

The Pemberton Almshouses revisited

by Stuart Macer

Hidden behind the fine brick walls on St Peter's Street and Grange Street are the Pemberton Almshouses.

I'd often viewed them from the entrance to St Peter's Church but my knowledge was limited. I'd heard of the myth of Roger Pemberton's wayward arrow and started my research into the Pemberton family inside the south porch of St Peter's Church, where the Pemberton brasses are located.

Samuel Flint Clarkson FRIBA gave a talk to members of the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society in May 1896 in St Albans Town Hall entitled, *The Gateway at the Pemberton Almshouses*.

He referred to a Henry Chauncy publication of 1700 with regard to these brasses and to Roger Pemberton, with the detail, "He lived well, and departed this life the 13th November 1627, in the 72nd year of his age. Here now his body rests in expectation of joyful resurrection". This was, according to Chauncy, the original inscription under the figures on one of the brasses.

It would appear that Roger Pemberton was buried in St Peter's Church on November 20, 1627. He gave detailed instructions to his sons in his will of November 13, 1624, for an almshouse for six poor old widows to be built in Bowgate opposite St Peter's Church.

They were to be "six sufficient rooms, six convenient garden plottes, within a wall of brick and stone". A codicil added to his will on November 7, 1627, bequeathed the widows five pounds a year for ever.

On a bright December day last year I entered the Gateway to the Almshouses and there, at the top of the brick surrounds, was the fabled metal arrow.



Gateway with the arrow on top

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Flint Clarkson referred to the wayward arrow in his 1896 talk with reference to *Beauties of England*, published in 1808, which suggested that the arrow was a memorial to an accident, when the founder shot an old woman with an arrow and built the Almshouses by way of atonement. Flint Clarkson declared it “a worthless tradition”.

Inside the gateway there was an air of serenity away from the bustle of St Peter’s Street. The old brickwork from late 1629, when these almshouses received their first six widows, looked in excellent condition and each residence had a heavy wooden black door and was clearly marked from one to six.

The rear of the property was only accessible via the Trademan’s Gate in Grange Street, which was firmly locked. However, with the help of Councillor Jacqui Taylor I was able to gain entry at a later date.

St Albans District Council became owners of the Pemberton Almshouses in 1944 and in 1960 extensions at the rear of the building gave every resident a kitchen and a bathroom. This improvement to the accommodation does not alter the appearance of the original building when viewed from St Peter’s Street.

Today the age limit for residents has been reduced to 55, and men are permitted as well as women.

The “six convenient plottes” mentioned by Roger Pemberton were clear on my visit and the rear garden contained two ancient yew trees and a magnificent cedar tree.

Roger Pemberton’s will of 1624 stated that two widows were to be chosen from the parishes of St Peter’s and St Stephen’s and one each from St Michael’s and Shenley. The widows would also receive money towards clothing, hose, shoes and linen as well as firewood.

The census details from 1851 to 1911 revealed widows from further afield and also reflected employment opportunities of the period. Many were indeed local to St Albans, but others originally came from Middlesex, Buckinghamshire and wider Hertfordshire.

Former occupations included many needlewomen and straw-hat workers. Many of the widows also had cohabiting carers, daughters and granddaughters in the main, and these tended to be employed in straw-hat finishing but later in wider occupations such as nursing.

The average age of the widows was in the mid-seventies and most only survived one census. However, Elizabeth Evans, originally from Tottenham, was 80 years in 1871 and her profession was touchingly entered as “Takes in Mangling”. By the 1881 Census, Elizabeth was 91 and her profession had been upgraded to “Formerly Laundress”. Many proudly stressed that they were “Living on own means” and some stated that they were “Past Work”.

I was keen to meet a 21st Century resident and had the good fortune to chat with Jo Cooper, a Nursery School Teacher.

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Resident Jo Cooper at the front of the Pemberton Almshouses



Jo Cooper in her rear garden plot, with giraffe (bottom left)

The Pemberton Almshouses are a wonderful example of the ability of St Albans to protect its rich heritage. Long may this continue as we approach 2029 and celebrate 400 years of these magnificent almshouses.

Stuart Macer

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