

THE OLD ALMSHOUSES, ST. JAMES'S STREET, TAUNTON

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In the grounds of Taunton Castle may be seen the timber framing of part of a range of tenements, which used to stand at the junction of St. James's Street and Canon Street, Taunton. The site formed part of the lands of Taunton Priory and was presumably among those lands granted to William Chapleyn and John Selwood in 1545. The grant speaks of lands, tenements and cottages so that it is clear that there were already buildings on the site.¹

Toulmin describes the various almshouses, which he knew of in the Taunton of his day (1791), but makes no mention of any such establishment in St. James's Street.² However, in Savage's revision of Toulmin's "History" (1822) appears the following statement:

'There are seven small houses, at the east end of St. James's-street, intended for the use of the second poor, which are now inhabited by paupers'.³

The earliest reference to these tenements as almshouses appears in the report of the Charity Commission (1821):

'There are six or seven almshouses at the corner of Saint James's Street in this town, which are at present occupied by persons placed there by the overseers of the parish; but it has always been understood that this is an estate which was originally given upon some special trusts for the benefit of the poor of the parish; and we are informed that there are some debentures belonging to the same charity, payable at the Exchequer, in aid of its objects; but no person in the town could inform us how these benefits have come to the parish. Mr. White, agent for the fee farm rents of the crown, used to account for the money, and in the year 1807, he paid to Mr. William Pring, one of the churchwardens, £29 10s. 6d. being twelve years debentures, ending Michaelmas in that year. That sum was then applied in payment of 30s. among 12 poor people then inhabiting the houses, and the balance was carried to the account of the churchwardens for the use of the church for that year.

¹ T. Hugo, *The History of Taunton Priory* (1860), p. 124.

² J. Toulmin, *The History of the Town of Taunton* (1791), p.33 *et seq.*

³ J. Savage, *The History of Taunton* (1822), p. 255.

There seems to be no doubt that the sum was intended for the poor in the almshouses, but as these persons had been relieved by the parish, the churchwardens probably thought that they had received enough, in addition to that relief from the charity, and therefore considered themselves at liberty to apply the remainder to the use of the church'.⁴

The Charity Commissioners recovered a sum of £32 in respect of arrears due on the debentures and paid it to the churchwardens for distribution amongst selected 'old and deserving parishioners past their labour, and chiefly, if not wholly, of that class of persons called second poor'.

In February, 1869, the Rev. W. T. Redfearn, incumbent of St. James's, gave evidence before Walker Skirrow, Esq., Charity Commissioner, at an official enquiry held at St. Mary's Vestry Hall. Mr. Redfearn said that there was a small charity connected with the poor-house in St. James's-street. The almshouse consisted of eight tenements. The occupants were seven single women and one married couple, of 50 years and upwards belonging to the parish. Following the practice of his predecessor, he had been in the habit of selecting the almspeople and looking after them. He knew of no late surrender and there were no trustees. The tenements formerly belonged to the old Priory. The roof of the house was good, but the interior was much out of repair. It would cost £500 to place these tenements in a proper condition. Mr. Redfearn further stated that the Metropolitan Board of Works paid him £2 8s. 9d. a year, designated 'pension to twelve poor persons'. The money was always applied to the repairs to the almshouses. The Commissioner observed that the place was little better than a poor-house, and it was a question whether the people would not be more comfortable elsewhere.⁵

In 1888 the Charity Commissioners promulgated a new scheme for the administration of the Taunton Town Charities, under which power was given for the erection of six additional almshouses on a suitable site in St. James's. Powers were also to be given for the sale of the Canon Street almshouses, the proceeds to be applied towards defraying the cost of the new almshouses.⁶

⁴ *Further Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring concerning Charities* (1821) Vol. 5, p. 535.

⁵ *Somerset County Gazette*, 20 Feb., 1869, p. 8.

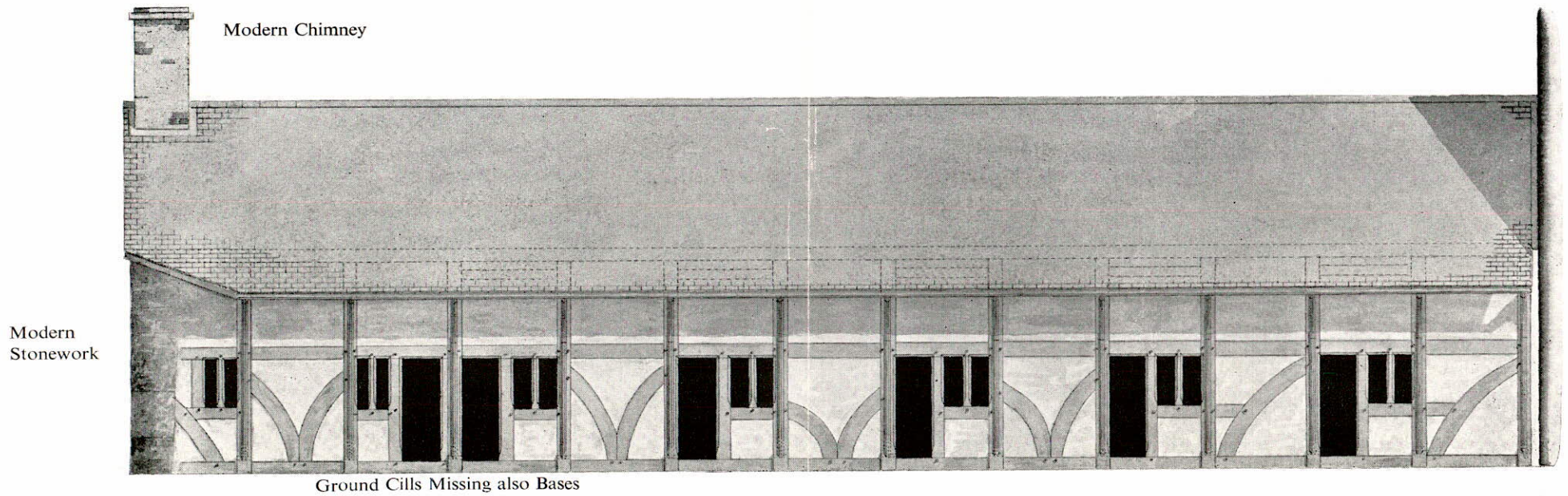
⁶ *Somerset County Gazette*, 15 Sept., 1888, p. 10.



THE ST. JAMES'S STREET ALMSHOUSES, 1832

From a Photograph by Mr. R. C. Sansome, of J. C. Buckler's Drawing in the Pigott Collection

PLATE 4



THE ST. JAMES'S STREET ALMSHOUSES: FRONT (NORTH) ELEVATION

From a set of drawings made in the 1890's by Woolston Smith

Scale: 1 inch — 8 feet

In 1897 J. Houghton Spencer made a survey of the site for the Charity Commissioners and a copy of his site plan is reproduced as Fig. 1.⁷

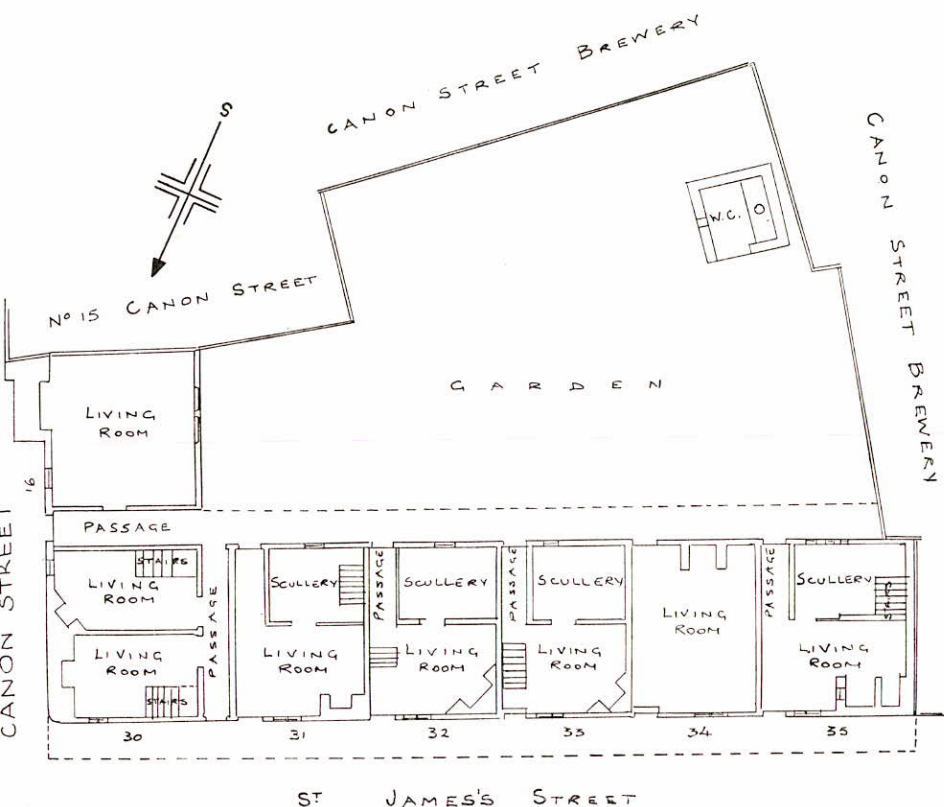


FIG. 1

SITE PLAN OF THE OLD ALMSHOUSES IN ST. JAMES'S STREET, TAUNTON

From the plan by J. Houghton Spencer, 1897

Scale: 1 inch — 16 feet

The site was sold to the Canon Street Brewery and the almshouses seem to have been demolished some time in 1897. The brewers, Messrs. Hanbury and Cotching, presented the frames of the buildings to the Taunton Corporation, who originally intended

⁷ The writers are indebted to the Taunton Town Charity and to Mr. C. P. McDonald of Messrs. Dodson and Pulman, Solicitors, for supplying a copy of the plan and allowing it to be reproduced.

to re-erect them in their yard in Magdalene Street.⁸ However, it is clear from a minute in the Society's books, dated 12 August 1898, that 'two of the old St. James's Street Almshouses' had been offered informally to the Society by the Corporation. They were re-erected in their present position in March 1899.⁹

The earliest known picture of the almshouses is one by Buckler dated 1832 in the Pigott Collection at Taunton Castle. (Plate 3). In the Tite Library and in the 'Bygones Room' at Taunton Castle are five sketches by Harry Frier of the almshouses made before they were demolished. There are four exterior views, taken from various angles, and one interior.¹⁰ These sketches show the general character of the building, but are not consistent in detail either with each other, with Houghton Spencer's plan (Fig. 1) or indeed with the surviving remains. The plan shows that the tenements had mostly been divided to give a small living-room and scullery, with stairs to an upper floor. Frier's interior sketch suggests that the upper floor was in the nature of a small loft over the scullery only. The right-hand of the two house frames in the Castle grounds still bears the number '33'. (see Fig. 1).

A set of drawings of the almshouses showing the complete framing of front (Plate 4) and back elevations and some details was made by Woolston Smith some time after 1893.¹¹ A plan included in this set shows that the west end of the building was closed with some old framing re-used, which suggests that the range of houses may originally have extended further to the west. Smith makes the following remark on his plan:

'The floors seem to have been unpaved, and are composed of cinders, bones and broken pottery'.

⁸ Information kindly given by the Town Clerk.

⁹ A photograph in the Society's possession, dated March, 1899, was evidently taken when re-erection had just been completed.

¹⁰ Frier must have made a number of other sketches of the almshouses, as several were on view in the exhibition of this artist's work, shown at the Taunton Borough Library in May, 1962.

¹¹ These four sheets of drawings, on paper watermarked 1893, are in the Society's possession. According to information kindly given by Mr. A. W. Parker, Woolston Smith was the son of Henry James Smith, who was Borough Surveyor of Taunton at the end of the 19th century. Woolston Smith worked in his father's office as a young man before going to Minehead as Town Surveyor.

A comparison of the Buckler drawing with all the later drawings and plans shows that at some time after 1832 the timber work at the north-east corner of the buildings was replaced by stone work and the corner rounded.

The surviving timber framing is for two single-room dwellings with doors and windows in both front and back walls, and with boldly overhanging eaves framed on projecting brackets. In the elevation (Fig. 2) the overhanging eaves have been omitted in part

Almshouses re-erected at Taunton Somerset

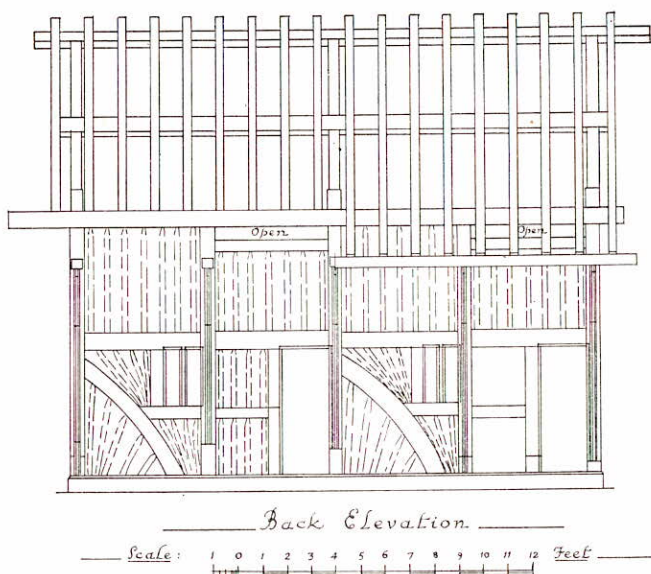


FIG. 2

*Measured & drawn by R.W. McDowall (R.E.H.M.)
April 1959*

to show the upper part of the wall.¹² The main panels of the framing were filled in with wattle and daub carried on battens, represented by broken lines on the drawing (Fig. 2). The framing is now a mere skeleton with hardly any of the battens surviving, but their arrangement is made clear by the holes in the framing into which the ends

¹² Figs. 2 and 3 have been selected for reproduction from a complete set of drawings of the existing timber frames. These drawings are deposited with the Society.

of them were fixed. But the most curious feature is that just under the wall plate each dwelling has a small panel at front and back 6 ins. high by 4 ft. 6 ins. wide, which was never filled in and must have formed a ventilator, perhaps with a shutter attached. The brick chimneys shown in Buckler's and Frier's sketches were internal and, from the nature of the framing, they cannot have been original. The rooms must have been heated by fires on open hearths or in braziers, and these ventilators may have been designed to let smoke out, or to provide an air inlet to assist in the dispersal of smoke through a vent in the roof.

In reassembly in its present position one wall-plate beam has been put in wrongly; those parts with holes to receive the battens and those which are plain have been reversed. The result is that the plain parts come where the holes ought to be and vice versa.

A series of carpenters' marks are unusual and are illustrated (Fig. 3). Timbers were more commonly marked with Roman numerals, though Arabic numerals occur occasionally, as for instance on the roof trusses of King's College Chapel, Cambridge.

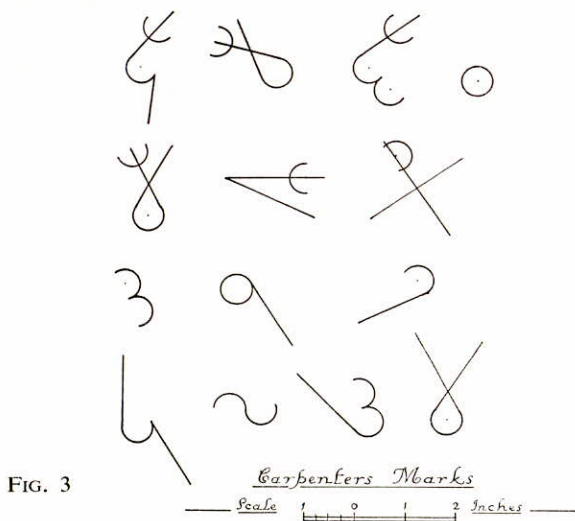


FIG. 3

The date when this framing was made is not easy to judge, but the general style of the timber-work, combined with the primitive smoke vents and absence of chimneys, suggests a pre-dissolution date, probably not later than 1500.

The condition of the framing has for some time been a matter of concern to the Council of the Society and to the Museum Governing Body. The structure is no longer safe and one of the frames may have to be dismantled in order that the other may be preserved intact.

The writers would like to thank, not only those gentlemen whose help has been acknowledged in the footnotes, but also Mr. R. C. Sansome, Keeper of the Somerset County Museum; Mr. D. M. Laverick, Borough Librarian; Rev. E. Hirst, until recently Vicar of St. James's; and Mr. H. W. Kille of Minehead, for their interest and assistance in the preparation of this paper.