

The Rector versus the rebellious Almsman

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Francis Winfield was the bane of Rector Simcox's life. Henry Simcox (Rector from 1889 to 1901) was perturbed throughout his incumbency with various problems relating to the "slipshod" running of the Ewelme Trust's affairs in general, and the neglect in particular by the Masters of the Almshouses (the Regius Professors of Medicine at Oxford). Simcox complained to the ailing Master Sir Henry Acland that due to this neglect Frank Winfield [1822-1898] had become an additional burden he did not need. Simcox insisted it was the Master's duty to enforce almshouse discipline not his, and he deplored the lack of interest and personal visits of the Masters. (Although not an easy journey from Oxford before motorisation, he did offer lunch if they made the effort!)

In 1898 he wrote to the new Master, Sir John Burdon-Sanderson protesting that for over 2 years Frank Winfield had allowed his daughter Rhoda* [1848-1920], and her illegitimate teenage daughter Lucy, to sleep in his bedroom! (*This Rhoda should not be confused with a younger Rhoda Winfield born in 1853, the blameless daughter of James and Sarah Winfield). Although wives had been allowed into the almshouses for over 50 years, when their husbands died, they were evicted and destined for the workhouse or a dutiful daughter's home. Thus, Frank Winfield was overstepping the mark. *"Not only is this indecent, but the daughter is dirty in her habits and the house stinks."* Frank was also breaking the regulations – *"He was moreover earning regular pay as a shepherd, in addition to his pay as an almsman, which is quite contrary to the design of the Foundation and keeping this dirty woman and her illegitimate daughter in comparative idleness."* To top it all Frank neglected his almsman's duties – *"He very seldom came to church even on Sunday evensong!"*



One of Rector Simcox's proposals was implemented in the early 1900's. Sister Badcock, a qualified nurse was appointed to care for the Almsmen. The photo shows her outside her pretty cottage in Ewelme.

The Rector was probably relieved to bury Frank Winfield in October 1898, but the problem did not go away. In desperation Simcox wrote to Sir John the following month reiterating that Rhoda and Lucy having lived at least 2 years in the almshouse were still there! *“If you had gone into that house anytime during the past two years, I venture to say you would as soon, or sooner, have gone into a pigsty, so offensive was the smell of stale dirt; other people did go in and when they asked ‘Where is the doctor? Where are the authorities?’ the only possible reply was ‘The authorities are away at Oxford, and there is no one in authority here.’ I myself should be surprised to hear that Dr Winslow had ever entered Frank Wingfield’s house, the old man had, I believe, never called him in. I think the fact that Mr Morrell [Trust solicitors] did not know of Rhoda Wingfield’s living (and sleeping) in the house with her father, is a proof how little the authorities know of what goes on in the almshouses. I do not think that, if you had known Rhoda Wingfield’s character, you could have sanctioned her living in the almshouse.”* The incorrigible family saga continued, as in January 1899 Lucy gave birth to her own illegitimate daughter Dorothy and in 1901 to another – Agnes. Our records do not show when Rhoda and Lucy were eventually evicted, but in 1901 they both lived at 41, The Hill – Rhoda defined as a charwoman. They seem to have remained unmarried, but Rhoda’s granddaughter Agnes married Joseph White and died in 1981 in Hounslow.

The discipline of the Almsmen was not Rector Simcox’s only concern. He also tirelessly campaigned to restore the provisions of the old Statutes that appointed a separate chaplain to oversee the almsmen. He also wanted a nurse engaged to care for them. He suggested the present Nurse’s Cottage, and another dwelling, now demolished, further down the hill, would provide housing for both Nurse and Chaplain. In addition, he argued that the medieval Founder’s original intention was the provision of a Ewelme Grammar School with a Grammar Master in the Grammar Master’s house.



The Final Straw came in October 1900 when Simcox received a letter from Vice Chancellor Sir William Anson stating the Trustees were *“constantly embarrassed”* by his efforts to override the revised Scheme of 1860 and *“to pursue a barren controversy was futile”*. Henry Simcox had burnt himself out. He resigned the Living and his Trusteeship, but before doing so he wrote one last hurrah to Oxford on June 16th, 1901, helpfully costing his innovative proposals for paying the Master, additional Chaplain, Nurse, (plus a Medical Attendant to assist her), the ‘Poor Men’ and Clerk totalling £2. 10sh per day or £910. 10s per annum – easily achievable from the Trust’s income. He died in Worcester in 1905 aged 66. but was buried in his old battleground in Ewelme churchyard.

Photograph on left: Sir William Osler

Sadly, Simcox just missed seeing some of his sensible proposals fulfilled. In 1904 Sir William Osler was appointed as Master. He was the first Master to regularly drive from Oxford ‘in a motor’ and with Lady Osler took a keen interest in the Almshouses. In the first decade of the 20th century a qualified Nurse was appointed, the first probably being Sister Babcock. The Grammar School was not re-established, but at a meeting of the School Managers in 1907 a scheme was submitted for the provision of Scholarships for opportunities to higher education for able pupils between 12 and 14 from the Trust’s elementary schools at Ewelme, Marsh Gibbon, Ramridge and Cannock. They would be chosen by the headmasters to take an exam to qualify for a scholarship. The scheme was refined, and the Ewelme Trust funds bursaries to financially assist ‘Ewelme Scholars’ for this purpose to this day.