

## WOKINGHAM UNITED CHARITIES

An illustrated talk was presented at the Wokingham Society Open meeting, held in the Town Hall on Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2023 by Dennis Eyrie on the subject of Wokingham United Charities. (Dennis is a trustee of WUS and a former Chairman).

Wokingham United Charities is an amalgam of some 24 former local charities which can be dated back over 550 years, making some of them amongst the oldest in England.

The United Charities registered with the Charity Commission in 1921.

Prior to the 1840s, a body of Commissioners had been established by the Statue of Charitable Uses 1601, but this proved ineffective. The Charity Commission itself was established by the Charitable Trusts Act 1853.

In 1451, John Westende gifted eight cottages to the poor and needy people of Wokingham. This was known as the Westende Charity and is now part of the Wokingham United Charities. Other charities included Richard Brackstone (1715) and the Fuel Allotment (1817).

In the present day, Wokingham United Charities still provide accommodation to those in need through running the Westende almshouse in London Road, Wokingham. It also manage a Relief in Need endowed fund which provides grant funding to those in need (individuals, local charities and organisations) within the Wokingham Borough.

Dennis sought to answer the question as to where the original Westende cottages were and could they be easily identified today. Through the historic documentation and photographs it became clear that this is not straightforward. There have been a number of changes and adjustments through the passage of time and the original cottages no longer exist, having been demolished in the late 1950's, but they had originally been sited in the vicinity of Peach Street / London Road near the Ship Inn.

Their distinctive chimneys are shown in the photograph below.



In 1972 a land swap took place with Wokingham Borough Council and after renovations in 1987 the charity now has 27 modern well-appointed flats plus one for a live-in manager on an adjacent site.

It was interesting to note the different charitable bequests made by others during the 1600s to 1800s; examples include the provision of six cloth coats or upper garments to ancient poor men (Cruttwell 1751), twelve dark blue camblet or cotton gowns and twelve white linen aprons to poor old women of the parish (John Nash 1817) and the distribution of beef and bread on the direction of Alderman, Churchwardens and overseers (Monk 1668). There were many others of note.

The other significant part of the Wokingham United Charities is relief in need. The main one serving this need is the Fuel Allotment Charity. Some thirty acres of land opposite Pinewood on the south of Nine Mile Ride adjacent to Old Wokingham Road opposite what used to be the Transport & Road Research Laboratory were given charity status, resulting from the Windsor Forest Enclosure Awards of 1817. This allowed poor people to take fuel for their fires.

Wokingham United Charities managed to get planning consent to develop and sold part of the land adjacent to Hatch Ride in 1964 for development, but retained title to the adjacent SANG (Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space) land.

This exercise raised some £10M which is the foundation for the RELIEF IN NEED part of the charity, which has come to be a major part of their operation – generating in excess of £300K per annum. As a consequence, the charity looked to expand its area of benefit to the whole of the Borough Council Area from 2020 and has made substantial donations to a range of good causes in partnership with Citizens Advice Wokingham and co-producing the Borough's first Tackling Poverty Strategy.

Much further information can be found on the Wokingham United Charities website at <https://wokinghamunitedcharities.org.uk>