

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2004

From Army Academy to Almshouses

At the February meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society Canon Bob Whiteley gave an interesting talk on the Woodclyffe Almshouses.

Bob began with Harriette Cooke-Smith, the benefactress who had given much to the village, although in a way we owed the existence of the almshouses to the "failure of a bankrupt clergyman, Albert Richard Pritchard". Harriette - born in 1824 - came to Wargrave at the age of 2 when her father, Rev.d. James Hitchings, became the vicar. In 1858, she married her cousin William Smith, who had inherited a fortune from the family wholesale business, and they bought the house 'Hillside' in Wargrave, extended it, and called it 'Woodclyffe House'. When Harriette was widowed, she inherited a large amount of money, but having no children looked to benefit the village. She felt her "wealth a call to help the poor and suffering and laboured to obey that call". The Woodclyffe Hall was built as a village hall, in memory of her husband. Later the Parish Magazine announced that the 'North Block of Hill Lands has been turned into 8 comfortable and spacious almshouses, each self contained. The building had been most skillfully adapted for the purpose by Cole Adams' (the architect of the Woodclyffe Hall).



Harriette Cooke-Smith

The first suggestion for almshouses had come in the Parish Magazine of 1870, when the vicar, Rev.d Simon Sturges, had a 'dream of 4 pretty almshouses with porches covered with honeysuckle and roses'. He estimated the cost at £500, and asked who would be willing to give the land. But two people offered £5 each, a widow offered 10/-, and a gardener a sovereign. As that was all the response, the money was returned -- but maybe the idea had remained with Harriette.

The building had begun as the north block of an army academy run by the Rev.d Albert Pritchard. In 1881, he was living at Ferry View, by the St George and Dragon, and was listed as 'single, MA Oxon, curate of Wargrave and army tutor'. In 1883 he spent a 'considerable sum' on two buildings for his business, according to the *Reading Chronicle*, and added to the premises 3 years later. 8 students, an army tutor and a caretaker and his family all lived in the north block according to the 1891 census. -



The Woodclyffe Almshouses in about 1902

known as 'Woolwich House', as the students were studying for entry there. Hill Lands itself was known as Sandhurst House, and reserved for the brightest boys, and Pritchard himself lived there, whilst the south block catered for the slowstream, for the 'militia' group.

Probably the most notable of the students was Hugh Trenchard, born in Taunton in 1873, who spent 7 years there (in part as he kept failing the exams). He was described as a 'cadet with a great future ahead of him, but not a brilliant scholar', and entered Hill Lands in 1886, aged 13, the youngest of 120 boarders (most, it seems, taking lodgings in the village). Hugh later described the Academy as a 'hell of vice', and was not popular with his fellow students. At first he lived in the north block, but was later moved to the south block. He finally passed the exam in 1893, and served in the army, but had a great interest in the Royal Flying Corps, became the first Chief of Air Staff of the RAF, and later Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, founding the Police College at Hendon.

Hugh saw Rev.d Pritchard as a 'shadowy but benign man' - the students were somewhat wayward, and amongst their 'pranks' distributed leaflets saying that Rev.d Pritchard 'had been walking about committing celibacy for too long and that a bride might improve him'!!

From the 1890s, the numbers at Hill Lands rapidly declined, and as Pritchard was heavily mortgaged was facing bankruptcy. The buildings were sold, and he moved on as a vicar in Kent. In 1901, Harriette Cooke-Smith agreed to buy the north block for the almshouses. The facilities were limited - each flat had a single cold tap in the kitchen, and outside toilets remained till the 1960s. Gas cookers were installed in 1951, but there were no electric power points until 1958, when Rev.d Llewellyn-Jones, the then vicar, launched a campaign to bring the almshouses up to date. The Charity Commissioners were asked to approve the levy of a 'weekly charge' (not a 'rent') on the residents - originally Harriette had provided funds for the residents to receive a weekly allowance of 6/- (single) or 8/- (couple), but the funds were no longer able to maintain this. A grant of £4000 from the local authority enabled the installation of central heating to be completed in 1976. Bob also spoke about some of the residents, including one of the first - Elizabeth Birt, who had been born in Warren Row. When resident at the Almshouses, she acted as the warden, and regularly gave what the vicar called the 'widow's mite' - a regular anonymous packet of sixpences towards the restoration of the church.

The Almshouses trustees have kept alive the long tradition of parochial service, and still fulfil a need in the village - and will do for the foreseeable future, although maybe in a different way to the past.



The Woodclyffe Almshouses today