However the sale of the Balls Pond site was progressing and pressure to find a site must have been intense. In December 1938 the Committee was told that Balls Pond had been vacated and on the

30<sup>th</sup> January the remaining furniture, mainly of the Nurses' rooms, was removed at a cost of £10 and was stored at £4 10s a month. The Prime Warden then reported that a freehold site of 2 ½ acres, part of Mr PL Hardman's Victoria Hall Estate at Crawley, was for sale and had been inspected by the Wardens, and Messrs Tidd and Flinn. Mr Bertram had also been to see it and reported favourably, adding the price was £1750. It was agreed to buy at a price not exceeding £1750 and Mr Bertram was instructed to prepare plans and agree with the Charity Commission a variation of the Company's Charity Scheme.

After all the previous changes of plan the project now moved forward agreeably fast. By February 1939 the sale was completed with £47 10s legal charges. Mr Flinn had conducted the negotiations and reduced the price to £1400, for which he was thanked. The new Scheme was lodged with the Charity Commission. There were to be 16 residents, 12 on the Tyrwhitt and West charities and 4 on the Lee and Peck. Widows were allowed to remain without notice of vacancy being published and the almshouses were to conform with modern practice.

In the following 3 months contracts were exchanged, interim planning permission was agreed by Horsham Rural District Council and the Commissioners gave permission for the purchase by November it was completed. £8499 10s was now available to spend.

The Committee also learned that the lowest building estimate, £7967, was from Messrs James Langley of Crawley. However the outbreak of hostilities had already forced its revision. In December £533 was added to the estimate 'to cover present and all future increases in labour and material costs'. £481 was also saved by varying the contract approved by the Estate Committee. Some of these savings can be identified because the Charity Committee added £50 to the revised estimate to provide oak instead of deal for the front and back doors and instead of teak for all the window sills.

Despite the dislocation of War the work building work was completed in time for the November 1941 Committee. It was already having to adapt to the responsibilities of owning a rural property. The local War Agriculture Committee stated the Company was responsible for the overgrown hedge on the north boundary. They were also required to plant 1 ½ acres of potatoes for the war effort. Finally they had to write to the Rural District Council to retain the iron gates and railings.

The Charity Committee could feel justifiably proud of what they had achieved, in budget and on time, finally. The project had taken much longer than first envisaged and the War must have horribly complicated the building work and its supervision. However in August the accounts of the costs of erection showed £8084 had been spent, well within budget. Only chimney pots needed to be installed, something omitted from the contract but now deemed a necessity.

Individual Committee members in 1941 celebrated by presenting trees to domesticate the former field. Dr Moody presented a Mulberry tree and Mr Rothwell 2 flowering Plum trees. Mr Goodsall presented a Weeping Beech and a beech hedge was planted.

The pre War Committee had provided modern almshouses on a pleasant site. They had though had to compromise on the number of beneficiaries. At the February 1947 Charity Committee Mr Leuchars proposed a motion that 'immediate steps be taken to add 2 wings' to the central block. The numbers of residents could return to their historic levels.