



**REVIEW OF CHELMSFORD AVENUE ALMSHOUSES
FOR POTENTIAL CONSERVATION AREA
DESIGNATION**



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I INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE AREA

The Dowsett Almshouses are located on the east side of Chelmsford Avenue, towards its southern end. Eight single-storey houses are arranged around a courtyard which contains the plinth of a sundial erected to commemorate the benefaction of the almshouses by Thomas Dowsett, the first Mayor of Southend, in 1904. The buildings are still in use today as almshouses. Two two-storey pairs of semi-detached houses sit either side of the single-storey dwellings, which were also part of the original planned development, though appear to have passed into private ownership. The buildings are not listed or locally listed, and there are no other heritage assets within the setting.

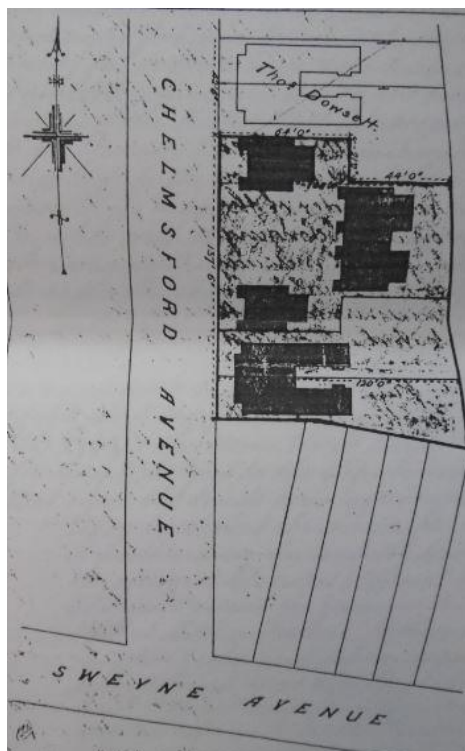
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council have commissioned this initial review of the area in order to assess whether it has architectural and historic interest sufficient to warrant designation as a Conservation Area. This assessment has included a site visit to the area, initial research in the Essex Records Office and desk-based research using online and both published and unpublished documentary sources. The report provides an overview of the history of the area, followed by a character assessment which identifies the positive elements of the area and any threats which it faces. Lastly, conclusions are made as to the potential for designation, any other recommendations regarding heritage and, if designation is proposed, the potential boundary is plotted using GIS software. The review has been prepared by Purcell, specialist heritage consultants experienced in the review and appraisal of Conservation Areas.

2 HISTORY

In 1892 a Town Council was officially formed in Southend, replacing the old Local Board. The first Mayor elected was Thomas Dowsett. He owned much land in the town through his company, the Southend-on-Sea Estates Company, and was a philanthropist, donating money to schools and the hospital.¹ One of his philanthropic gestures was to establish almshouses on Chelmsford Avenue.

Conveyance Plans from 1904 detail a list of Trustees who had been appointed to oversee the running of the almshouses:

- The Reverend Edward Hamilton, Minister of Cliff Town Congregational Church
- The Reverend John Moore Fergusson, Minister of St. George's Presbyterian Church
- The Reverend James McCleery, Minister of Avenue Baptist Church
- Thomas Dowsett the Younger, glass and china dealer
- Walter Bradley Dowsett, fancy warehouseman
- Herbert Arthur Dowsett, ironmonger and house furnisher
- Arthur Herbery Smith, baker
- Robert Langton, solicitor²



Conveyance plan for Dowsett's almshouses, ERO
TS 409/1

¹ Yearsley, 2001, pp.50-51

² ERO, TS 409/1

The Trustees had a duty to insure the properties, maintain them in good condition, pay all taxes and rates, and let them for periods not exceeding 21 years at the best rent that could be obtained.³ The Trustees would also pay each almshouse seven shillings and sixpence per month during December, January and February (presumably for additional heating costs in the winter months). People had to fulfil certain conditions to be eligible for residence in the almshouses:

- 1) *A husband and wife or two women to each almshouse;*
- 2) *Each of the almspeople must be the age of sixty-five years at least;*
- 3) *Each must have resided in the Parish of Prittlewell (now within the aforesaid Borough) for ten years at least preceding the time of appointment;*
- 4) *Each person appointed must have an income from investments or guaranteed by third persons of not less than five shillings weekly but otherwise all those appointed must be poor persons of good character who, from age, ill-health, accident or infirmity are wholly or in part unable to maintain themselves by their own exertions;*
- 5) *Each must be a member of one of the Protestant Free Churches in the said Parish of Prittlewell;*⁴

The architects were Burles and Harries, who appear to have worked a lot in Southend during the period (over 1000 records appear in a search for 'Burles and Harris' on the Essex Records Office catalogue). Two of their buildings are locally listed: Southchurch Hall School and The Cornucopia.

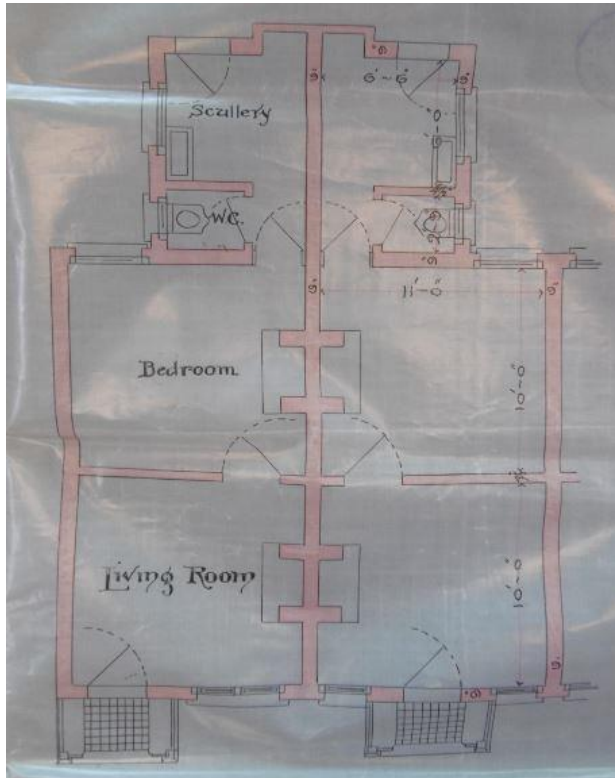
Burles and Harris' original plans of 1902 show each of the single storey houses entered into a living room, which interconnected with a bedroom (both heated by fireplaces), which in turn connected to a scullery and WC. Presumably it was intended that cooking was carried out over one of the fireplaces as there does not seem to have been provision for a stove or range in the scullery. The elevations show the decorative porches which still survive today, though a cartouche design is sketched in the gables above which no longer survive (it is not known if these were ever built) and leaded lights to the front doors which do not match the stained glass panels in the doors today. A seat and tree are shown in the centre of the garden, with the sundial to the west.



*Original design of the external elevations of the almshouses,
ERO D/BC 114/12/3367*

³ ERO, TS 409/2

⁴ Ibid.

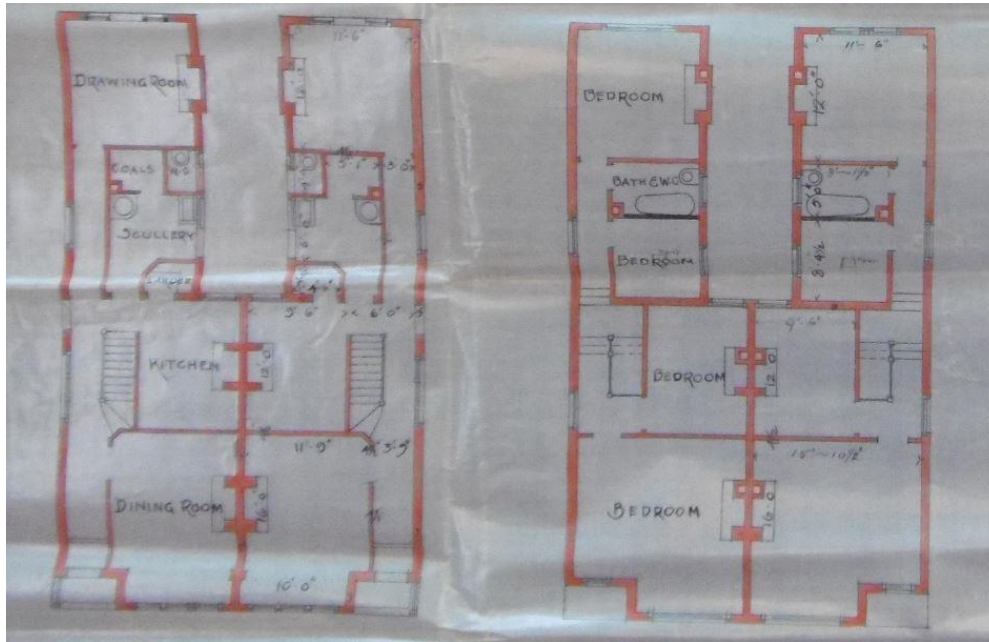


Original plan of the almshouses, ERO D/BC 1/4/12/3367

The semi-detached houses had more accommodation: a dining room, kitchen, larder, scullery, WC, coal store and drawing room on the ground floor, with four bedrooms and a bathroom on the upper floor. These seem to be very large for typical almshouse accommodation, so it is not clear if these were to be let out as almshouses or not (minute books in the Essex Records Office may provide details). They were certainly built at the same time and owned by Thomas Dowsett; the conveyance plan detailing the Trustees includes at least the southern pair of houses, so perhaps they were for rental to the wider public.



Original design for the external elevation of the houses adjacent to the almshouses, ERO D/BC 1/4/12/3367



Original plan of the houses adjacent to the almshouses, ERO D/BC 1/4/12/3367

The houses were constructed in 1904 and an opening ceremony took place on 8th September, attended by the Trustees and other local dignitaries. The proceedings included a hymn specially composed for the occasion and the unveiling of the sundial with the dedication inscription as follows:

TO THE GLORY OF GOD
AND THE MEMORY OF THE
LONG AND BENEFICENT REIGN OF
QUEEN VICTORIA
THESE ALMSHOUSES WERE ERECTED
BY
THOMAS DOWSETT
J.P. FOR ESSEX AND THIS BOROUGH

The almshouses have continued in the same use until this day and are now administered by the Dowsett Almshouses Trust. If the semi-detached houses were ever used as almshouses, these have passed into private ownership since and have undergone alterations such as replacement windows and doors. The almshouses themselves have had a few changes, such as replacement windows (though in a good matching style) and glazing to the doors. They have also been extended to the rear, presumably to provide proper kitchen facilities. However, they retain the original character of their frontages arranged around their courtyard garden.

3 CHARACTER APPRAISAL

3.1 ALMSHOUSES

3.1.1 Positive Features

The almshouses are attractive, modestly sized cottages with a consistent design. Their single-storey size and arrangement around a small courtyard garden sets them apart from the rest of the street, which is formed of semi-detached houses close to the street behind small front gardens.

The gabled porches with latticework joinery above and to the sides are key features. The built-in benches within the porches are also an interesting feature and are a nice way to encourage sociability between the residents. Dentils to the main cornices and to those in the gables also add interest.

The tall roofs, with red/brown tiles, dividing ridges between properties and prominent chimneys are also a key design feature. Leaded lights to the windows mirror the original design. The frames are uPVC replacements, though of a good quality with flat frames, so this is not very obvious. The original doors appear to have survived, though with stained glass glazing replacing the original leaded lights. The red brick walls have not been painted or rendered over.

The boundary wall of red brick with concrete capping appears to be made of more modern materials though is good quality and well-kept. This is also true of the railings topping the wall. Together with the hedge behind the wall, this forms a pleasant boundary enclosing the garden. The grass and planting in the garden are attractive. The sundial with its original inscription is an interesting feature, though has lost the actual sundial from the plinth.



The almshouses in their courtyard garden setting

3.1.2 Threats

Apart from the loss (or perhaps removal for safety reasons) of the sundial, the plinth is in need of some minor repointing work and is also leaning slightly. The iron bar which held the sundial on top is rusty and would need replacing before the sundial was added back on. The base below is rendered in concrete, possibly over brick, and this is cracked and breaking away at the corners.

As mentioned, the windows are uPVC. Though the design of these is appropriate, the material is not usually suitable for historic buildings as it prevents the building from breathing and can exacerbate any issues with damp. The stained glass to the doors is also non-original but is not unattractive. Window and door changes have been done in a co-ordinated programme, which is beneficial in retaining the character of the properties as a group.



uPVC windows, though of a good quality, and stain glass glazing to the doors. Recycling boxes are also seen on the built-in benches



Holes seen at the base of this wall indicate an injected damp proof course

The extensions to the rear which can be seen from the street are utilitarian in design, with grey render that contrasts with the well-built brick of the original houses.

Minor ad-hoc additions are diluting the character of the buildings to a small extent. These include wall mounted lighting, hanging planters, handrails and aerials. Electricity boxes beside each front door are incongruous. Though small, recycling boxes placed in porches are also unattractive.

There are small filled in holes towards the base of one of the properties, which indicates an injected damp proof course. This is an inappropriate solution to damp in historic buildings due to the possibility of it trapping moisture within the building and reducing its breathability.

Paving to the paths around the site is a mix of fairly utilitarian tarmac, paving slabs or concrete.

3.2 SEMI-DETACHED HOUSES

3.2.1 Positive Features

The character of the two pairs of semi-detached houses has been diluted to a greater degree than the almshouses, though still retain elements of their original design, which compliments the almshouses. Red brick quoins and plinths, with rendered upper floors were originally used. The gables with dentil cornices mirror those above the porches on the almshouses, though at a larger scale. The porches to the houses also mirror design details of the almshouses, including a curved brace over the porch and similar original doors, as well as the dentils to the cornice. The southernmost house may retain its original timber gate within the boundary wall.

3.2.2 Threats

It is not immediately obvious that these houses are all part of the same scheme as the almshouses because later changes mask the original design details. The northern pair of houses has been altered to a greater degree than the southern ones. Their brick quoins and plinth have been painted or rendered over and the right-hand porch has lost its curved brace, side railings and supporting post. The windows on all four houses have been replaced with white uPVC windows. Sometimes these replicate the form of the original windows, e.g. with sliding sashes on the ground floor containing glazing bars on the upper sash only, though often these have deviated from the original design.

On the northern houses, both properties have converted all or part of their front garden to driveway, with the loss of the boundary wall.



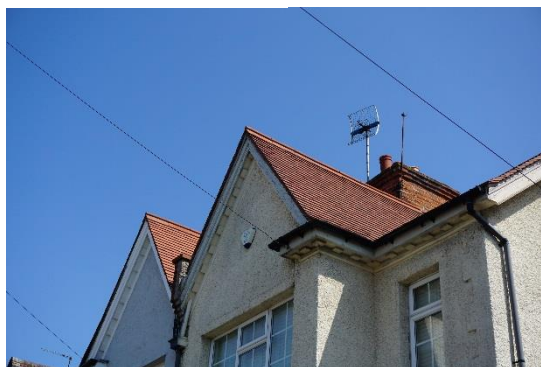
Semi-detached houses to the north which have been rendered/painted. One porch retains its curved brace while the other does not



Pair of semi-detached houses to the south which have undergone less change than those to the north



Porches on an almshouse and on a semi-detached house, showing the same doors and curved brace details



The same dentil detail on gables on the almshouses and the semi-detached houses

4 RECOMMENDATIONS AND POTENTIAL BOUNDARY

The Dowsett Almshouses are attractive cottage style almshouses which have survived relatively unaltered and retain their original character. They have a strong historical association with Thomas Dowsett, the first mayor of Southend, and this association continues today as the buildings are still administered by the same Trust. They also still continue in their original use. The buildings also have an association with local architects Burles and Harris, who appear to have been prolific in Southend at the time.

The semi-detached houses either side were built in the same scheme and have the same association with Thomas Dowsett and Burles and Harris. They still retain architectural details which mirror those on the almshouses. However, they have been altered to a greater extent than the almshouses themselves and do not appear to have ever been in the same almshouse use.

After initial assessment, it is therefore recommended that a Conservation Area is designated to cover the almshouses in their garden setting. These buildings are the priority for designation in this area.

The pairs of semi-detached houses either side which, though less well preserved, were also part of the original scheme by Dowsett, could also be considered for designation. Conservation Area designation could assist in controlling changes to the buildings, to protect against inappropriate changes and with the gradual evolution over time to reverse any unsuitable work already carried out.

A proposed boundary has been submitted with this report which shows the recommended boundary and potential additional boundary to include the semi-detached properties.

A more detailed character appraisal should be conducted in line with other Conservation Area Appraisals adopted and being updated for Southend, during which the extent of the boundary will be established. Key items in the Essex Record Office have been viewed, though minute books and administrative papers are also available, which could add detail to the story of the buildings' construction. These documents may assist in informing whether the semi-detached houses should also be part of the Conservation Area designation. Contacting the Dowsett Almshouse Trust may also yield further information about the buildings, including history, as well as details of more recent works, such as the replacement of the windows. The Trust should be the key consultee in the designation of a Conservation Area for the buildings.

An Article 4 Direction should be considered for the area, particularly for the replacement of windows and doors, and the rendering/painting of the exteriors. Potential items which would require planning permission could include:

All Buildings

- *The installation of hardstanding for vehicles.*
- *The alteration, demolition or construction of a means of enclosure which fronts a highway (walls, gates, fences, etc.).*
- *The enclosing of recessed porches which front a highway.*

- *The rendering of any brickwork which fronts a highway (other forms of cladding already need planning permission).*
- *Painting over facing brickwork of any part of a building which fronts a highway.*
- *The alteration of any window or door visible from a highway.*
- *Re-roofing with different materials.*

APPENDIX A: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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