

Tomkins Almshouses



Written by R C M (Dick) Barnes

Tomkins Almshouses on the corner of Conduit Road and Ock Street are listed as Grade II* buildings of particularly important architectural and historical interest. They were built in accordance with the will of Benjamin Tomkins, a wealthy maltster of Clock House in Ock Street, who died in 1731.

He bequeathed land called Steeds or Studs in Ock Street, on which there was then a dwelling, a malthouse, granaries and other premises, and gave his sons precise instructions to erect almshouses consisting of eight tenements in two blocks separated by a courtyard. They were to occupy part of the land, a plot 153 feet in depth and 43 feet wide, on that part of Steeds between "Mrs Simses" house (later the Crown public house) to the left and the existing gateway into the land on the right. Each block was to have four ground-floor tenements, with two rooms 12-foot square and, under an archway in the middle of the block, a pump and a "necessary house". He also specified that the frontage to Ock Street should have an entrance with two brick pillars and a "proportional low gate". The builder, probably the same as at Brick Alley almshouses between St Helen's and the river, produced the well-built tenements in blue bricks, and gave them a handsome architectural effect by decorative features such as red-brick facings to windows and doors, Dutch gables with blind windows facing the street, windows with leaded glazing, and a small parapet in the centre of each block to break-up the roofline. The rear of the courtyard was enclosed by a screen wall with an arched gateway leading to gardens, a small room with window above the archway, and the whole crowned with a clock in an ornamental pediment. The gardens have been converted into a secluded courtyard, but were originally divided into plots, one for each tenement.

Above the arch is a panel recording that :

"These Alms Houses were built in the year 1733 by the Order of Mr Benjamin Tomkins and according to the form prescribed by him to his sons Mr Benjamin and Mr Joseph Tomkins who were Executors to his last Will and Testament by which he gave Sixteen Hundred Pounds to endow the Same for four Poor Men and four Poor Women forever".

These men and women were to be from the parishes of St Helen and St Nicholas, or any other parishes within four miles of the town. The money was used to purchase a freehold estate at Weald near Bampton to provide an income by which the eight poor people were clothed and given a weekly allowance. Although Benjamin Tomkins was a staunch Baptist he did not impose religious conditions on the occupants of the almshouses. This was in contrast to another of his bequests that provided relief for "such poor Christian people in and about Abingdon as dissented from the Church of England and were not Papists".

The reference to two pumps suggests that the property might have had a well. There was also a nearby source of water from the handsome brick "fountain" known as the Carswell, which had been erected in Ock Street a few years earlier by Mr Richard Ely, to distribute fresh water from springs in the fields which later became Albert Park. The Carswell was close to the almshouses, just to the west of The Crown. In 1947 it was moved to a safer non-working position on the east wall of the almshouses in Conduit Road, where it forms a decorative feature in the centre of the four windows of the tenements.

In the 1860s Christ's Hospital developed the farmland to the north of Ock Street as a new residential suburb, away from the overcrowding and industrial smells of Ock Street. By this time they owned the remaining part of Steeds, and demolished the houses and industrial premises on it in order to make the Conduit Road access to the new development. As a result, the almshouses no longer backed onto fields, and had roads on two sides, but their layout facing into the courtyard fortunately retained an air of peace and quiet in an increasingly busy town. Another major change occurred when the administration passed from the individual trust (Benjamin Tomkins's Charities) to Christ's Hospital, which now administers all the Abingdon almshouses.