

THE WOKINGHAM SOCIETY
LUCAS HOSPITAL: WOKINGHAM'S ONLY
GRADE I LISTED BUILDING

**An illustrated talk by Peter Must at the Wokingham Society's
Annual General Meeting on Wednesday 20 November 2019**

The primary source for the talk was an unpublished text by Neville Franklyn, given to the Wokingham Society by the author.

Henry Lucas was born in November 1587, the son of Edward Lucas and Mary Covert. He was brought up in Thriplow, Cambridgeshire, where he went to the village school. Although the family was comfortably off, much of Edward's money was lost in protracted court cases brought by his wife's relatives after the Lucases had taken in her brother's children.

Henry went to St John's College Cambridge but did not complete his degree course; nor was he called to the bar despite being admitted to the Middle Temple in London. Henry often found himself not finishing what he had begun, no doubt attributing this to the loss of the family estate 'snatched from me .. during my childhood'.

His first recorded employment was in 1618 as agent for collecting tolls on coals for the Countess of Bedford. A little over ten years later, in 1628, Henry became secretary to Viscount Dorchester, Secretary of State under Charles I. On the Viscount's death in 1632 Henry secured the post of secretary to Henry Rich, first Earl of Holland, at that time Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. Through Holland's patronage Henry was awarded an MA from Cambridge and twice served as one of the two Members of Parliament for the University.

Holland took up arms for Charles I in the Civil War but was captured and executed in 1649. Henry, more by association than action in battle was imprisoned for a year and shorn of his Parliamentary seat. His fence-sitting is evidenced by his both signing the Presbyterian charter against Charles I and the Engagement for the restoration of Charles II.

Henry retired from public life thereafter and died in 1663 in Chancery Lane, being buried at the Temple Church. In his will he left his extensive collection of books to Cambridge University Library and asked his executors to purchase land so that the revenue could fund a Professorship of Mathematics in the University (the Lucasian Chair). Holders have included Isaac Newton and Stephen Hawking.

The remaining revenue from land rents he asked his executors to allocate to building and maintaining an alms house in either Surrey or Berkshire. They purchased land at Chapel Green, Wokingham, from Richard Palmer of Luckley House and the Hospital, as they called it was completed and opened in 1665.

Despite claims to the contrary, there is no evidence that the building was designed by Sir Christopher Wren, although he was a family friend of the Lucases. It was laid out in the then fashionable style of a long central structure with two shorter wings, one serving as the chapel and the other as the mortuary and staff apartments. The word 'Venite' still appears above the chapel entrance while 'Requies' remains above the door to the staff quarters.

The will called for the appointment of a Master, single and with an MA from Cambridge, on an annual stipend of £50.

Under the terms of the will, there were to be 16 brethren (occupants): nine from Berkshire and seven from Surrey. A brother was required to be single, over fifty, free of disease, and of a sober life and conversation, 'decayed in estate by sickness and other misfortune and not by their own wicked, wasteful and riotous courses', and with less than £20.

The executors drew up and printed a list of 38 Ordinances and Statutes, governing what was required of both Master and brethren. These were displayed in the Hospital to ensure they were taken to heart. Among the rules were:

'... if any brother shall use any blasphemous words ... the same shall be...removed out of the house and never be received there any more'.

'...if any brother... shall commit adultery, fornication, or any such uncleanness...or shall steal within the house...the same brother to be expelled and never to be received there again'.

Each room was fully furnished, including a bed and bedding, furniture, a hearth set and a waterproof sheet.

The second of the two Executors died in 1675 and, under the terms of Henry Lucas's will, the care of the Hospital was to pass to the Drapers' Company in London. The only problem was that neither Henry nor his executors had told the Company, so that they were somewhat taken aback, but nonetheless accepted the task and remained responsible for the Hospital for the next 300 years.

Over the years there were 14 Masters, only one of which had to be removed from office by petition of the brethren. The rulers for appointment were changed at various stages, permitting a Master to hold a BA degree from either Cambridge or Oxford, to be at the same time rector or perpetual curate of the local church, and to receive an increased annual stipend of £100. The level of this larger salary did not go unchallenged, Earl Grey raising his concern in the House of Lords in 1846, with which the Bishop of Salisbury agreed, but did not act.

The brethren sometimes fell foul of the rules as these instances indicate:

In 1699 Richard Twigg struck the Master with a large wooden fork

John Pierce in 1727 called Lucas's will a forgery, the Master a liar and the Governors of the Drapers' Company 'rogues, cheats and knaves'

Brother Goodyear was found with a strange woman in his room on a Sunday in 1894.

It was not always easy to fill vacancies for brethren,. In 1709 there was only one vacancy but by 1750 there were 10. In 1755, with nine rooms going spare, Wokingham Corporation called for the vacancy rate to be investigated but the Drapers' Company said the Charity was in balance and nothing happened.

Problems continued and Rev. Thomas Morres, Master in 1873, commissioned a report which concluded that there was a high vacancy rate and the building was in poor state of repair. The Drapers' Company told him to mind his own business.

Nonetheless, by 1921 the Charity was in need of funds and sold the land in Bedfordshire that the executors had purchased. The following year married, single and widowed women were admitted, no doubt responding to both social and financial pressure.

The last Master died in 1938 and, with the intervention of WWII, it presumably became difficult to find a successor. Instead, a series of Matrons were appointed, the last of whom was, to everyone's delight, present in the audience. On her resignation in 1995 the Hospital was put under the management of Hanover Housing Association which, in a report commissioned by the Drapers' Company in 1998, concluded that the Hospital's rural setting and modern nursing requirements made the Hospital unsustainable, even if an additional care facility were to be built in the garden.

The Drapers' Company indicate its wish to sell the site and use the proceeds to fund alms houses elsewhere. There was considerable local concern that the Company should look harder for viable alternatives and that the quality of the building, with its Grade I listed status, would be under threat.

The Charity Commission accepted that the Drapers' Company could not be expected to run the Hospital at a considerable annual loss, and that the Grade I status was not relevant to the case. The property was accordingly put on the market by Savills in 2000 and a number of local attempts were made to acquire it, including potential bids from two charities which eventually came to nothing.

In 2001 the property was bought as a family home and the planning application for internal modifications to meet residential needs was negotiated between the Borough planners and Conservation Officer and the purchasers' representatives with little friction.

The Drapers' Company, true to its word, used the income to build new alms houses at Whiteley Village near Walton-on-Thames and called them the Henry Lucas Cottages.

In 2005 the Wokingham Society purchased at auction a painting of the Hospital Chapel by Henry Lucas Lucas (no relation to the founder), the brother of the wife of Joseph Stratton, Master from 1889 to 1929 and at present it hangs in Wokingham Library.

In 2010 the Society erected two blue plaques on the walls of the Hospital to mark its history.

In 2019 Charles Church indicted its intention to build 250 houses on land to the north of the Hospital, in accordance with the Borough Council's plan for the South Wokingham Strategic Location. Although the land close to Lucas Hospital is not involved, and indeed some of it is liable to flooding, the local community will be anxious to ensure the integrity of what is Wokingham's only Grade I listed building.