**A short history of the Homes** 

By Edward Thackray, President

**The Cambridge Royal Albert Society was established in 1846.**

***Why were we named after Royal Albert?***

Queen Victoria married Albert in 1840 and he became a strong influence for good and in particular he encouraged in his wife a greater interest in social welfare and the problems that different societies and communities faced on a day-to-day basis and to be conscious of the difficulties and hardships they faced.

Cambridge was in the 19th century, a town of less than 30,000 but it had its fair share of prosperous people who had done well in their chosen careers especially in trade or finance and who sought to repay their good fortune by seeking to do good works to help others locally.

***Why were we formed?***

An idea and a dream developed amongst a prominent entity in Cambridge to raise funds and build a group of houses for those in need. Using the language of the time it was called “An asylum for decayed subscribers”!

Our first President was Charles Finch Foster who was also the mayor at the time.

Charles Finch Foster, who with the founding Treasurer Charles Balls and a committee, had strong connections to the Town Council. (Incidentally it was not until 1951 that Cambridge received a city charter.) Hence the Cambridge Royal Albert Society was formed.

***How were the funds raised and what did it cost?***

Between 1846 and 1859 a period of fund raising took place to enable a site to be found and buildings erected. The patience and efforts of the fund-raisers were amply rewarded when in 1857 they were able to report that “They have lately succeeded in purchasing a plot of ground which they flatter themselves will be deemed exceedingly advantageous for the erection of an Asylum facing Hills Road and the Avenue, Brooklands”.

The purchase price was £400 and a further parcel was bought in 1858 for £125 making up the area we see today. To put these prices into context a labourer’s average wage was £20 per annum. Once the site had been secured donations increased quite markedly. More Cambridge Colleges were sympathetic and prominent local traders, among them Robert Sayle and W.Eaden Lilley contributed to the fund.

A big fillip came from a grand bazaar held on the two days of the 26 & 27 May 1858 “under the patronage of the Countess of Hardwicke and other ladies of the Town and County” which raised the princely sum of £473 after expenses.

***Who designed the homes and what did they cost to build?***

The initial design for the Hills Road building was by the architect Mr J Eldin. This included a spired tower and loggias at each end of the building. Sadly, after this had gone out to tender the prices received were too expensive.

After much deliberation competitive designs were sought from 150 architects across the country. 59 plans were submitted and those from Mr Frederick Peck were chosen.

Mr Peck was a Cambridge man practising in Maidstone who also designed Framlingham College and the Royal Agricultural Hall in Islington. Tenders were received from 10 builders and that of Bullock and Son was accepted in the sum of £1,675 and work could commence.

***When was the foundation stone laid?***

A suitably grand occasion was arranged for Foundation Day to coincide with the anniversary of Queen Victoria’s coronation on June 28, 1859. Having assembled in the Town Hall and the Market Place a large group proceeded to Great St Mary’s Church for a service with choristers from the college choirs and the Cambridge Amateur Music Society taking part. The Very Reverend Harvey Goodwin preached with his text being “Who went about doing good” Acts X v 38. From Great St Mary’s the large congregation emerged to find to their astonishment that the route to the new site on Hills Road was densely thronged with spectators.

The foundation stone was laid by Charles Balls JP (founding treasurer), who by then was mayor, and he was presented by the President with an engraved trowel to mark the occasion. After further prayers, the rendering of the National Anthem and “Rule Britannia” the procession reformed and returned to the Town Hall where the “vast assemblage dispersed”.

***When did the first residents move in?***

In January 1861 the first residents were elected with the first three homes filled in 1863.

***How does the homes raise funds - have there been donations/bequests?***

The finances of the Homes have always been a challenge and therefore tightly run but over the years we have been blessed with generous bequests.

In 1868 Mr James Reynolds left the sum of £5,000 plus shares in the Cambridge University and Town Gas Light Company. This bequest enabled the Homes to add a further four homes facing Brooklands Avenue.

A further addition of another two homes facing Brooklands Avenue was financed by Mr John Swan of Kings Parade in 1879 and his initials were applied to the gable of one of the properties. Later Mr Swan came back to make a further generous offer to build two more houses facing the Botanic Gardens.

Meanwhile the challenge as always was to find the stipends (or costs) of accommodating residents. The continuing objective was to build up an endowment large enough to fund these costs.

In July 1882 our indefatigable benefactor Mr John Swan returned again with a generous offer to construct two more houses (his fifth and sixth) facing the Botanic Gardens. And then in June 1887 Mr Swan made his last offer in his lifetime and with additional help from two other legacies at the time this resulted in a further three houses being built.

It is interesting to realise that by the early 1900s the Homes would no longer have the feeling of remoteness being by then on the very fringe of town. Houses were being built in numbers south of the railway bridge with married dons seeking accommodation and motor bus services being available.

In the turbulent economic times between the two great wars the Homes financial position was in a fragile state reflecting as it did the effects of the depression. A special committee was formed to consider and report on how best to help. This resulted in a wide appeal which made public that two houses were now empty and could not be offered to residents until the situation improved. This helped to increase donations.

In 1926 we received the welcome news that Miss Hannah Flack had made a substantial joint bequest to us which allowed us to build a pair of bungalows along the back of the site bordering what is now boarding accommodation for St Mary’s School.

***What works have been completed since the homes were built?***

Before the second world war broke out, we were able to alter the Board Room to provide accommodation for a resident nurse together with a Recreation Room.

Since the end of the second world war, no further housing has been built but that it is not to say that things have stood still. Extensions to provide more up to date accommodation have been constructed, and whenever properties become vacant, they have been carefully brought up to date and refurbished.

As recently as 2018 a very generous legacy from Miss Egan allowed us to replace the kitchens in many of the units with sufficient funds left over to increase insulation to modern standards and to provide a professional makeover of the Recreation Room with improved lighting and comfortable seating. Now that we have a large TV screen we can show films selected by the residents as well as big sporting events.

The Cambridge Royal Albert Homes
28 Royal Albert Homes
120 Hills Road
Cambridge
​CB2 1PP

 Charity number 1190144

August 2021

*With grateful acknowledgement to Ken Atkins (President 1999 – 2002) for this précis drawn from his 152 page publication “The History of a Cambridge Almshouse set in its Times” published in 2002.*