

This history of the Churchyard Cottages in Lapworth is transcribed from a typewritten document donated by Rosemary Fox who lived in Broomfield Cottage adjacent to the church until the 1980s. It is likely to have been written by her late husband, Howard Fox, who was Treasurer of the church and interested in local history

‘And some there be’

Early in 1892, five old cottages which had stood to the south of St. Mary's Church in Lapworth churchyard for three hundred years or so, were demolished by the Solihull Sanitary Authority on the order of the Justices of the Peace for Warwickshire, because repeated requests to make them safe and habitable had been ignored by the parish. No one knows when the houses had been built or who had paid for them or even whether their final condition was really so bad that restoration was impossible, but they were entirely destroyed and the ground where they had stood for so long was added to the churchyard. Nothing remained to show where they had been except a sudden change in the slope of the ground. Their removal exposed a fine view of the south side of the church, which had been obscured for centuries, but their wholesale demolition was surely excessive: the little single-storey schoolroom nearest to Church Lane would have hidden very little of St. Mary's, had it been left, and it would, when restored, have been a delightful reminder of a little piece of Lapworth history.

The cottages were built around the wall which marked the southern boundary of the churchyard; in fact the wall was actually incorporated into the buildings. A pathway led from a gate in Church Lane, across the fronts of the first four cottages, which faced the church, and another path led from the same gate up to the church porch. At the beginning of the 19th Century the building nearest to the lane was the school and then came the houses of the schoolmaster, the Parish Clerk and the sexton, and it seems reasonable to suppose that this had always been the arrangement. A fifth cottage at the end furthest from the lane faced to the south and was of later construction, Even Robert Hudson who, in his "Memorials of a Warwickshire Parish' made such a splendid and comprehensive study of Lapworth records, could only surmise that the cottages were built originally with charity funds and that probably they were intended for officers of the church and school and that that was why the churchyard site had been chosen. (There was, at one time, a similar old cottage in the churchyard in Rowington)

Though the actual date of the cottages is not known it is thought that they belonged to the beginning of the 17th Century or even earlier. Edward Welchman, who was Rector of Lapworth from 1690 until 1739, mentioned them and said nothing to indicate that they were then new. In 1890 a representative of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings considered them to be about three hundred years old, and presumably he would be a fairly reliable judge. If he was right, then the cottages were built in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The parish register for 1662 has the signature 'John Wight, schoolmaster' in it. There is no proof that John Wight kept the school in the churchyard but perhaps he did, for there certainly was a school in Lapworth 37 years later when Edward Welchman wrote to John Chamberlayne of the Royal Society, for advice about it.

‘Edward Welchman of Lapworth has endeavoured for ten years to get a school for the poor of his parish, which does not answer his expectations, the houses being at such distance that the

smaller children cannot come and the parents cannot spare the others from their work. On this he desires the advice of the Society'.

It sounds as though Lapworth possessed a school which was too far away from the homes of most of the parishioners to be within the reach of small children. This would certainly have applied to the school in the churchyard.

There is, however, one little piece of evidence which does not fit the theory that the houses were Tudor. During the demolition a brick, dated 1692, was discovered. Nevertheless the general consensus of opinion seems to be that most of the structure was about one hundred years older than that.

The school and the cottages were not the only buildings ever put up inside the churchyard. The records show that until 1615 there was also, opposite the south door of the church, 'a verie fayre cross built with arches in which a dozen men might have stood, a verie convenient cross for a preacher'. Such a preaching cross may well have been older than the church itself, but in 1615 one of the Charity Feoffees, William Askew, pulled it down and used the stone in the construction of his own house; one of his many crimes which a commission was set up to investigate. Later on, at the end of the 17th Century, Edward Welchman described an "arbour or summerhouse' which stood in the churchyard but he did not make its position clear.

There seems no information about the school and the cottages throughout the 18th Century but, by the early 19th Century the churchyard was becoming full and new graves were being dug very close to the fronts of the buildings (eventually only a six foot wide gap remained) and a little more space was provided when, in 1815, a lane which ran along outside the eastern boundary was incorporated into the burial ground. The site of this lane is shown by the row of lime trees. Much later, in the early 20th Century the churchyard was extended again at one point on this same side to provide a plot for the Jefferson family.

In 1814, a year before the battle of Waterloo, John Morteboys kept the school, though he lived, not in the churchyard, but on the Old Warwick Road, opposite Hudson's Bridge in the house now called Yew Tree Cottage. Compulsory Education Acts were still more than fifty years away and the poverty of most working people forced them to send their children out to work at the age of about eight, so probably John Morteboys' school was not very well attended. It was evidently not very well cared for either, for he described it as being in 'ruinous condition'. His salary for 1815 is shown in the Overseers' accounts for that year; £20 per annum and an extra £5 for collecting the charity rents and keeping the accounts. His pupils may have been all boys since there was, at the time, a school for 'poor girls' in a little cottage on the Old Warwick Road near the site where the Bear House now stands. It was probably little more than a child-minding establishment, kept by Dame Brown for a salary of £5 a year. Country schools in the early 19th Century were entirely under the jurisdiction of the church and the feoffees and it is greatly to the credit of both these bodies in Lapworth that, as the old school deteriorated, they 'appropriated' a piece of land, just outside the churchyard, for the erection of a new school which was planned to cost about £800. It was most unusual in those days for a small village to have a purpose-built school, and the

provision of one in Lapworth with its two attached houses must have been a considerable undertaking. It was not, in fact, completed until ten years later and it cost £1500 (paid off in £200 instalments each year)

When, finally, in 1826, the new school was finished and equipped with desks and forms, John Morteboys moved his pupils into it and remained Headmaster until 1844. After his death, the appointment of Mr and Mrs Cattell to run the school led the feoffees to draw up some rather more definite conditions about its management under the direction of the Rector or 'visitors appointed by him'. The school was for both boys and girls; boys from 5 to 10 years old were taught spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic, and girls from 5 to 12 years old, spelling, reading, sewing and knitting. It is not clear whether writing and arithmetic were thought to be unnecessary for girls or whether girls were considered incapable of dealing with them. The schoolmaster was paid £60 per annum and he held his house and garden free of rent and rates. This was really a far better salary than one might have expected: nearly a hundred years later, in spite of continuous inflation, the starting salary of a graduate teacher, on the Burnham Scale, was £216 per annum without either house or garden! The Lapworth schoolmaster, however, was required to provide the coal for the school fires and to be responsible for the children on Sundays in church and Sunday-school.

When the children and the parish clerk had moved to their new quarters the cottages became rent-free accommodation for the 'deserving poor' the selection of whom was left to the Rector. (One wonders whether the 'ruinous schoolhouse' was repaired before its new occupant was moved in) From then on the cottages were always referred to as the almshouses though they were never almshouses in the usual sense of the word because they had no endowments. The early part of the 19th Century was a particularly hard time for farmworkers, who formed a considerable proportion of the Lapworth population, for a succession of measures, all unfortunate so far as they were concerned, had both increased their numbers and decreased their earnings relative to the cost of living. The Napoleonic Wars had cut off supplies of European corn from Britain and had made the price of wheat rocket from 43/- per quarter in 1792 to 126/- per quarter in 1812. Agricultural wages had always been low and in 1795, when many families were on the verge of starvation, the Berkshire magistrates met at Speenhamland, near Newbury, to fix minimum farm wages. Unfortunately they changed their minds, left wages as small as before and supplemented them from the Poor Rate. All the English counties, except the most northerly ones adopted this same principle. It was disastrous. Wages were so low that, as prices continued to rise, even full-time workers had to ask for poor relief and so became 'paupers', In addition, the various 'enclosure Acts' were fast bringing about the disappearance of all common land forcing small yeoman farmers to give up their independence and become labourers for the large land-owners.

The Poor Rate was first levied 'from those able to pay' in 1601 and local Justices of the Peace used it to provide 'outdoor relief' for the near destitute. It was used, too, by the Overseers of the Poor to buy materials, such as wool, or the occasional spinning wheel, and so provide employment for those without work. Until 1810 those who received outdoor relief were required to wear a red and blue badge on the shoulder, showing the letter P together with the initial of the parish to which they belonged, and accounts, showing the cost of these badges with their letters P and L, appear in the Lapworth Overseers' records. Anyone who refused to wear the badge received no help. At first sight this appears to be a positively sadistic regulation, but it may well have stemmed from the Act of Settlement of Charles II's

reign which made each parish responsible for its own poor. Every parish zealously kept out the poor from other parishes in case they became a charge upon the rates. Perhaps the badges were simply a means of identification of the place of origin of the wearers. Before the cottages became almshouses the poor rate was stretched to its limit by the increasing numbers of workers who were subsidised by it and also by payments directly occasioned by the French and American wars. The Lapworth Overseers' accounts for 1803 show the entries:-

<i>Paid to John Maids to serve in the Army of Volunteers</i>	<i>14-14-0</i>
<i>Paid to John Price</i>	<i>8- 8-0</i>
<i>Paid to Wright for finding a substitute</i>	<i>26-5-0</i>
<i>Paid to substitute</i>	<i>7-17-0</i>

Such payments, very large for a small parish to find, sometimes amounted to £80 in the course of a year and they continued until after Waterloo in 1815.

So it is not surprising that Lapworth needed almshouses and that the churchyard cottages were pressed into service when the new school was completed. In 1834, when William IV was King, the New Poor Law was instituted, designed to centralise help for the poor. Locally it was administered by Boards of Guardians elected by the rate-payers. It had some long term advantages but its feature which caused most despair among the very poor was the abolition of outdoor relief by means of which they had just managed to live in their own homes. After 1834 anyone asking for alms could receive help only in the workhouse, and so, in that year, we find the Lapworth churchwardens filling in a form for the Local Government Board in London and stating that they had five small cottages for the accommodation of paupers and that many parishioners wished all or part of the new school (completed only six years before) to be used as a workhouse. Obviously, this was never done.

After the 'hungry forties' the condition of rural working people improved slowly though the problem of keeping the children at school remained a major difficulty. An old lady, who lived most of her life in Lapworth, but who now lives away, remembers that her mother attended the new Lapworth School in the 1870's. This mother, as a small child, achieved only a spasmodic education for, like many other country children she was one of a large family and she was often either kept at home to care for younger children while her mother worked or she was unable to go to school because her mother could not provide the two pence a week 'school money' necessary. Study of the old school registers shows that this girl (and many others like her) was admitted to school, then disappeared for one of the above reasons, then came back again and was re-admitted... over and over again. The schoolmaster, whose salary depended partly on the attendance record of his pupils and on their performance in the 'Inspectors Examinations' had to find time to go and persuade her parents to send her back, if only temporarily. When this little girl did go to school, she must have been a frequent visitor to the old churchyard cottages, for her grandmother lived in one of them. It is difficult to realise how close to us these events are: this little girl was the mother of an old Lapworth resident who is still living. Her grave is on the spot where her grandmother's almshouse used to stand.

So, throughout most of the 19th Century, the school lived in its good new building and a succession of old people lived in the cottages, the condition of which became steadily worse until it was obvious that they must either be repaired or taken down. There were no title deeds or conveyances in existence and nobody was willing to carry out the extensive repairs necessary to keep the houses habitable. In June 1889 the churchwardens were informed by William Harris, Inspector of Public Nuisances in Solihull, that the cottages must be made safe. The churchwarden, Robert Hudson, replied in December of the same year:

'The parish authorities are absolutely without any documentary evidence as to how or when the cottages were built or acquired, or in whom they are legally vested. No rent, so far as is known, has ever been charged for them, but they have always been occupied by the poor of the parish who through age or infirmity, widowhood or other causes, have been thought to have special claims for assistance, There is nothing to show that the parish has ever borne the cost of repairs to the buildings; such repairs appear to have been done as an act of grace by the feoffees of the Lapworth Charity who have always disclaimed and abstained from exercising any acts of ownership'

The statement 'They have always been occupied by the poor of the parish' is odd. They had, in fact, been so used for about sixty years.

The Rector and the churchwardens wanted the cottages to be demolished on the grounds that they were insanitary, that there had ceased to be any parishioners with special claims upon them, that the parish could not afford the repairs and that the recent growth in Lapworth's population made an extension of the burial ground essential. The Overseers of the Poor, William Horton and Thomas Smith, wanted the cottages to be sold and the money to be paid into the poor rate, On discovering that this would be illegal they suggested instead that the cottages should be sold by public auction and that the money raised should be put into the care of two responsible ratepayers, to be used at their discretion to the best advantage. £10, it was suggested, should be taken from the fund each year to buy food, coal and clothing for the poor of the parish.

Shortly after this, in August 1890 a dispute resulted in changes in the appearance of the churchyard and its boundary wall. The Rector and churchwardens learned that, unknown to them, William Whitworth had occupied one of the cottages and was using it for the storage of grain. Mr Whitworth alleged that he had the permission of the overseers and expressed his intention to continue such occupation without the consent of either Rector or churchwarden. The latter retaliated by blocking up the gateway in the church wall which gave access to the cottages and by turving over the path which led from the cottages to the church porch and using it for burials.

The cottages were neither pulled down nor sold and in January 1891 William King, the Guardian of the Poor, who lived at Lapworth Park Farm, suggested the rebuilding of the cottages and circulated a letter to all parishioners asking them to vote on the issue. His letter was follows:-

'You know that there is a movement on foot to pull down and do away with the Almshouses adjoining Lapworth churchyard, and to add the ground upon which they stand to the churchyard.'

I am doing what I can, as your Guardian, to prevent this, because I am of the opinion that they belong to the poor of the parish, and should not be done away with unless others are built in their place. If the site is unhealthy I am not opposed to the Almshouses being rebuilt on another site, so that they are near the church, and the old people who live in them may not have far to go to Divine Worship.

I am told that in my endeavours to protect the rights of the poor of Lapworth, I have not your support, and that a majority of the parishioners are in favour of the extinction of the Almshouses, I deny this, and say I have the Support of the great majority of the parishioners, I have promised to give £50 towards rebuilding the houses, and other influential friends have promised large sums amounting in all to about £100.

Please read the enclosed postcard and write 'Yes' or 'No' in reply to the question. You need not sign your name unless you like, but post the card at once!

William King

Guardian of the Poor

The pre-addressed card simply said:-

Are you in favour of the Old Almshouses being rebuilt?

Read the question carefully, write yes or no and post this card at once

Write yes or no here ...

There seems to be no record of the result of this ballot, but the money collected at this time was later used to build 'one good cottage' which was handed over to the feoffees. The cottage built then was 'Lilac Cottage' on the Old Warwick Road.

When it became apparent that demolition was the most likely fate of the old houses the Secretary of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings sent to the national press a copy of his letter to the Rector and churchwardens.

To the Reverend the Rector and Churchwardens of Lapworth

Gentlemen,

The attention of the Society has been drawn to the proposed demolition of the old almshouses on the south side of Lapworth churchyard, and the matter having been carefully considered by the Committee of the Society, I have been instructed to address you on the subject with a view to the preservation of the buildings. It is alleged that the buildings are in an insanitary condition, and that they have been condemned by the Sanitary Authority. The Society would submit that if this statement is correct that it does not justify the demolition of the buildings, but that they should be repaired and proper sanitary arrangements made. The Society is informed by their

correspondent, who visited the Almshouses about a twelvemonth ago, that the rooms were then in a fairly substantial state of repair, and the Society is at a loss to understand how a building, which is probably three hundred years old, and has been inhabited up to the present time, can have suddenly become so dilapidated as to necessitate its immediate destruction.

It appears that it is in contemplation to enlarge the churchyard, and that it is considered by some persons that the site of the almshouses would form a convenient and inexpensive addition to the churchyard. The Society is informed that there is other land in the vicinity which might be acquired for the purpose of enlarging the churchyard, and they would respectfully submit that the alienation of the land upon which the almshouses are built would be an injustice to the poor, and a disregard of the intentions of the charitable donor of the almshouses. The Committee pleads for the preservation of the aimshouses on the ground of their age, their picturesque appearance, and the increased value they give to the church with which they form at present an effective and harmonious group, and they trust that their remonstrance may not be in vain, and that one of the few remaining antiquities of Lapworth may be spared to gladden the sight of future generations.

I have the honour to be, gentlemen, your obedient servant.

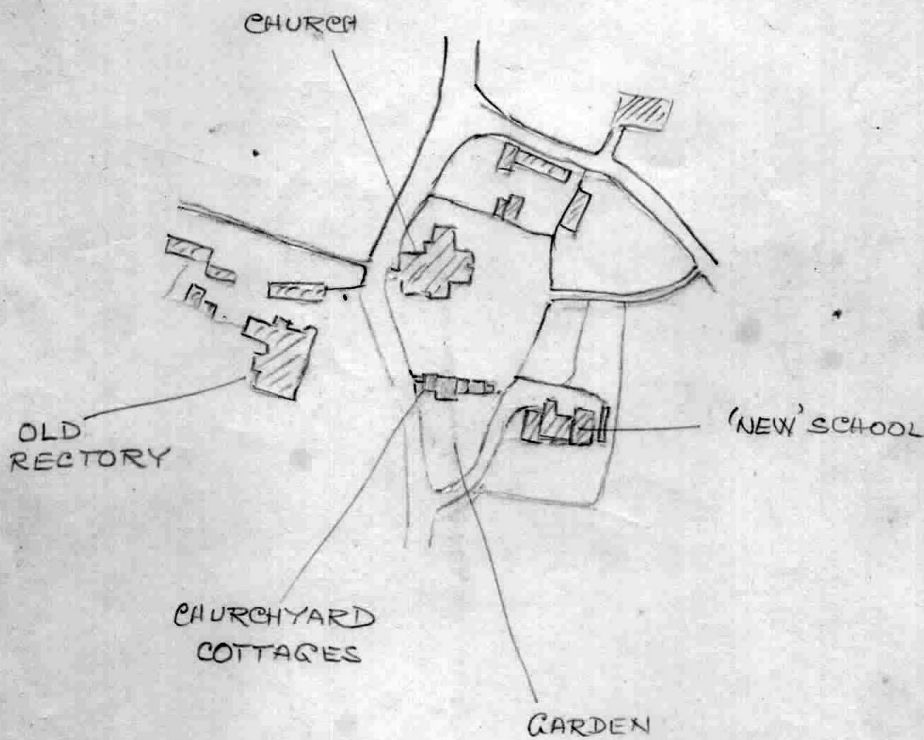
Thackeray Turner Secretary

January 24th 1891

On December 14th, 1891 a notice headed--

'Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890', which came from William Harris, Inspector of Nuisances of the Rural Sanitary Authority in Solihull, required the 'owner' to make the premises fit for human habitation within one month. The cottages apparently remained in their derelict state and on February 12th, 1892 a complaint was made by William Harris before Henry Harvey Chattock Esq that the cottages were 'in a state so dangerous and injurious to health as to be unfit for habitation'. On the 5th of March of that year the 'owners' were summoned to appear before two of Her Majesty's Justices of the Peace in the County of Warwick and 'the use of the premises for the purpose of habitation was prohibited until in the judgment of the Court they were rendered fit for that purpose'. Eventually in that same year the Sanitary Authority itself stepped in and demolished all the buildings, taking away the brick dated 1692 'so that it should be preserved in Solihull by way of proof that it was the sanitary Authority which at last had to carry out the demolition work'. Anyone who wished to see the brick, they said, could do so on application.

Plan showing the position of the church and cottages, in relation to the church, 'new' school.



Tracing from an Ordnance Survey map.

Date — about 1890 it must be between

1825 and 1872 since the 'new' school is

shown. The church and cottages are