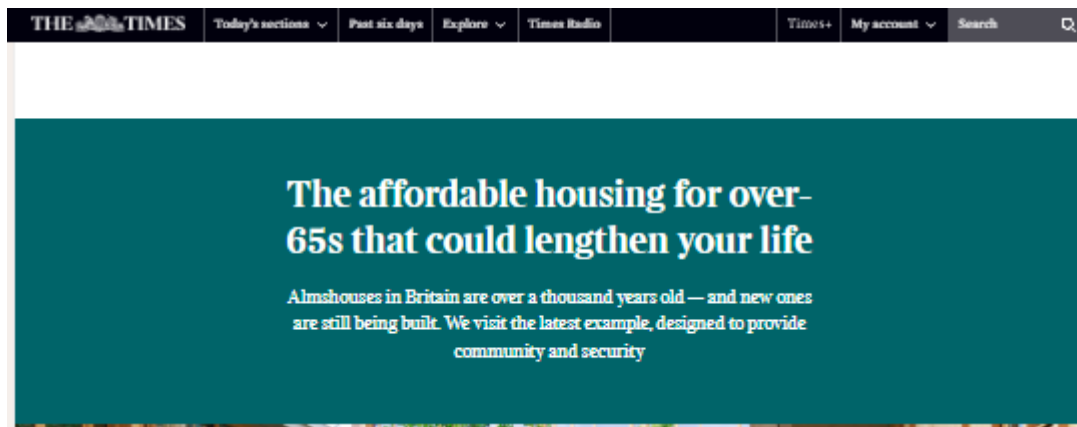


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The affordable housing for over-65s that could lengthen your life

Almshouses in Britain are over a thousand years old — and new ones are still being built. We visit the latest example, designed to provide community and security



Appleby Blue's 57 flats carry on with the courtyard tradition

BENOÎT GROGAN-AVIGNON

[Hugh Graham](#)

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When most people hear the word almshouse, they think back to Victorian or medieval times — rows of pretty cottages around courtyards or greens, built by the church or charities to house the elderly poor. But I attended the opening of a brand new almshouse last week in Bermondsey, southeast London. Not only am I hoping it signals an almshouse revival, I found myself hoping that I end up living in one in my sunset years.

Appleby Blue, the new almshouse, has 57 flats and 65 residents, and is a welcome addition to an ancient British tradition of low-cost housing for the elderly. The oldest almshouse still in existence is thought to be the Hospital of St Oswald in Worcester, founded circa 990 by the Bishop of Worcester to create 21 homes for the sick and the poor. Almshouses flourished in Victorian England, as philanthropists felt it their duty to house retired workers or the elderly destitute.

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But in the 1950s, with the rise of council houses and the welfare state, new supply dried up; philanthropists assumed the state would take over. The ancient ones endure, however: there are 2,600 almshouses in England and 36,000 people living in them, says Nick Phillips, the CEO of the Almshouse Association, which supports almshouse charities.



An almshouse in Milton Abbas, Dorset

ALAMY

Designed in weathered brick by the Stirling prizewinning architects Witherford Watson Mann, Appleby Blue carries on with the courtyard tradition — the 57 flats look down onto an enclosed communal garden filled with foxgloves and a babbling water feature; elderly residents tend to their rhubarbs and strawberries in another rooftop garden. But Appleby Blue is not a cloistered world: the glass-fronted garden room opens directly on to the high street, so elderly residents can sit and watch the world go by. This is a far cry from many retirement homes, which are hidden in dull suburbs, rather than in the heart of a bustling city.

To prevent loneliness, residents' kitchen windows look on to internal glazed walkways — no institutional corridors here — so they can wave at neighbours as they pass; benches outside their doors encourage chatting. Appleby Blue also has a cooking school that is open to the public and residents alike, so the oldies still mix with the outside world.



Residents must be over 65, in financial need and live locally

PHILIP VILE

Appleby Blue is managed by United St Saviour's Charity, which was founded in 1541 and has two other almshouses in London. Residents must be over 65, in financial need and live locally. They pay about £850 a month: most residents' costs are covered by housing benefit. Many residents were empty-nesters living alone in three or four-bedroom council houses, simply because they couldn't find anywhere to downsize. So almshouses are a useful valve to relieve housing pressure: five times as many people are housed if you build homes for elderly people, because it frees up family houses down the chain, said Lord Best, who declared Appleby Blue open at the ceremony last week.

They're also better for the wellbeing of the elderly than social housing, says Phillips. He cites a 2023 study by Bayes Business School that concluded that a 73-year-old male entering the Charterhouse almshouse in London would live 2.5 years longer than his peers from the same socio-economic group.

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The enclosed communal garden is filled with ferns and a babbling water feature

PHILIP VILE

“They encourage the model of the good neighbour, which you sign up to when you come in,” Phillips says. “It creates an environment of companionship to eradicate isolation. And they are led by volunteer trustees who take an interest in the welfare of the residents.”

He cites one example of a resident who stopped coming to social events. When the warden checked up on him and inquired why, the man said he was embarrassed by his dirty clothes — his washing machine had broken, so the charity paid to have it fixed.

With the dearth of council houses, and the government’s depleted coffers, we clearly need more almshouses to help pick up the slack. “There’s a time bomb of older people living in market-rented property — what will happen when they hit retirement?” Stephen Burns, the chair of trustees at the charity, says. “They won’t be able to pay.”



Appleby Blue is designed in weathered brick

PHILIP VILE

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But how do you fund new almshouses? This one was developed by United St Saviour’s Charity in collaboration with the developer JTRE, which recently completed Triptych Bankside, a development of luxury flats in the borough. Instead of building the required quota of affordable housing in its luxury scheme, JTRE came to an agreement with Southwark council to develop this almshouse on the

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site of a derelict care home, on land owned by the local authority. JTRE now has plans to build another almshouse at 220 Blackfriars Road as part of a mixed-use commercial-resi scheme.

It's a model that should be replicated, says Phillips, who says there is a revival of interest in almshouses in recent years, as housing pressures increase — he estimates 400 were built last year. The Almshouse Association is campaigning for almshouses to be recognised by the government as a form of affordable housing under the National Planning Policy Framework.



A lounge overlooking the garden room in Appleby Blue

PHILIP VILE

Now we just need a new generation of philanthropists to step up and fund more of them — where are all the future Peabodys and Guinneses? “I read an article about Jeff Bezos going to the moon and billionaires wanting immortality,” says Chris Wilson, the CEO of Southwark Charities. “If they want immortality, fund an almshouse. Your name will live for ever.”

Indeed, this new almshouse is named after Dorothy Appleby, a pub landlady who died in 1682, and left her money to the poor through United St Saviour's, all those centuries ago. Cheers to Dorothy.