

**The history of Peterson House.  
Earlier known as Church Houses or Dame Clayton's Almshouse.**



Because of the traditional name of "Dame Clayton's Almshouse" we must assume they were erected and funded by Dame Bridget Clayton, the wife of Sir Thomas Clayton MD MP, Warden of Merton College Oxford or more probably erected by Sir Thomas in memory of her. She died in Oxford 11 December 1687 at the age of about 76 and was buried in Merton College Chapel. Her will has not been found. Sir Thomas was the owner of The Manor of the Vache from 1662 till his death on 4 October 1693 when he was succeeded by his son James Clayton.

No documents or deeds have been found by me or other researchers, for any endowment from Dame Clayton for the cost of the almshouses and their occupants, nor any reference in the Vache estate deeds to their existence but they were presumably built between 1662 and 1687 or shortly after. This was a time of particular zeal for founding almshouses and schools. Almost a dozen almshouses were founded in Bucks in the seventeenth century. The nearest other one is that in Old Amersham founded by William Drake in 1657.

The first firm record of the Chalfont St Giles Church Houses is in the Vestry minute book for 1782 – 1800 (*Ref Centre for Bucks Studies PR35/8/1*). On 24 October 1787 a “Memorandum” is written into the book between the Minutes. It is worth quoting this in full.

*“Be it remembered that the Rev Mr Hare of Herstmonceux Sussex did by letter dated 21 May 1787 freely give up and transfer the three poor houses situate near the church yard in Chalfont St Giles Bucks with the gardens and appurtenances thereto belonging to the Minister and churchwardens of the said parish for the time being as trustees for the use of such poor families belonging to the said parish as they shall think the most worthy of them upon the condition of their being prepared and made fit for habitation at the expense of the said parish in general.*

*In consequence whereof it is hereby agreed unanimously by a vestry held for that purpose after legal notice given thereof that the three houses be repaired as soon as possible in a strong sufficient but frugal manner and that Mr William Clark Draper of Chalfont St Giles aforesaid is hereby decided and appointed to inspect and direct the repairs that will be necessary and to keep an account of the same when requested thereto.*

*In testimony of the above resolution and agreement we have here unto set our hands this 24th day of October 1787*

*W C Jones*

*John Anthony*

*Peter Parker*

*Ben Child*

*Benj Buckmaster*

*William Clark*

*Jos Buckmaster*

*John Weedon*

*Henry Hawks*

*John Hill*

*“*

Some 47 years later there is essentially a rerun of this when a memorandum dated 10 November 1824 is written in the Churchwarden's accounts. (*Ref Centre for Bucks Studies PR 35/5/1.*) This states that in a letter of 21st May 1787 the Church Houses were given to the minister and churchwardens in trust by the Rev. Robert Hare of Herstmonceux, Sussex a canon of Winchester Cathedral. This Robert Hare had been the owner of the Manor of the Vache until 1777 when he sold the manor and most of the land to Admiral Palliser, however he retained all of Pollards Wood and could have retained some other property, although Church Houses is the only case that has come up. The estate had descended to him from his father Rev Francis Hare who had purchased it in 1734 from descendants of Thomas Clayton.

The churchwardens memorandum quotes the actual wording of the 1787 letters from Hare to and is in response to one from Rev. W Jones it is clear from the wording that in 1787 the Minister and churchwardens had believed the Church Houses to be still owned by Hare.

Hare writes "With regard to the poorhouses, in whatever situation they were (sic) I would certainly not wish to make any advantage of them and therefore I shall readily acquiesce in giving them up to the Minister and churchwardens if the parish will repair them as trustees for me to appoint any poor people to inhabit them."

In a subsequent letter, also quoted, Hare writes that in the case of a future vacancy "that you will fill it up with whoever you shall think most deserving". This was interpreted by the Vestry as the Church Houses were to be for the use of such poor persons as the minister, with the agreement of the churchwardens, might think proper to be tenants rent-free; on condition that the parish should keep the premises in tenantable repair. However Hare still did not provide an endowment, and neither had Dame Bridget Clayton. The parish were therefore left with a funding problem.

(For reference Rev R Hare died 1797 Rev M Jones was the curate of Chalfont St Giles between 1759 and 1792 and Rev W Jones was his son and was curate between 1792 and 1816.)

In addition to the financial problem there was a political issue between the minister and the churchwardens. The minister wanted to be sure that only he could say who could tenant the cottages and not the parishioners. So there was a note added to the end of the 10 Nov.1824 memorandum to clarify this. In addition he had personally paid for a workshop to be erected for one of the tenants so that he could clearly be seen as having power over the cottages and their tenants.

This memorandum of 1824 also gives the earliest physical description we have of the building. It is described as three tenements under one roof of brick and with two storeys, built in the 17th century, standing next to the parochial almshouses by the churchyard. It is clear that this property did not form part of the parish poor law provision and was not affected by the 1834 new Poor Law which formed Unions of parishes. (*See note below.*)

In 1836 the Charity Commissioners scheduled the houses as a charity. At this date the "Charity Commissioners'" role was merely collecting information about the charities that existed based upon returns by each parish and then listing them. They did not control or approve Charities, these powers came in with later legislation. It is clear that the Minister and churchwardens believed it was a charity even though there was no trust deed or endowment.

The parish had to find the funds to maintain the houses and clearly found it difficult to do this and to put in necessary improvements as the public health requirements increased over time. There was no proper water supply nor sanitation. There was only one earth closet for the three houses together.

The situation remained like this until 1924 when the 3 tenements were condemned as unfit for habitation.

After having a survey made the parish decided to sell the building. This proved to be a long process because of the legal difficulties caused by the lack of title deeds, the questionable charitable status and the unknown ownership of a path which ran from the Merlin's Cave yard, behind the house garden and at the back of the shops to the lych gate.

However it was eventually all resolved and the Church Houses and half the width of the path, (because it could not be determined who were the owners of the path), were sold on 17 July 1925 to a Mr William Munro Tapp LLD of London for £510. The money received was then used by the parish to endow a new charitable trust fund.

W M Tapp was a wealthy lawyer and company director from London but with great interest in the arts and archaeology. It is not known why he should purchase the building.

In 1925 Amersham RDC approved building alterations and improved sanitation. The District Surveyor's report of 11 June 1925 notes the alterations are for the building to be used as a Post Office. ( I have not confirmed that this happened.)

Although W M Tapp died in Jan 1936 leaving a large proportion of his estate to endow a scholarship at Caius College, the death duties on his estate were contested by the Crown up to the High Court of Appeal and were not resolved until 1958.

The Church Houses appear from a local directory to still being used in 1952 as three separate small dwellings when they were called 1, 2, and 3 Church Cottages.

### **History from 1956 to the current time**

The earliest record is from Feb. 1956 when change of use to offices for an estate agency plus some alterations to Nos. 2 and 3 are approved. (CDC Planning application AM 56/115.) At this time the owner is J A Horne who gives his address as "The Estate Office" High St, Chalfont St Giles. This appears to be the lodge house at the start of Stratton Chase Drive. I do not know if there were any other owners in between Trapp's executors and J A Horne.

However in July of the same year Horne changed his mind and said he was only going ahead with the changes to No. 3 which included a new larger front door.

There were further changes of mind because in Nov 1957 approval is given for a new window to No. 2 to replace its front door. There is also a larger rear extension to No. 3. (CDC AM 57/1312).

A couple of years later there are further internal changes and alterations to the rear extension. The original door to No 1 still remains, the door to No 3 becomes the main entrance. The owner at this time is stated to be Ian James Hobbs but still of "The Estate Office". (CDC AM 59/832.)

In 1964 permission is given for conversion of 2 cottages to form a flat on the first floor and 3 offices on the ground floor. The offices were still used for an estate agent. It is in this change that the door to No 1 is removed and the main entrance moved to its current location. The windows are also changed to their current size and locations. (CDC AM 64/203.) The owners are given as "Deerland Property Co." of East Moseley.

In Feb. 1968 there was an application for change of use of the ground floor to a doctors' surgery. This was made by Dr M G Webber and Dr R H D Miles as prospective purchasers. The owner is stated to be D Allen c/o Hamnet Raffety, 7 Burkes Road, Beaconsfield. Dr Webber wrote to the council on 19 March 1968 saying that the application is now a matter of urgency as: "We are informed by the solicitors acting for our late partner's estate that we may have our access to our practice premises at South Lodge withdrawn at any moment. We have 3000 patients who rely upon our service so we need urgent resolution." The application was approved 4 April 1968. (CDC AM 68/428.)

In 1975 the building was purchased by Dr M G Webber and Dr R H D Miles to continue to be the doctors' surgery before the current surgery in Town Field Lane was built in 1981.

In 1975 temporary change of use of the first floor flat also to be used as a doctors' surgery is granted. (CDC AM 75/181.)

In May 1978 Drs Miles and Webber gave to the Parish Church a small piece of the garden of “Church Cottage” as it was then called. This was because this piece of garden contained a number of graves and it was more appropriate for it to be part of the Churchyard.

In 1982 change of use back to flat and offices for Peterson Homes was granted. (CDC CH 82/913.) (*I am not sure if Petersons Homes were the legal purchaser or whether it was Mr P K Brock.*)

In 1983 a single story rear extension for office use was added. (CDC CH 83/1779 and CH 83/2007.)

In 1993 Change of use of ground floor to an osteopath’s practice was granted. (CDC CH 93/0329.)

In 1995 Change of use of ground floor back to office. (CDC CH 95/0798).

In 2002 Change of use of ground floor to retail was granted to enable a Health and Beauty Clinic to open. (CDC CH 2002/0947.)

(*In 2014 I received an email from Susan Brock who is living in the property which was purchased by her father P K Brock of Little Stratton. Stratton Chase Drive in 1983.*)

**The building was listed Grade II on 17 March 1982.** It is described as:-“Former charity cottages of C17 brick with old tiled roof. Formerly 3 cottages. Three bays and 2 storeys. Rendered plinth, band course and English bond brickwork. Central bay with bracketed and open pedimented doorcase. Later 3-light barred casements, 2-light beside door. At rear 2 storey gabled extension and at each end double shafted stacks of old thin bricks”.

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#### **NOTE regarding the poor house and workhouse for the parish of Chalfont St Giles.**

The original parochial “Alms Houses” or Poor House referred to above together with the Work House were demolished around 1836-40. According to H A Clarke, in his 1961 History of the Parish Church of St Giles, they consisted of ten tenements or rooms and occupied about 60 foot of frontage abutting on the churchyard. They and the workhouse, which is mentioned separately but whose location is not defined, were sold. By a Deed Poll 14 February 1837 The Guardians of the Poor and the churchwardens conveyed to William Morten of Amersham for £150 “those five cottages occupied as 10 dwellings then and for many years past called the Almshouses situate in Chalfont St Giles fronting the Town Street on the NW and abutting the churchyard on the SE”. (Source CBS/AR 70/69 1879 Abstract of Title of late Edwin Hedgwick.) Their site is now occupied by shops, which appear to be of 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> Century construction.



**Sources other than noted above.**

*"A history of the Parish Church of St Giles" by H Adams Clarke. 1961*

*"Victoria County History, Buckinghamshire" Vol 3 pp 184 -192*

*"Newsletter of Friends of Chalfont St Giles Parish Church" Ken Lees. Issue 18 and 19, September 2000.*

*Amersham RDC records at Centre for Bucks Studies.*

*Planning records. Chiltern District Council.*

*Chalfont St Giles Church records at Centre for Bucks Studies.*

*Information from Dr Andrew Weber.*

John Dodd

Revised 3 Feb. 2017