



Fig. 10 The Trinity Almshouses. Entry is beneath the central two-storey 'tower' that contains the muniment room. The quadrangle lies in the middle

Trinity Hospital Almshouses, Castle Rising and Wisbech Museum

Our first visit on Saturday 19 July was to the small village of Castle Rising, where opposite the church, lie the Trinity Hospital Almshouses, founded in 1614 by Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton. Made up of twelve houses forming a quadrangle that encloses a pretty garden the entrance is through an arched gateway flanked by towers (Fig. 10). The central path crosses the garden to a main door leading to a meeting room and the chapel. The Northampton arms, a single lion rampant, are set above this doorway in a small brick plaque. Built for twelve women, the almshouses have in recent years been adapted to form six dwellings with modern conveniences, but the external appearance is unchanged; twelve doors face into the garden and can only be about 5 feet high. One of the pensioners introduced us to the history and way of life, and demonstrated the traditional scarlet gown and black conical hat worn to church and on special occasions (Fig. 11)

The meeting room contained a quantity of early 17th-century oak furniture, including two long tables with associated benches, used for occasional communal meals, social gatherings and meetings (Fig. 12). Here and elsewhere we saw the furniture originally provided for each almshouse, a sturdy little oak table about 30 in square and a small panelled backstool; they were supplied with beds too, but we didn't see one. These items are no longer in



Fig. 11 The matron of the Almshouses, Vicky Jackson, wearing her scarlet serge cloak, embroidered with the Northampton lion badge and black pointed hat



Fig. 12 Inside what was the common dining hall with its original table and benches. Note also the different black satin bonnets on the table

daily use, but they are being kept, thankfully, because they are rare survivals. On one wall was the original framed deed under which the Earl had made provision for the almshouses and one of the windows contained the Northampton arms in stained glass.

In the chapel, rebuilt in the 1870s, were 17th-century pews and altar table, while on a side table was a pair of candlesticks designed by C. F. A. Voysey. Above the entrance gateway, reached by steps inside one of the towers, is a counting house, a small panelled room furnished with oak tables and chairs and in one corner a heavy door with several locks led into the treasury or muniment room. This is built into the other tower, again panelled but with a stone vault above, which indicated great security and protection against fire. A substantial iron bound softwood chest made to fit exactly along one wall was the only piece of furniture. This ensemble of counting house and treasury, complete with original panelling and early furniture is a significant and rare example. At the back of the almshouses, a long low building with twelve

small doors was apparently for the pensioners' fuel, not for pigs as was suggested!

Wisbech Museum

We were welcomed to Wisbech Museum by the curator, David Wright, who explained that the Wisbech Museum Society, formed in 1835, had established a collection, acquired a site and raised a public subscription to create the imposing Museum, designed by J. C. Butler, which opened in 1847. At this time Wisbech was in its heyday, with a wealthy population prospering from its commercial position as the capital of the Fens and the inhabitants included a large number of Quakers and social reformers, the most famous of who was Octavia Hill. One of the museum's most important collections relates to Thomas Clarkson (born in Wisbech in 1760) who campaigned against slavery, collecting evidence of the brutal conditions in which Africans were shackled and transported to the West Indies. His graphic drawings showing the way slaves were packed into the ships remain some of the most compelling images of inhumanity to this day. It was largely Clarkson's evidence that was used by William Wilberforce to lead the anti-slavery campaign in Parliament.

The museum is mainly housed in a single gallery with a first floor balcony, not unlike the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and in a similar way all the original cases survive and are packed with a wonderful array of specimens and artefacts, which make this a 3-dimensional encyclopaedia. Much of the collection came in the form of a bequest in 1868 of the Rev. Chauncy Hare Townshend, a local landowner, dilettante and collector of curiosities, the bulk of which he left to the V&A. The items destined for Wisbech were transported from his London house in two large wagons and weighed 15 tons! Amongst the treasures were a boxwood chess set reputed to have been owned by Louis XIV, a Sevres porcelain breakfast service apparently retrieved from Napoleon's camp after Waterloo, and Charles Dickens' manuscript for *Great Expectations*, a truly wonderful item proudly displayed in the library, which contains the original bookcases and collections of the Wisbech Literary Society.

Amongst the museum's amazing collections of artefacts and oddities are Egyptian and Roman antiquities, prehistoric and early archaeological finds, cases full of stuffed birds, samples of minerals, local items illustrating the Fenland flora and fauna, trades and customs, the contents of Mrs Pooley's shop and Post Office which closed in 1946, leaving a delightful collection of packaging and advertising material of the early 20th century, and the important and moving collection of Thomas Clarkson, complete with his travelling box of slavery items which he used to confront people with the horrors of the slave trade.



Fig. 13 A view of the interior of the Museum looking across from the staircase up to the gallery. The wonderful and eclectic range of artefacts is immediately obvious

This is really a museum about museums, one of a very few which survive to show how the early museums were formed and how they displayed their wonders to a population for whom so much of this was novel. Even today, with our instant access to information on just about anything, these objects bring us face to face with the real thing and remain compelling, wonderful and delightful. The sad thing is that the museum is struggling to survive, it runs on a shoestring and it urgently requires a sustainable and secure income to enable it to be fully preserved for future generations to enjoy.

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