

THE END OF AN ERA – THE BENSINGTON CHARITY

In January 2012 a tradition of charity in Benson came to an end when The Bensington Charity was dissolved and de-registered by the Charity Commission after 380 years.

1632 Mr John Merryweather left £200 to buy land, the income from which was to be used to clothe “such poor people as are reputed and of honest life and conversation” in the parishes of Benson and Wokingham

1639 Mr John Blacknall’s will left 20 shillings a year – 3/4d to the vicar for disposing of 1/8d to each of 10 poor widows

1809 Mr Thomas Smith left £5 per annum for the poor of each of the parishes of Benson and Berrick, to be distributed in bread, twice a year from the galleries of each church.

1879 Robert Aldworth Newton, of Fifield House, bequeathed £200 to be invested, and the income to be distributed in bread on November 4th to the poor of Bensington

1905 Mary Ann Corsellis of Colne House, Benson, by her will founded a charity called Powell’s Gift, being the sum of £200. The income from this, which was about £5, was to be used for charitable purposes. She had been a very charitable woman in her lifetime, too.

The details of these charities can be found on two boards at the back of the nave of St Helens Church.

Mr Merryweather may have come from the Bath area, Mr Blacknall from Abingdon, where he also was a benefactor as is mentioned in the church of St Nicholas, and Mr Smith was a coachmaker from the parish of St James, Middlesex. We do not know the origin of their interest in Benson.

Extracts from the accounts:-

Merryweather’s In 1912 the balance was £7.3s .0d and was spent as follows

From Mr Hargreaves – 8 overcoats at 11/6d, from Messrs Pettit’s 4 cloaks at 12/6d, and a book for recording at 1/-

The gifts were handed out on Christmas Eve .

By 1915 the men were receiving waterproof capes and by 1917 the women received shawls.

In 1922 Overcoats were 14/11d,. cardigans 7/11d, and shawls 12/11d

In 1928 blankets were given at 5/11d each

In 1929 lengths of flannel at 2/4d a yard were given, and in 1931 £2 was set aside for “bread for necessitous cases”, in addition to cardigans, blankets and flannelette .

Blacknall’s The custom of dividing the annual £1 gift between 10 poor widows, with 3/4d to the vicar, on St Thomas’ Day, continued. From 1912 the vicar’s share was

donated to “The Coal and Clothing Club”. The cost changed a little – in 1928 2/- each to ten widows, and in 1931 2/6d each to eight widows.

In 1933 the committee of the Charities, with the consent of the Charity Commissioners, had amalgamated all these charities into one with a single bank account. It was administered by a body of five Trustees – local people – and the Chair was normally the current vicar of St Helens Church. . The remit of the Charity was to be the relief of hardship in Benson. The accounts were presented annually at the Annual Parish Meeting. A voluntary post of clerk was instituted , as secretary and treasurer to the Trustees, and in the last thirty years there have been three clerks – Miss Doris Chamberlain, Mrs Isabel Taylor, and Janet Burt..

By the year 2010 it became apparent to Trustees that, because of the National Health service and Social Security service, the Charity was no longer functioning in any real sense. We had very few claims on our resources, and the resources themselves no longer had any great value in order to be able to do anything meaningful with them. It was decided to consult with the Charity Commission on the procedure for winding up the charity.

The Trustees advertised this plan in The Benson Bulletin and invited applications for funds.

We put all our funds into one account and, in 2011 we decide to divide the funds equally between the youth and the elderly of the village. One half was donated to the Millstream Day Centre, and the other half to Benson Youth Club.

Once all the funds were disbursed we informed the Charity Commission by form, and on January 16th 2012 the charity was removed from their register.

On February 15th 2012 the Trustees held their final meeting and laid down their responsibilities for this ancient institution.

2012 Trustees : Don Fletcher (Chair), Rev. Jean Travis, William Bowles,
Until 2010 Rev Canon Andrew Hawken.

Janet Burt (Clerk/Trustee)