

# God's Hostels.

## Two Ancient English Almshouses.

[*By I. Giberne Sieveking.*]

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**T**HERE is at Lübeck a beautiful old building—a house of Pity, where men and women, on whom the snows of life have begun to fall thickly, may rest and recruit and “take their ease,” before they start on the long dark journey from which no traveller returns to tell to those he left behind how he fared. This building has been given the suggestive, appropriate name of “God huis”—God’s Hostel, where the tired out and the money-less folk may find harbourage.

Our English word of “Almshouses,” if we take its original meaning “almesse” in middle English, derived from the Greek word meaning “Pity,” is sweet, but to my mind the name “God’s Hostel” is more, infinitely more, suggestive.

About the middle of the seventeenth century, or perhaps earlier, there seemed to be a great impetus towards starting and endowing, or at any rate restoring, these Almshouses, or Hostels of God, in England. It was in many respects an age of pity, of charity, of ideals. And these acts of pity were done as a sacred duty, as a trust, as a spiritual privilege, that blessed both him that built and him that was built for.

It was at the time of year when, as Gerard—from his old house in Holborn within the suburbs of London—expressed it, “Nature” was busy with “her lively portraitures”; Nature, “whose gentle breath inticeth forth the kindly sweets, and makes them yeeld their fragrant smells.”

I had long wanted to see the old Almshouses at Quainton, near Aylesbury, about which there were drawn up, in 1695, by Sir Ralph Verney, some quaint rules and orders for government. The town itself is at some distance from the station, and I was wondering if I should have to walk all the way, when a little milk cart, with two small boys in it, passed me, and one of them offered me a lift. Presently we came to some old thatched houses, faced with red bricks, set in a sort of zigzag, with old black timbered doorways, sloping forwards, or with beams white-washed all round. Others that we passed were of white cobb with diamond-paned windows,

and with four big scallop shells fixed in the wall. One of the boys said that these shells were found in the soil in the neighbourhood, when excavations for the foundations of the houses were being made. They were certainly a feature in the walls of many of the houses. Further on, we arrived at the village common, at the further end of which was the Cross of the Knights Hospitallers—who, as is well-known, held lands in Quainton at a very early period—four flat stones for its base, and one upright. In the latter was a little depression, which probably had been a receptacle for holy water in days gone by. Fifty years ago, my small informant told me, the stocks stood here.

A few paces beyond we turned up a quiet lane, a high paling, grey and time-honoured, flanked it on our left hand, straight ahead the grand old church, and on our right were the gray pile of Alms-houses. They are very picturesque, very quietly impressive : indeed, one is very sensible in first coming face to face with these old buildings, of the sort of old-world atmosphere, which seems to girdle them round. Here, great changes, great sorrows, great repressions have played their part in the lives of the inmates.

One special tragedy had happened to one of the inmates only a few weeks ago. Her husband had been the sexton of the Church hard by, and in digging the grave of a fellow parishioner late one evening, he had slipped and fallen into it, and broken his neck in the fall : thus, unawares, he had dug his own. The widow was a sad, subdued looking, elderly woman, who showed me the two little rooms, opening the one out of the other, which were her allotted space. Over the fire-place, and used as a mantle-piece, was an old carved bedstead head, of dark oak.

Each inmate had a porch with seat on each side, and a little garden attached, and a paved court. There are eleven gables to the almshouses, and four blocks of chimneys ; over two of the most projecting gables is a crest : a bird, yellow and black, over a gold crown, and underneath the words "Anno Dom.—1687."

"These almshouses were then erected and endow'd by Richard Winwood, Esq., son and heir of Right Hon<sup>ble</sup> Sir Ralph Winwood, Bart., Principal Secretary of State to King James y<sup>e</sup> First."

In the Church adjoining there are some curious sculptures and some monuments to the Winwoods ; also one curious one to the Bretts, coloured, date 1639. The old registers date from 1599, are bound in rough leather, all torn, blistered and stiff, and somewhat undecipherable. There is an old Bible, dated 1658, of which the sacriligious beetle has eaten part of the cover ; it is bound in

leather, and clamped with brass, and is now kept on what evidently used to be a side altar. On the opposite side of the Church there is a very curious old painted screen, the figures representing the four Evangelists, on a red and black ground, and supposed to be of great age. The tower of the Church is believed to be its oldest part, date about the middle of the fourteenth century. It is of stone, turreted, and ornamented with the humorous gargoyle. Outside, the windows in the tower have quaint wooden doors drilled and punctured to admit air and light. Inside the tower are winding stairs with footmarks cut deeply in them at regular intervals.

The Almshouse buildings abut on the Churchyard, and in old days it must have been easy for the inmates to attend mass in the Church.

"The Method of Government for Public Working Almshouses," in the old record to which I had access, runs as follows :—

The Almshouses themselves were built by Richard Winwood in Jan., 1686, and the rules were drawn up nine years later. The number of tenements was eight, and the rules declare "that the number of poor people shall not be less than six. Three poor men—widowers,—to be called Brothers, and three poor women—widows,—to be called Sisters.

"That every person shall be of good report and of sober and religious conversation, and not affected with any noisome or infectious disease.

"Any Brother or Sister admitted into the Almshouse, afterwards marrying, shall immediately forfeit his or her place and be forthwith expelled.

The opinions of the Brethren were to be unflinchingly "cabin'd, cribbed and confined," as the following rule shows :—

"If any Brother or Sister hold any erroneous opinions in any principle of religion, after conviction by the Rector of Quainton, before the rest of the Brethren and Sisters, who shall not upon three admonitions (one at the least three weeks after another) revoke such error before the Rector in the presence or hearing of the rest of the Brethren and Sisters, to be forthwith deprived of his or her place and never received again.

"That no Brother or Sister presume to go into any inn, alehouse or public-house in the town or parish of Quainton, unless on some business to be approved by the Rector or other of the Governors.

"All the Brethren and Sisters shall be persons of good behaviour, no whisperers, quarrelers, evil speakers or contentious.

"That no Brother take any woman to sewe or attend him in his house, without special license of the Rector—nor therewith under age of 50, unless she be his sister, or daughter, and of good conversation."

What one feels, I think, on reading these rules, is that in connection with them, there must have been some interesting items in the Parish book of the Rectors of that time, when he had to sit in judgment now and again on the delinquencies of a "Brother" or a "Sister," who, maybe, had ventured across the border into some neighbouring "ale-house," and while doing so had encountered the watchful eye of the Rector; or who perhaps had disagreed with the received interpretation of a sentence in the Athanasian Creed.

Not far from Quainton there is a similar almshouse, erected in 1605, at Chenies, and "endowed with £50, for support of ten poor persons, six of Chenies, two of Northall, and two of Wotton Under-edge." (1)

This Almshouse has the same kind of chimneys as that of Quainton, but is unlike it in the respect that it has three sides to its buildings and stands back some little distance from the road. There are three crosses on its gables and one on the arch of the doorway.

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(1) Lipscombe.

(To be continued.)

## Notes and Queries

### RELATING TO BERKS, BUCKS AND OXON.

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### Notes.

ERRATUM.—May I call your attention to the misreadings of the inscription on p. 6 of the last number of the *Journal*? "Huii" for "hujus" (hui'), "Januaru" for "Januarii," "Cuuis" for "Cujus," and "xxv" twice for "xxii."—W. D. MACRAY.

KING JOHN AT SONNING.—Shortly after the fateful meeting at Runnymede, and one month before his death, or to be more exact on Thursday, September 8th, 1216, King John and his retinue came from Reading to