

## St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

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| Building:  | The Pemberton Almshouses, St Peter's Street |
| Researched by:   | Elizabeth Adey                              |
| This research was undertaken by volunteers and is not an exhaustive history of the building but captures what intrigued them during the project.<br>If you have any memories you'd like to share, or any queries about the research, please do let us know: <a href="mailto:museum@stalbans.gov.uk">museum@stalbans.gov.uk</a> |   |

I walked along to see the Pemberton Almshouses after reading about them, stopping first at St Peter's Church to see the brasses of Roger Pemberton and his wife Elizabeth, which are now positioned on the inside wall of the church just beside the side entrance. Crossing the road to the almshouses opposite, the big wooden door in the brick wall surrounding the almshouses was open. Stepping up into the garden in front, I saw that one of the doors was ajar and a pair crutches just visible inside, propped against a wall. There was a vacant air, as though the resident was no longer there. The wall surrounding the almshouses continues round to Grange Street, where there is another door labelled as 'Tradesmen's Entrance'. The wall is too high to see the gardens at the back, however, they seem spacious.

A metal spike tops the brick surround above the solid wooden door from St Peter's Street. The blue plaque beside the doorway claims that the almshouses were built as atonement for the founder shooting someone by accident. The metal spike represents an arrow. Another plaque embedded in the brick above the gateway says that the almshouses were endowed by Roger Pemberton of St Albans who was buried in St Peter's Church, November 20, 1627.

### **So who was Roger Pemberton, how did the almshouses come to be built and who lived in them and were they actually built as atonement for shooting someone?**

Fortunately St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society were interested too and published '*The Pemberton Almshouses*' in 2004 to celebrate the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Roger Pemberton's birth. <sup>1</sup>

Roger Pemberton came from a prosperous family who owned land in several counties and had come to St Albans from Pemberton in Lancashire.<sup>2</sup> Roger Pemberton was born on March 8, 1554/5, married Elizabeth Moore in 1579, they had three sons and three daughters, who were baptised at St Peter's Church.<sup>3</sup> He had a house in St Peter's Street, St

<sup>1</sup> Clare Ellis & Pat Howe, *The Pemberton Almshouses*, St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society, 2004. This is an invaluable source of information and gave pointers to newspaper references and other sources.

<sup>2</sup> J.T. Smith & M.A. North, *St Albans 1650-1700*. Hertfordshire Publications, 2003, p. 162

<sup>3</sup> Clare Ellis & Pat Howe, *The Pemberton Almshouses*, p.3. There are brass plates with engravings for Roger and Elizabeth and a plaque to the children in St Peter's Church.

Albans.<sup>4</sup> The family were Puritans and Roger's third son Raphe (also spelt as Ralph), was a major in Cromwell's army.<sup>5</sup> Puritans believed that giving to the poor would help ensure a place in heaven.<sup>6</sup>

He gave detailed instructions to his sons in his will of November 13, 1624, for an almshouse for six poor old widows to be built in Bowgate opposite St Peter's Church. They were to be 'six sufficient rooms, of bricks or stones, with six convenient garden plottes, within a wall of brick and stone'.<sup>7</sup> Two widows were to be chosen from the parishes of St Peter's and St Stephen's and one each from St Michael's and Shenley.<sup>8</sup> The widows would also receive money towards clothing, hose, shoes and linen as well as meat, bread, drink and firewood.

The widows were to 'live peaceably and quietly' together and if they were 'contentious and unquiet' then his sons and heirs could withhold payment to make any repairs and remove them if their behaviour did not improve. As part of the agreement the widows had to attend services at St Peter's weekly.<sup>9</sup> The almshouses were built quickly with the first widows living there by August 1629.<sup>10</sup>

A codicil added to his will on November 7, 1627, just before he died, bequeathed the widows five pounds a year for ever, to be funded from income from his property in Shelton, Wootton and Marston Moretaine in Bedfordshire.<sup>11</sup>

*("And whereas I have had a desire and determinacion for many yeares past to erect and found an almeshouse or houses for sixe poore widdowes to inhabite and dwell in, and for that purpose have purchased a close or meadowe or pasture in Bowgate in the parish of St Peters in the towne of St Albanes aforesaid in myne owne and my sonne Raphes name to us and our heires ...And in my will is that they shall build or cause to bee built in the same close or some parte thereof sixe sufficient rooms of brick or stones for sixe poore old widdowes to inhabit thereine. And the same to continew and bee an almeshouse for ever with sixe convenient garden plottes to be severed from the same close and added unto the same rooms for the use of the same widdowes, to be walled with a wall of bricke and stones and each garden to bee devided out from the other with a very sufficient plae. And my will is that*

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<sup>4</sup> Clare Ellis & Pat Howe, *The Pemberton Almshouses*, p.3 He was mentioned in the Corporation Minutes for 7<sup>th</sup> December 1612 for putting posts or railings in front of his house in St Peter's Street, encroaching on the public thoroughfare.

<sup>5</sup> Clare Ellis & Pat Howe, *The Pemberton Almshouses* p. 3 and J.T.Smith and M.A North, *St Albans 1650-1700.*, p.109.

<sup>6</sup> Clare Ellis & Pat Howe, *The Pemberton Almshouses*, , p.3

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 2

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 2

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 5

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.2. Apparently £30 a year was still paid by Mr Dimmock, lord of the manor of Shelton in 1908.

*my three sonnes John, Robert and Raphe and my sonne Wolley and their heires, ...shall have the placeing and displacing of the same widdowes in the severall rooms from tyme to tyme as occasion shall require....John and Robert and of my soone Wolley or the survivors of them, shall purchase lands and tenements or yearely annuities of the yearely vallew of thirtie pounds for ever or to a vallew as neere thereunto as my ready money...and shall distribute the same yearely amongst the same widdowes in manner and forme following, that is to saie, a fift part therof to be yerely bestowed amongst them towards their Clothes, hose, shoes and linen as their need shall require. And the other fower partes to bee delivered unto them quarterly by even porcions in ready money towards their meate, bread, drincke and fying for ever.””<sup>12)</sup>*

The Herts Advertiser and St Albans Times for Saturday July 3, 1887 describes the Pemberton Almshouses: “There are six rooms, each woman having one room about 18 feet by 14 feet, and eight feet high. The rooms are pleasantly lighted on their east and west sides. In situation, surroundings, and size or rooms the Almshouses are all that can be desired. They are, however, much out of repair. Pieces of the walls of the buildings should be re-built, a gable tied in, and other portions of the walls should be repaired and repointed.”<sup>13</sup>

The metal spike representing an arrow is mysterious. A tradition grew up that the iron spike over the gateway represents the shaft of an arrow and that the founder (Roger Pemberton) once shot a widow by accident and built the almshouses as atonement.<sup>14</sup> Rather disappointingly Mr S. Flint Clarkson, researching the almshouses in the 1890s<sup>15</sup> mentions that while *‘Beauties of England’* published in 1808 describes the tradition, he came to the conclusion that there was no evidence to support this and that it might have come about because George Abbot, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1611, had killed a keeper accidentally with an arrow, while shooting deer in the 1620s<sup>16</sup>, rather than anything Roger Pemberton had done.

Charity Commission reports for 1815-1839 still show the widows, selected by St Peter’s Church, receiving five pounds a year from the manor of Shelton.<sup>17</sup> Parishes were making repairs to the almshouses by then. New regulations for the charity drawn up in 1884 still kept to the terms of Roger Pemberton’s original will: “six almshouses, poor widows of good character, not less than sixty years old, not having received Poor Law relief during the three preceding years, who from age, ill health, accident or infirmity were unable to maintain

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 11-12. Excerpts from the will concerning the Almshouses are quoted on pages 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> *The St Albans Almshouses*, Herts Advertiser and St Albans Times, Saturday July 3, 1897.

<sup>14</sup> *The Victoria County History (Hertfordshire)*. (1908, rpt 1971) vol 2 p.473

<sup>15</sup> S. Flint Clarkson, *The Gateway of the Pemberton Almshouses* in *St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural & Archaeological Society Transactions* vol 1 part 1. New series 1895 & 1896 pub. 1898, pp. 20 – 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 27. The Victoria County History also dismisses the tradition. (Hertfordshire vol 2, p. 473).

<sup>17</sup> Clare Ellis & Pat Howe, *‘the Pemberton Almshouses’* p. 5

themselves by their own exertions; with a preference for those persons who had become reduced by misfortune from better circumstances.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1905, Arthur Willoughby Pemberton, a descendent, repaired and enlarged the almshouses. They were threatened in a proposed redevelopment in 1929 but were listed by the Council after 1932 because of their architectural and historical interest. By 1942 they were in a poor state of repair and the Charity was given permission to sell them in 1943 for not less than £4,100, St Albans District Council became the owners in 1944.<sup>19</sup> In 1960 extensions at the back gave every resident a kitchen and bathroom.<sup>20</sup> Today, men as well as women live there.

One of the 20<sup>th</sup> century residents reported that there was a ghost. She would often see a large indented shape in the corner of her bed and would notice a strong smell of tobacco in her house, even though she was a non-smoker.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.6

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.6-7. And column in *Herts Advertiser*, Friday June 11, 1943 talks of the Charity Commissioners decision to allow the sale and gives historical details.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p.7

<sup>21</sup> Eerieplace.com/haunted-St-Albans- the ghost-at-the-pemberton-almshouses. Also Paul Adams, *Haunted St Albans*, 2013, p. 87 although he gives less detail than the website.