

# The almshouses

Compton's almshouses stood on the edge of the common by Polsted Lane on the site of what is now Compton Cottage. There were seven dwellings under one roof, one separate detached cottage and about an acre of ground that made up their gardens.<sup>1</sup> They were are part of the parish's provision for its paupers until the late 1830s.

## Poor relief

Arrangements for relieving the poor had been established in the last years of Queen Elizabeth's reign when the new Poor Law Relief Act of 1601 made each parish responsible for supporting its own paupers by raising a property rate. This parochial system created great variations in the provision for the poor because of differing local conditions and because some parishes were significantly richer than others. Consequently, a patchwork of solutions grew up over the years: charities that provided food, clothes or fuel were often established by the will of deceased parishioners whilst living accommodation was sometimes given in the form of almshouses or parish workhouses.



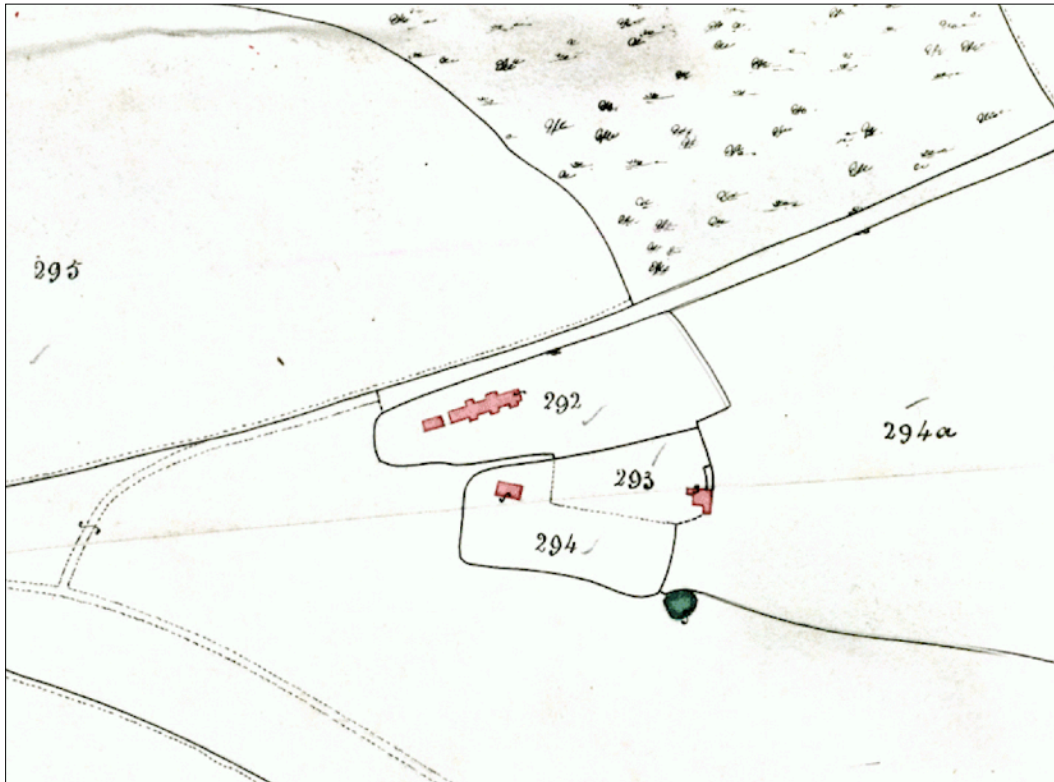
*Compton almshouses painted by John Hassell in 1824. They stood on the site of what is now Compton Cottage in Polsted Lane (plot 292 on the tithe map).*

The Compton almshouses provided a basic standard of living, even by the low level of the early nineteenth century. Hassell's painting of 1824, shows a row of humble, single-storey, thatched dwellings in a poor state of repair, each with an external chimney stack. They were certainly not offering the same standard of accommodation

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<sup>1</sup> Valuation of the almshouses 31<sup>st</sup> Jan 1838, ref: COM/17/7, Surrey History Centre.

that was provided at Abbot's Hospital in Guildford and Wyatt's Almshouses in Meadow near Godalming, both of which were established by wealthy benefactors. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that the Compton almshouses had any kind of endowment to support them and they were probably maintained by money from the parish poor rates.



*An extract from the Compton tithe map of 1839 showing the almshouses on plot 292. The school had not yet been built.*

### **The inhabitants**

As a part of the parish's provision for its paupers, the houses were home to some of the poorest people in the parish. They have left no record and it is not until the earliest census returns of 1841, which was after the time that they were a part of the parish provision for the poor, that we can gain an idea of who actually lived there.

Although the returns list all the inhabitants of Compton at that time, it is not possible to identify the inhabitants of the almshouses as very few house names are recorded. However, the tithe survey of 1841 does give the name of one occupier, James Colpus. He can be found in the census records and they show that he lived with his two adult children and a lodger. Another document, a property valuation of the same year, gives us the name of John Withall who, with his wife, Sarah, had five young children and John's father living with him. A crowded household indeed in a tiny almshouse cottage.

Both Colpus and Withall were agricultural labourers and so had some of the lowest wages in the rural economy. They were not living in any degree of comfort. Indeed, the Withall household of eight people in the tiny space of an old almshouse cottage must have been extremely and unpleasantly cramped. The household of eight people described by Mr Best (see below) could well have been that of John & Sarah Withall.

By the late 1830s, the almshouses were no longer a part of the provision for the poor and anyone who needed relief in future was sent to the Union workhouse. We know, therefore, that those who were living in the almshouses after 1837, included Colpus and Withall families, were living on their own resources.

PLACE	HOUSES		NAMES of each Person who abode therein the preceding Night.	AGE and SEX		PROFESSION, TRADE, EMPLOYMENT, or of INDEPENDENT MEANS.	Where Born	
	Uninhabited or Building	Inhabited		Males	Females		Whether Born in same County	Whether Born in Scotland, Ireland, or Foreign Parts.
			Margtha Etherington	65			g	
			Geo Toft	45		Ag Lab	g	
			Sarah d <sup>r</sup>	40			g	
			John d <sup>r</sup>	20			g	
			Daniel d <sup>r</sup>	18			g	
			William d <sup>r</sup>	12			g	
			James d <sup>r</sup>	11			g	
			Robt d <sup>r</sup>	10			g	
			Karisth d <sup>r</sup>	8			g	
			Georges d <sup>r</sup>	6			g	
			Denah Goddard	50			g	
			Robt Turner	24		Ag Lab	g	
			Lucy d <sup>r</sup>	22			g	
			Goddard Geo	20		Ag Lab	g	
			William Goddard	15		D	g	
			Amos d <sup>r</sup>	11		D	g	
			John Withall	45		D <sup>r</sup>	g	
			Frederick d <sup>r</sup>	13		D <sup>r</sup>	g	
			Richard d <sup>r</sup>	12			g	
			William d <sup>r</sup>	60			g	
			Sarah d <sup>r</sup>	15			g	
			Mary d <sup>r</sup>	11			g	
			Sarah d <sup>r</sup>	9			g	
			Sarah d <sup>r</sup>	7			g	
			James Lowe	45		Ag Lab	g	
<b>TOTAL in</b>								
Page 17				16	9			

An extract from the 1841 census showing the household of John and Sarah Withall.

## The new Poor Law

The periods following major wars have often proved to be a time of a depressed economy and high unemployment. This was certainly the case in the decades following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. Agricultural prices plummeted after the war and farmers consequently reduced their workers' wages. With unemployed ex-servicemen suddenly flooding the labour market, bidding down wages still further, there was great poverty and life became extremely hard for most rural people.

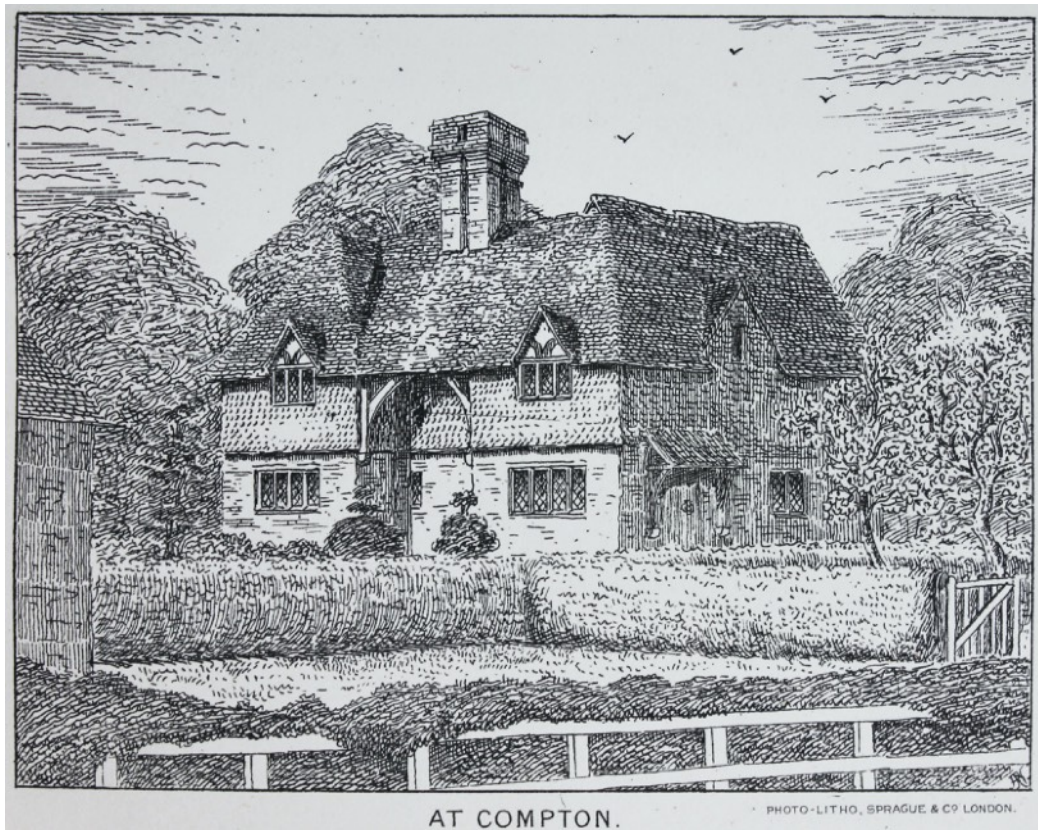
The old Poor Law arrangements simply couldn't cope with the consequent, rapid increase in the number of people claiming poor relief and, by the 1820s, the cracks were beginning to show under the strain of increasing demand. Finally, in the early 1830s, the government acted. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 swept away the ramshackle Elizabethan system of locally-based poor relief by creating unions of parishes that were provided with new, centralised, Union Workhouses. Compton became a part of the Guildford Union that built its workhouse in Warren Road to the east of the town.



*An extract from the 1872 edition of the 25" Ordnance Survey map showing the new cottages that replaced the almshouses and the school.*

Parishes were compelled to contribute towards the cost of building the new workhouses and the money frequently came from the sale of their assets. Once the new workhouses were established, their day-to-day running was to be funded out of each parish's poor rates.

Compton was one of those parishes that sold some assets to pay its share. In June 1837, the vestry meeting (the precursor of the modern parish council) resolved that the almshouses should be sold to James More Molyneux of Loseley and that the present occupiers should be given notice to quit. Compton's other assets, such as the parish poor lands and the Church House in Eastbury Lane, were also sold, although this time the proceeds stayed in Compton and were invested by its Trustees of the Poor for the benefit of the parish paupers.<sup>2</sup>



*The semi-detached cottages that replaced the almshouses sometime between 1848 and 1872, as pictured by Ralph Nevill in the 1880s.*

### **Living conditions**

We don't know what conditions inside the almshouses were like when Hassell painted them but, by the late 1840s, they were dire. They had ceased to be a part of the poor law provision a decade earlier and were now privately let to some of the poorest people in the parish.

It was not just cramped living accommodation that was the problem; the lack of any form of sanitation made living conditions intolerable. At a meeting of the Guildford Poor Law Union in 1848, George Best of Eastbury Manor, who was a member of its Board of Guardians, described the appalling condition of the houses. Talking about the increasing prevalence of communicable diseases in London, such as cholera, scarlet fever, typhoid and typhus, he stated his belief that these diseases were also

<sup>2</sup> Vestry minute book, ref: COM/8/1, Surrey History Centre.

present in Compton because of the insanitary way in which some people were forced to live. He drew the board's attention particularly to the conditions that existed in the old almshouses of Compton:

*“With the respect to the parish of Compton, I believe the prevalence of fever there is more traceable to the horribly filthy way in which they live. There is in Compton a number of houses with no back ways at all; and the dirt from the houses is thrown into an adjacent land, which is in such a state that a gentleman told me that for three months he was unable to go down it. There are 26 persons living in this place, eight sleeping in a room barely nine feet square, and among the eight were a young married couple and a girl of about 16 sleeping in one bed. Contiguous to this place is an infant school, and there the fever is very prevalent”.*<sup>3</sup>

Advances in medical knowledge were being driven by the cholera epidemic that started in 1847 and Mr Best's belief was to be confirmed: in 1854 contaminated water was found to be the means by which the disease was spread.

### **The end of the almshouses**

Such we know about the almshouses but precisely when and how their end came is a mystery. It may be that, having been identified as the owner of disease-ridden slum housing, James More Molyneux felt compelled to do something about it. What we can be sure of is that at some time between the making of the 1839 tithe map and the 1872 Ordnance Survey map, they had been demolished and replaced with a pair of semi-detached cottages built with a nod to the traditional medieval Wealden style.<sup>4</sup> Now united into one dwelling, the house is currently known as Compton Cottage.



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<sup>3</sup> Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle, 2 Dec 1848.

<sup>4</sup> Compton tithe map 1839, ref: 864/1/39, and Ordnance Survey 25' first edition both at Surrey History Centre.