

Heritage Statement in support of a planning application by McCarthy & Stone Ltd for a retirement living development on Old Charlton Road, Hitchin, Hertfordshire SG5 2AJ

National grid reference (NGR) TL 1817 2883



Figure 1: The modern bungalows currently occupying the proposal site.

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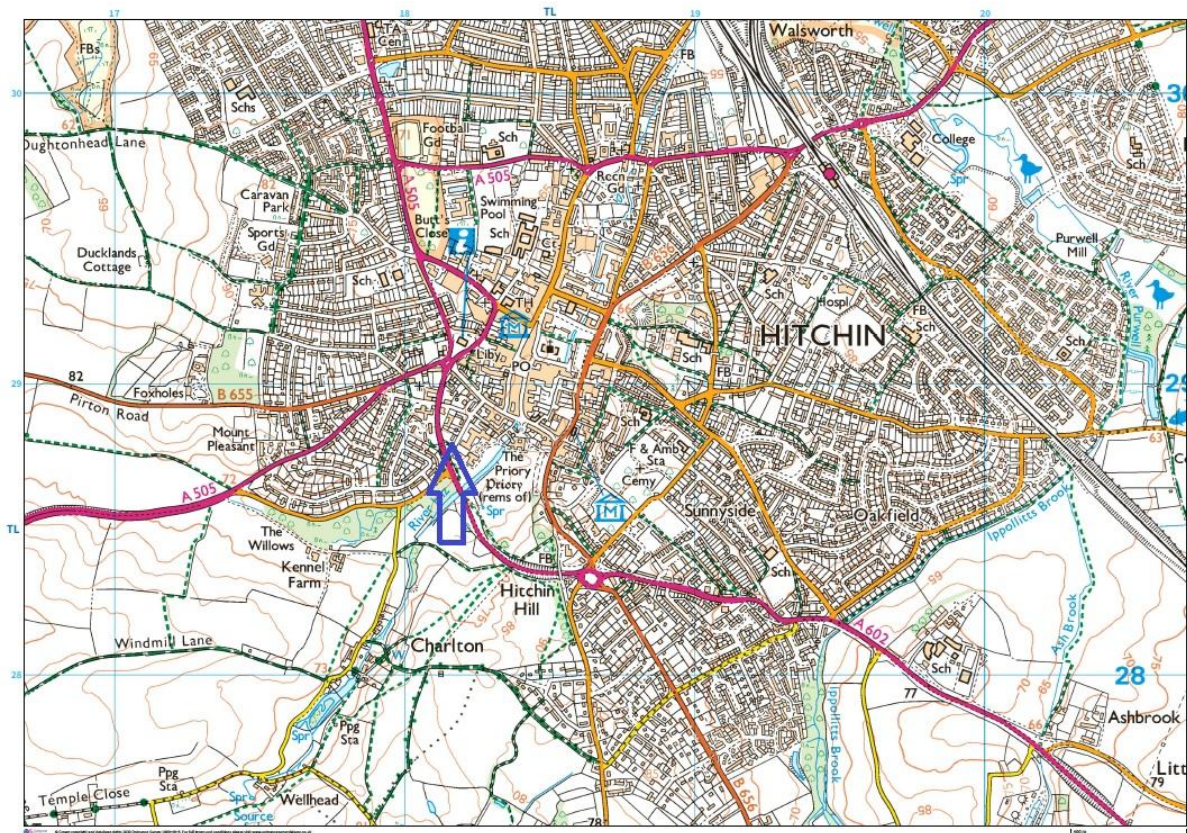


Figure 2: Ordnance Survey map showing the site location (arrowed) in Hitchin. Not to scale.
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Executive summary

McCarthy & Stone Ltd is applying to North Hertfordshire District Council for planning permission to build 35 Retirement Living apartments on land immediately to the west of Old Charlton Road, 125m to the south-east of Tilehouse Street and 285m in the same direction from the Market Place, the historic urban core of Hitchin. The proposal site is occupied by four mid/late 20th-century chalet bungalows on substantial plots with gardens to the front and rear. The new building would be of 2.5 to three storeys, and would include communal facilities, as well as external landscaping and parking. The area around the site is in mixed residential and commercial use, with a wide variety of age, size and type/design among the surrounding buildings. They range from modern offices, apartment blocks and terraced housing to a listed building and a group of earlier 20th-century almshouses: the latter are not listed.

The site is adjacent to the Hitchin Conservation Area with several listed buildings nearby. The latter are particularly clustered along Tilehouse Street, around 150m to the north and north-east, but the closest is Wratten Cottage, c 72m beyond the north edge of the site on Wratten Road East. There are no further examples in a 100m radius from the site centre. No other types of designated heritage asset are represented within 2km of it. A pair of 1930s almshouses on the north side of the proposal site is included on North Hertfordshire District Council's Register of Buildings of Local Interest: they are therefore non-designated heritage assets as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2024 edition). They are also within the Hitchin Conservation Area (the proposal site is outside the CA). The brick boundary wall along the east side of Old Charlton Road does not appear to be on the Register of Buildings of Local Interest, but it is identified as an 'important boundary wall' defining the west edge of Character Area 7 (Priory Park and Hitchin Hill) of the Conservation Area. It is now the boundary of Radcliffe House, an office block erected in the 1980s.

This Heritage Statement has involved extensive research into the historic development of the Old Charlton Road area on the south-west margins of Hitchin. The proposal site is currently occupied by four mid-20th century bungalows, which are of no historic, architectural or other heritage interest or merit. They are outside the town's Conservation Area. Thus heritage and setting issues do not arise as far as the site itself is concerned. Heritage assets are a feature of the surrounding area, however, with a listed building (Wratten Cottage) and a pair of locally-listed 20th-century almshouses within 100m. The latter are also contained within (and were the reason for) a small extension of the Hitchin Conservation Area in 2009. This report has examined these (and other) heritage assets, and assessed their significance. It finds that their settings would not be adversely affected by the proposed Retirement Living development due to other modern buildings/development also within their settings, the local topography, distances from the new build, and the inherent character/quality of the design. The heritage assets will not be harmed. McCarthy & Stone/Ridge have provided a high-quality design which will succeed in enhancing the area while respecting and preserving the settings of the nearby heritage assets, and improving the retirement housing in the area. The National Planning Policy Framework tests in paragraphs 212-215 are not engaged. Local plan policies are also adhered to.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and planning context

McCarthy & Stone Ltd is applying to North Hertfordshire District Council for planning permission to build 35 Retirement Living apartments (17 single and 18 two-bed) on land immediately to the west of Old Charlton Road, c 125m to the south-east of Tilehouse Street and c 285m in the same direction from the Market Place, the historic urban core of Hitchin. The site is occupied by four mid/late 20th-century chalet bungalows on substantial plots with gardens to the front and rear. The new building would be of 2.5 to three storeys, and would include communal facilities, as well as external landscaping and parking. The area around the site is in mixed residential and commercial use, with a wide variety of age, size and type/design among the surrounding buildings. They range from modern offices, apartment blocks and terraced housing to a listed building and a group of earlier 20th-century almshouses: the latter are not listed but are recognised as locally important buildings, and are within the Hitchin Conservation Area (the proposal site is outside the CA).

The roughly L-shaped area of land is bounded to the north-east by the earlier 20th-century William Brown Almshouses. These are not statutorily designated as listed buildings, but are recognised as locally important by North Hertfordshire District Council. They occupy the junction between Old Charlton Road with Wratten Road East: Wratten Cottage, on the north side of the latter road just to the east of Parkway, is the only listed building (Grade II) within 100m of the bungalows. Parkway is an urban relief road running to the west and south-west of the site, effectively cutting it off from other suburban areas in these directions (although there is a pedestrian underpass below the road). Old Charlton Road runs south-westwards from Tilehouse Street to the east and in front of the bungalows.

This Heritage Statement assesses the history and significance of the proposal site, its relationship to neighbouring properties (ie its immediate context), and how the site relates the wider surroundings on the south-west margin of the town centre. It examines the impacts of the proposed development on the nearby listed building and the Conservation Area, while also assessing its potential effect on other heritage assets. The report has been prepared in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, December 2024 edition). Paragraph 207 (previously para 200) states that

In determining applications, local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting. The level of detail should be proportionate to the assets' importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance. As a minimum the relevant historic environment record should have been consulted and the heritage assets assessed using appropriate expertise where necessary. Where a site on which development is proposed includes, or has the potential to include, heritage assets with archaeological interest, local planning authorities should require developers to submit an appropriate desk-based assessment and, where necessary, a field evaluation.

Heritage considerations also apply in local planning policy. North Hertfordshire District Council is in the process of updating its local plan to ensure that it conforms with national policy as expressed in the NPPF. The local plan review is in progress but is not expected to be completed until 2027. Therefore the *North Herts Local Plan 2011-2031* remains in force.¹ It is the cornerstone of the local development framework, although it is now somewhat out of line with the latest revisions of the

¹ [North Herts Local Plan 2011-2031](#) | [North Herts Council](#); [Local Development scheme](#)

National Planning Policy Framework. Section 12 deals with the historic environment, with policy HE1 covering designated heritage assets. This states that

Planning applications relating to Designated heritage Assets or their setting shall be accompanied by a Heritage Assessment/Justification Statement that:

- i. Assesses the significance of heritage assets, including their setting;
- ii. Justifies and details the impacts of any proposal upon the significance of the designated heritage asset(s); and
- iii. Informs any necessary measures to minimise or mitigate against any identified harms.

Planning permission for development proposals affecting Designated Heritage Assets or their setting will be granted where they (as applicable):

- a) Enable the heritage asset to be used in a manner that secures its conservation and preserves its significance;
- b) Incorporate a palette of materials that make a positive contribution to local character or distinctiveness, where it is appropriate and justified; and
- c) Will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of the designated heritage asset, and this harm is outweighed by the public benefits of the development, including securing the asset's optimum viable use.

Where substantial harm to, or loss of significance, of a designated heritage asset is proposed the Council shall refuse consent unless it can be demonstrated that the scheme is necessary to deliver considerable public benefits that outweigh the harm or loss.

Policy HE3 covers non-designated heritage assets:

Permission for a proposal that would result in harm to, or the loss of, a non-designated heritage asset will only be granted provided that a balanced judgement has been made that assesses the scale of harm to, or loss of significance of the non-designated asset and, where the proposal results in the loss of a non-designated heritage asset:

- a) The replacement building contributes to preserving the local character and distinctiveness of the area; and
- b) Where the asset is located in a conservation area a continuous contract for the demolition and redevelopment of the site has been secured, unless there are justifiable grounds for not developing the site.

RPS Ltd has prepared a desk-based archaeological assessment of the bungalow site (February 2025).² This involved a search of the Hertfordshire Historic Environment Record. The results of that are fully described and assessed in RPS's report. Their DBA and this Heritage Statement are therefore fully consistent with and conform to the requirements of the NPPF 2024 and local plan policy.

1.2 Sources and methods of the study

The proposed development has been designed by Ridge and Partners LLP. The scheme has been through an extensive process of feasibility, contextual analysis, site constraints study, and design. An earlier iteration of the scheme was the subject of pre-application consultation with North Hertfordshire District Council in 2024 (ref 24/00924/PRE), and the final designs for the planning submission take account of that process. Ridge and Partners' submitted drawings, Design and Access Statement, perspective views, and information from other team members have been used in the preparation of this Heritage Statement.

² RPS Ltd February 2025, *Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment - Three Trees, Silverdale, Willow Close & Birchwood, Old Charlton Road, Hitchin*

The author visited the site in April 2024 and April-May 2025 to carry out a full assessment of its current status (the bungalows are clearly of no heritage interest), the grounds, surroundings, and potential setting issues with regard to nearby heritage assets and the wider historic environment. Numerous photographs have been taken of the site, its environs, and a relevant wider context in topographical/townscape terms. The centre and western margins of Hitchin were assessed briefly in general terms, but this report concentrates on the areas relevant to this application. This is in accordance with the guidance provided by the NPPF and local plan policy. The photographs of the site's current status used in this report were taken during the visits unless stated otherwise. The nature and extent of the proposed development was examined, and its potential impact on the nearby heritage assets (as well as the area generally) was assessed in detail.

Research for the Heritage Statement included consultation of various sources such as the National Heritage List, the Historic England Archive, historic mapping, and published or archival sources such as Tithe information and Census data. A search of the online *Britain from Above* and Historic England online collections of aerial photographs from the 1920s onwards³ only revealed a few images of the site, all taken from a considerable height directly overhead (vertical photographs) in the 1950s. These are only relevant because they show the slightly different construction dates of the bungalows; they are discussed in section 2.1 below. The online *England's Places* resource was also checked. It contains scanned versions of all the historic photographs formerly housed in the 'Red Boxes' at the Historic England Archive Centre. There are four boxes for Hitchin: one (with 44 cards) for ecclesiastical buildings/churches, and three (281 cards) for 'other places'. Individual cards may contain one or multiple images, usually with information about their date and (where relevant) photographer. One photograph from 1960 of the William Brown almshouses was found, along with one of Wratten Cottage from 1942, but no other relevant images of the site or its environs.⁴ The online Historic England archive collection was also checked but no images of the site or its environs were found. Historic Tithe and Ordnance Survey maps for the site were also examined, with selected examples used to illustrate section 2 of the report, and various publications/online resources were checked. All sources used during the study are referred to as appropriate in the text.

1.3 Designated heritage assets

The site is adjacent to the Hitchin Conservation Area with several listed buildings nearby. The latter are particularly clustered along Tilehouse Street, around 150m to the north and north-east, but the closest is Wratten Cottage, c 72m beyond the north edge of the site on Wratten Road East,⁵ with no further examples in a 100m radius from the site centre. No other types of designated heritage asset (Scheduled Monuments, Registered Parks/Gardens etc) are represented within 2km of it. A pair of 1930s almshouses on the north side of the proposal site is included on North Hertfordshire District Council's Register of Buildings of Local Interest: they are therefore non-designated heritage assets as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2024 edition).⁶ The brick boundary wall along the east side of Old Charlton Road does not appear to be on the Register of Buildings of Local Interest, but it is identified as an 'important boundary wall' defining the west edge of Character Area 7 (Priory Park and Hitchin Hill) of the Conservation Area. It originally marked the west edge of

³ www.britainfromabove.org.uk and [Aerial Photo Explorer – Over 400,000 aerial photos in Historic England's digitised collections | Historic England](#)

⁴ [A - BA, Other Places, Hitchin | Card 2144016 | England's Places | Historic England](#); [S - Z, Other Places, Hitchin | Card 2146210 | England's Places | Historic England](#)

⁵ [WRATTEN COTTAGE, Non Civil Parish - 1296002 | Historic England](#)

⁶ **Heritage asset:** A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. It includes designated heritage assets and assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing).

the kitchen gardens for The Priory, a Grade I listed building set in a wide expanse of historic (but not registered) parkland. It is now the boundary of Radcliffe House, an office block erected in the 1980s.



Figure 3: Top - listed buildings within a radius of 100m (left) and 0.5km of the site, showing the extent to which they cluster in the urban core and the main streets leading off it. Bottom – extract from the Conservation Area map (Character Area 7), with the site arrowed.

1.4 Location, topography, geology and archaeology

The roughly L-shaped area of land concerned comprises the curtilages of four bungalows – a semi-detached pair (Birchwood and Willow Close) at the north end, with two detached ones (Silverdale and Three Trees) immediately to their south. The National Grid Reference (NGR) at the approximate centre of the site is TL 1817 2883. The post code is SG5 2AJ (very small areas on the southern and western margins lie outside this, but this is of no consequence). The overall site is bounded by a small group of almshouses at the junction of Old Charlton Road with Wratten Road East to the north, Woodcroft (an apartment block) to the north-west, and Parkway (an urban relief road) to the west and south-west. Old Charlton Road runs southwards to the east and in front of the bungalows. Large office blocks (including Radcliffe House) occupy the opposite side of the road, behind a high brick-built boundary wall. The combined grounds of the bungalows cover an area of c 3.138m² (0.3ha). The land slopes gently from north to south (c 71m aOD - above Ordnance Datum - to c 68.5m aOD) within the gardens and along the road to their east, where the topography dips away quite strongly further to the east (this may have resulted in part from landscaping and construction of Radcliffe House, which appears to have basement parking and/or other underground facilities).

The geological bedrock on the site comprises the Zig Zag Chalk Formation - Chalk. This sedimentary material formed between 100.5 and 93.9 million years ago during the Cretaceous period. The chalk is overlain by superficial/drift deposits of the Lowestoft Formation – Diamicton, sediments formed between 480 and 423 thousand years ago during the Quaternary period.⁷

The archaeological desk-based assessment carried out by RPS Ltd examined documented data on sites and finds for an area of 1km around the bungalows. Their study identified “a low archaeological potential for evidence relating to the prehistoric and Roman periods and a low to moderate potential for the Saxon period. The overall archaeological potential of the Site to contain marginal edge of settlement evidence of medieval and post-medieval date relating to the historic town, nearby tithe barn, and results of nearby archaeological investigations is considered to be high. Evidence of agricultural practices may also be present. It must be noted that some investigations close to the site have been negative for archaeological finds or features”. They also noted that “any archaeological evidence that is present within the site would ... most likely be of local significance only”, and that archaeological evaluation and/or other mitigation may be needed if development does go ahead (RPS 2025, *executive summary* – see footnote 2).

2 Description of the site

The RPS archaeological study shows that there is limited evidence for prehistoric or Roman activity at Hitchin. The area of the town was settled in the Anglo-Saxon period, and the place-name may reflect this (perhaps relating to a Saxon tribe, the *Hicce* - although an earlier, Celtic origin has also been mooted). The fully developed urban core with its central church and market place, however, is of medieval date with later development. The town is recognised for its excellent stock of historic buildings allied to a remarkably complete ancient urban topography, with relatively few intrusive modern developments. In 1912 the Victoria County History entry for Hitchin commented that it “is fortunate in having retained so many of its ancient houses, though most of them have been re-fronted and much altered in the 18th and 19th centuries”. Pevsner went further in 1953, stating that “Hitchin is without doubt, next to St Albans, the most interesting and visually most satisfying town of Herts. It has not only plenty of good timber-framed and gabled as well as C18 brick houses, but very

⁷ [BGS Geology Viewer \(BETA\)](#)

little to spoil the harmony of these two types. Moreover the town has kept its medieval plan virtually without interference, a real market square (rare in the county) with parallel streets running off at angles to the N and S". His approbation for Hitchin extended to and along Tilehouse Street ("worth careful study") but he evidently did not find anything of note beyond it. Old Charlton Road, Wratten Road and their buildings are not mentioned. He was writing, of course, before Parkway cut its swathe through the south-western suburbs.⁸ The Victoria County History similarly makes little or no mention of this area, but this need not cause any surprise - the publication (1912) pre-dates the foundation of the William Brown Almshouses, after all.

2.1 Historical development of the site and its environs

This part of Hitchin seems to have been outside the core area of the historic town until the mid-20th century. It is shown as open space in all early maps and surveys covering the town, although many of these are at too small a scale and/or schematic in intent to place much trust in what is shown. Both the Andrews and Drury map of 1766 and Bryant in 1822, for example, show the site as undeveloped fields, although the later map perhaps shows some buildings to the north of (but outside) it.

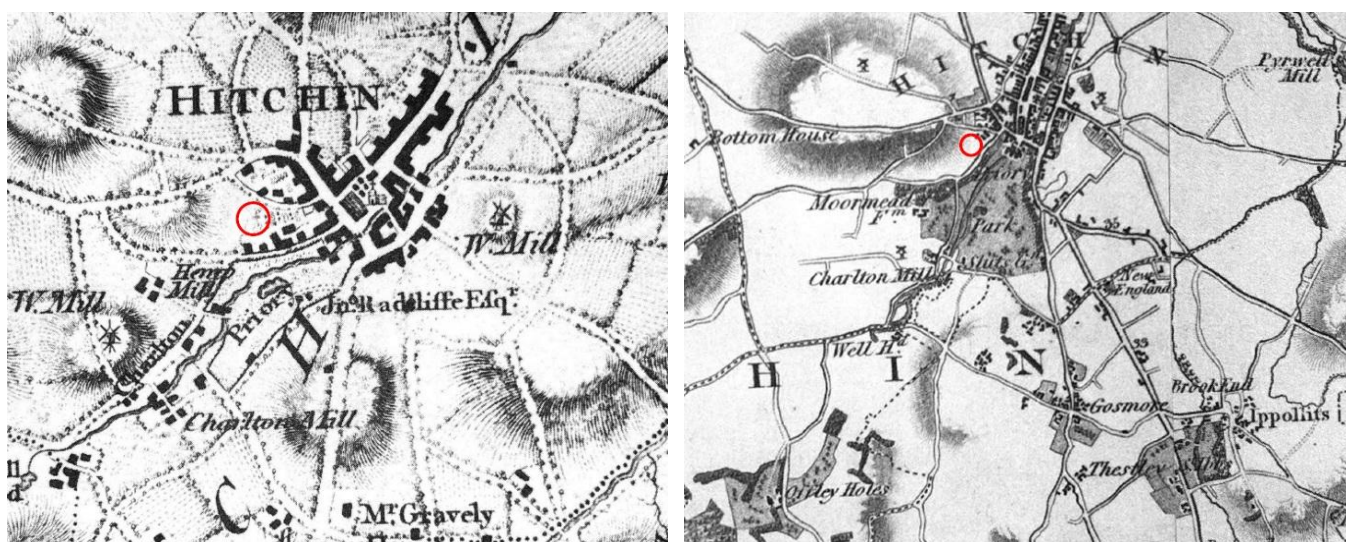


Figure 4: Extracts from the Andrews and Drury map of 1766 (left) and Bryant's of 1822 with the site's approximate location circled in red.

The 1844 Tithe Map is the first detailed and accurate survey of the area; the Apportionment which accompanies it provides a catalogue of ownership, occupancy and use – it is therefore an invaluable historical and social record. The site now occupied by the four bungalows straddled two pieces of land, representing a mixture of pasture to the south-west (Croft) and an apparently formal garden known as the Coburg Gardens, its central and northern thirds divided into six regular compartments. Strangely, both were described as arable land – perhaps the Coburg was for cultivated allotments. The owner was William Lucas (Snr), while the occupiers of both pieces of land were "Mess^{rs} Lucas" – presumably junior members of William Snr's family. The Coburg Gardens would later become the site of the William Brown Almshouses. It is interesting to note that the 1st edition OS map showed much of the area as allotment gardens almost 40 years after the Tithe.

⁸ Pevsner N 1953, *The Buildings of England: Hertfordshire*, Penguin Books, 131-8. See also VCH 1912, [Hitchin: Introduction and manors | British History Online](#) and the Conservation Area Statement for the town by The Conservation Studio/North Hertfordshire District Council.



Figure 5: The 1844 Tithe Map (top) shows the area west of Old Charlton Road as largely open ground. The bungalows are on land then in use as pasture (parcel 1359), extending a short distance north into 1360 (Coburg Gardens) as well. The 1881 OS map shows a similar scene, with large areas of allotment gardens.



Figure 6: The OS maps of 1923 (top left) and 1932 (top right) show few major changes to the pattern of settlement and fields/allotments in this part of suburban Hitchin since the 1840s or 1880s. The 1950 aerial photograph, however, shows that the almshouses and three of the four bungalows had been built. The former seem to have been built just before World War II, the latter perhaps just after (the type of brick used is typical of early post-war housing throughout the south-east). Curiously, perhaps, the 1959-60 OS map shows all these buildings in outline (centre-right in the inset map), a convention of the time suggesting that they were either being built or had been completed recently.

Figure 6 documents the early years of extensive suburban growth to the south-west of Hitchin, but even by 1960 Old Charlton Road was relatively unaffected by this. The local pattern of development changed dramatically during the next 30-40 years, however, as later OS maps and aerial photographs show (Figure 7).



Figure 7: OS maps and an aerial photograph from 1964-5 (top left), 1982-3 (top right), 1991-2 (bottom left) and 1999 showing the contrast between the gradual early development of the south-western suburbs and their rapid expansion in this period. The old allotment gardens were replaced by streets of housing and large blocks of flats, while Parkway cut a swathe through the entire area in the 1970s. Commercial development also transformed the former kitchen gardens/nursery on the west edge of The Priory's grounds: the scale and massing of these buildings were unlike anything else in the vicinity at the time. The aerial photograph also shows the new almshouse block added behind and at right-angles to the original pair between 1991-2 and 1999.

2.2 The site and its surroundings today



Figure 8: Top, the almshouses with Wratten Road East to the right. They are a late but characteristic example of this type of building. Bottom, the bungalows on the proposal site.



Figure 9: Wratten Cottage (top, Grade II) and the view back from it with the almshouses in the centre and the bungalows to the right of them. The two-storey building to the right is Woodcroft, and further to the right is a 2.5-storey block of the same modern date (immediately opposite the Grade II listed building). The cupola is on Radcliffe House, part of a large office development of c 1980. The 2.5-storey short terrace to the left of the almshouses was completed c 2008.



Figure 10: Top, Radcliffe House – note the sloping ground towards the east and the underground car parking set into this. Bottom, view north-east to Tilehouse Street with Midland House (a modern 3-storey office block) to the left and 2.5-storey terraced housing to the right (completed in the last 2-3 years).

3 Statement of Significance

This part of the Heritage Statement identifies the significance of the site and/or any historic features in its area. The assessment follows standard professional guidance, in particular Historic England's *Conservation Principles*. The primary concern is not simply to say that something is important; that is rarely helpful. Rather, it is to define and determine a hierarchy of significance – how important is a site or a part of it? These questions are addressed across the range of values set out in *Conservation Principles* – historical, evidential, aesthetic and communal. A simple sequence of high (national), medium (local/county) and low (slight) significance is used, as well as neutral or no significance (not important but does not necessarily detract from an area's value), detrimental (where something has a negative effect on significance), or visually intrusive.

Statutorily designated heritage assets such as Scheduled Monuments and many listed buildings are of national significance. Grade I buildings are defined as being of “exceptional interest”, representing 2.5% of the c 400,000 listed buildings. Grade II* buildings are described as being of “more than special interest” and comprise 5.8%. The rest are Grade II and of “special interest; 91.7% of all listed buildings”.⁹ Some Grade II listed buildings may be exemplars of regionally significant vernacular traditions rather than nationally important in their own right, so that “not only are all buildings of strong intrinsic national architectural or historic interest included on the statutory list, but also the most significant or distinctive regional buildings that together make a major contribution to the national historic stock”.¹⁰ All listed buildings will usually be defined as having **high significance** unless particular circumstances (such as its condition, or a compromised location) dictate otherwise. They often have (and are sometimes specifically designated because of) ‘group value’ – the contribution they make to a street scene or ‘sense of place’.

Only one listed building lies within 100m of the proposal site. The significance of this is discussed below: no other examples need to be considered here because distance, topography and intervening buildings/development mean that this development proposal would not affect them. Midland House and recently built two- to three-storey housing to the north along Old Charlton Road provide full visual and physical screening for listed buildings along Tilehouse Street, while Radcliffe House and the other office blocks on the east side of Old Charlton Road (behind a high brick wall) provide the same coverage for The Priory and related assets to the east. This assessment is consistent with guidance provided in the NPPF, local planning policy, and by Historic England. As noted in section 1.3 (above), no other types of designated heritage asset (Scheduled Monuments, Registered Parks or Gardens etc) are represented within 2km of the site. The William Brown Almshouses (earlier 20th-century) to the north of the site are locally important and within the Conservation Area: their significance is also assessed because of these factors.

Title	Designation	Significance assessment
Wratten Cottage	Listed Building, Grade II	<i>Historical: High</i> due to its early 19 th -century date – it is a good example of a building of this age on the fringe of Hitchin's historic core, an originally quite isolated early building south of Tilehouse Street. <i>Evidential: High</i> as a substantial late Georgian/early modern house representing an early stage in Hitchin's

⁹ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/listed-buildings/> - updated 10 July 2024.

¹⁰ DDCMS 2018, *Principles of Selection for Listed Buildings*
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/757054/Revised_Principles_of_Selection_2018.pdf

Title	Designation	Significance assessment
		sub-urban expansion, quite different in type and design to buildings in the urban core. <i>Aesthetic: High</i> because of its pleasing early 19th-century architecture, well maintained. Good stucco, white painted, with varied fenestration (surprisingly so – this is no slave to Georgian taste) with dormers in the west part and tall chimneys on the gables. <i>Communal: Medium</i> – still a fine building but has lost some of its landmark quality because of developments around it. Private, limited public access, at the end of the surviving eastern segment of Wratten Road. <i>Setting: Negative</i> - severely impacted by late 20th century development, with Parkway immediately to its west cutting the house off from Wratten Road West, and multiple large blocks of apartments to the south, south-west and west taking away its local dominance.
Hitchin	Conservation Area - character area 7 (Priory Park and Hitchin Hill)	Priory Park and Hitchin Hill are the main defining parts of this character area – neither is particularly relevant (if at all) to this assessment. The CA was extended in 2009 to include the William Brown almshouses (see below), although these have little or no historical, physical or visual connection with the rest of CA7. They are not mentioned in the list of Positive Features in CA7, but there is a short description of the buildings before this. The almshouses arguably have more connection with CA2c, ie The Market Place, Bridge Street, Tilehouse Street and Upper Tilehouse Street.
Boundary wall along east side of Old Charlton Road	Defined as an important wall in CA appraisal	<i>Historical: Medium</i> due to its connection with the Grade I Priory. The wall is not mentioned in the list description (which is cursory at best) but its brickwork suggests a later 18th or early 19th-century date. <i>Evidential: Medium</i> as a tall boundary, deliberately so to protect the privacy of The Priory and its residents – and to define the external limits of the kitchen garden / nursery on the west margin of the Park. The wall lost any connection with the Priory and the rest of its Park when the office blocks were built from the 1980s on – this has severely reduced its evidential value relative to the listed building and Conservation Area, although it is identified as an ‘important boundary wall’ defining the west edge of Character Area 7. <i>Aesthetic: Medium</i> as a good quality brick wall defining the east side of Old Charlton Road. The masonry has a pleasing appearance but is of course simple, befitting its original function. Now little more than a backdrop for suburban on-street parking adjacent to Radcliffe House and the other offices (which have their own parking). <i>Communal: Low</i> – now nothing more than a boundary between on-street parking and office blocks to its east.

Title	Designation	Significance assessment
		<i>Setting: Neutral</i> – modern development has taken away the wall's positive attributes as a boundary to Priory Park.
William Brown Almshouses	Register of Buildings of Local Interest	<i>Historical: Medium.</i> This is an earlier/mid-20th century development on land which had previously been in use as gardens (perhaps allotments) just outside the urban core of Hitchin, at least from the 1840s. The site had probably been under cultivation long before that. <i>Evidential: Medium</i> as an unusually late example of a private charity providing small but good-quality housing for the urban poor. The boundary wall and associated features also survive, although they have been altered (especially at the corner with Wratten Road East). <i>Aesthetic: Medium</i> – though small in scale and simple in design, the two original blocks are well detailed and visually pleasing. <i>Communal: Medium</i> – the buildings continue in their original charitable use, providing housing for those in need locally. The boundary walls and original gateways are also good quality elements of the (partly) public realm. <i>Setting: Low</i> – the urban landscape around these buildings is of limited value.
The bungalows	None – outside the CA	<i>Historical: Neutral</i> due to mid-20th-century date – the bungalows are typical of their age with no unusual or stand-out features. <i>Evidential: Low</i> as a typical examples of post-war urban development and growth. <i>Aesthetic: Neutral</i> – adequate but standard examples of a nationally common suburban housing type, materials are also typical of the age (especially the brickwork). There is nothing to raise these buildings above the contemporary norm. <i>Communal: Neutral</i> – standard mid/late 20th- century private housing with minimal to no contribution to the public realm. Outside the Conservation Area (which has been reviewed and extended several times). <i>Setting: Neutral</i> - Parkway runs immediately to the west and south-west, severing the bungalows from suburban traffic, but underpasses provide good pedestrian links between inner and outer areas.
Table 1: Significance assessment, Old Charlton Road, Hitchin.		



Figure 11: Top – the boundary wall along Old Charlton Road, with the office blocks at Radcliffe House behind it. Bottom – the almshouses in 1960 – Figure 8 shows that the outer gate has been rebuilt.

4 The proposed development – heritage impact assessment

Part 16 of the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2024 edition) affirms the desirability of conservation and enhancement of the historic environment in the planning process. Preserving or enhancing heritage assets is highlighted. Paragraphs 212-5 deal with the potential for development to harm a designated heritage asset (eg a listed building) or its setting. Paragraph 212 states that

When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.

Paragraphs 213-215 address the national policy approach to degrees of harm (from substantial to less than substantial) and how these should be weighed in the planning balance. Policies for the historic environment in the *North Herts Local Plan 2011-2031* (including policies HE1 and HE3) reflect the NPPF philosophy on preserving, conserving and where possible enhancing heritage assets. This includes their settings and significance. Policy HE3 (non-designated heritage assets) is relevant on this site because it is next to the William Brown Almshouses, which are locally listed. The entry in the council's Register suggests that only the original blocks are designated in this way (the 1990s block to the rear is mentioned but in a context which indicates that it is excluded).



Figure 12: The scale of buildings around Old Charlton Road (based on a drawing by Ridge LLP).

As already noted, the Old Charlton Road/Wratten Road area contains a mixture of residential and commercial use, with a wide variety of age, size and type/design among the surrounding buildings (Figure 12). They include

- modern offices such as Radcliffe House (up to four storeys) and other blocks adjacent to it of similar size to the east, and Midland House (three storeys);

- modern apartment blocks of two, three and four storeys such as Woodcroft immediately to the north-west, and on the other side of Parkway blocks on Wratten Close and the recently built three-storey Churchill scheme at Dovehouse Lodge;
- new terraced housing such as Copper Beech Terrace (2.5 storeys) and 1-5 Kitchen Garden Court (2.5 storeys, directly opposite the almshouses);
- One listed building, Wratten Cottage,
- and single-storey housing (including the William Brown Almshouses).

The proposed development has been designed by Ridge and Partners LLP. The scheme has been through an extensive process of feasibility, contextual analysis, site constraints study, and design. An earlier iteration of the scheme was the subject of pre-application consultation with North Hertfordshire District Council in 2024 (ref 24/00924/PRE), and the final designs for the planning submission take account of that process. The Design and Access Statement, drawings, views and other documents prepared by the Design Team have been used in the preparation of the heritage impact assessment presented here.

The retirement living apartments will be provided in a 2.5 and three-storey L-shaped block fronting onto Old Charlton Road and returning westwards at its south end into the southern bungalows' rear gardens. The eastern frontage will be c 2m-4.5m closer to Old Charlton Road than the bungalows, but the northernmost part of the block will be c 13.5m-16m further south than Birchwood/Willow Close (the northern bungalow) and thus much further back from the William Brown Almshouses (c 22m away). This end of the new building is also set at a lower (2.5-storey) height than the rest of the building – a full storey lower than proposal in the pre-application scheme. On-site parking will be provided in the northern part of the site, while the new building will have extensive communal grounds on its other three sides. Balconies will also provide private outdoor spaces for residents.

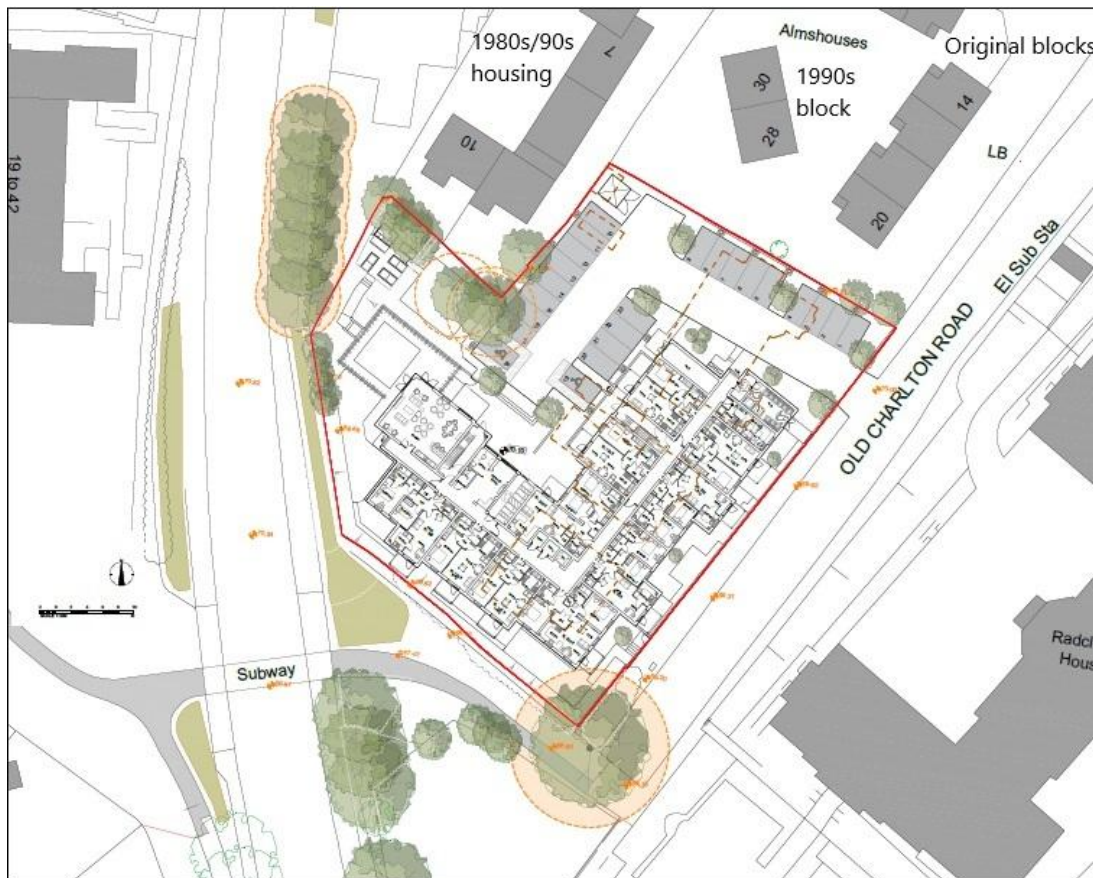


Figure 13: The layout of the proposed development (after Ridge drawing 2983-001).

The height and massing of the design have been reduced from the one submitted at pre-application stage. The north-eastern four bays of the Old Charton Road frontage are now of 2.5 storeys, with no windows in the end elevation facing towards the almshouses and box dormers in the attic (half) floor of the frontage and to its rear (ie facing into the main communal gardens on the north-west side). The rest of the building is essentially of three storeys, although the north-west end of the return wing into the gardens also has box dormers in the attic and thus reads as 2.5-storey. Fenestration is simple, restrained and well arranged to provide both horizontal and vertical emphasis. Gabled and hipped bays also provide animation and variety, especially in the vertical plane. The chosen materials and detailing provide a contextually-grounded appearance in keeping with the surrounding buildings, with brick, render and stone features (string courses, lintels), steel balconies, and roof tiles providing a high-quality design and appearance. The simple modernity of the scheme as a whole respects the locality, where there is no dominant architectural style even among recent housing developments, let alone among the (few) surviving older buildings.



Figure 14: The north-west (top) and north-east elevations of the proposed development. The upper image faces into the main communal gardens - Radcliffe House, rising clear in the background, is by far the dominant building in the area. The north-east elevation faces towards the almshouses – note that the lower gable to the left is on the main Old Charlton Road wing, while the rest of the building is the return into the garden area: it is therefore set a long way back into the site, distant from the almshouses.



Figure 15: The south-west (top) and south-east elevations of the proposed development. The upper image faces onto Old Charlton Road, with modern developments beyond rising above the roof lines. The south-east elevation faces towards Parkway, with the varied roofscape along Wratten Road East in the background.

The proposed development has no direct impact on any heritage assets, designated or otherwise. It is outside the Conservation Area, well away from Wratten Cottage (Grade II listed), while the nearest part of the new building would be more than 20m away from the locally-listed almshouses (further than Birchwood/Willow Close, the nearest of the current houses) and the old boundary wall on the east side of Old Charlton Road. The bungalows themselves are mid/late 20th-century and of no historical or aesthetic significance. Their demolition is not an issue in heritage terms.

Turning to potential impacts on the settings of heritage assets, Wratten Cottage is the only listed building requiring consideration here. There are many others along Tilehouse Street and beyond, but their distance away, and the significant scale of intervening modern buildings to the north, north-east and east negates any possibility of development impacts on the settings of listed buildings in these directions. Similarly, the few listed buildings to the north-west on the far side of Parkway (eg the Baptist Chapel and 41-43 Tilehouse Street) are now so divorced from Old Charlton Road by the orbital road that there is no possibility of any impact on their settings from a development on this relatively modest scale (in keeping with the height of other recent building projects).

Wratten Cottage sits on higher ground to the north-west of the proposal site, looking down towards it, the almshouses, and buildings beyond (including the visually dominant Radcliffe House). Modern apartment blocks to the south and south-east of the Grade II listed Cottage provide substantial visual screening in short to medium views, while the larger modern office blocks do not allow for anything more than glimpses of anything beyond (see Figure 9, which shows the view towards the bungalows

from in front of the Cottage). Parkway is only a few metres away to the west, and some screen planting cannot hide the extent to which that road impinges on the setting of the listed building. It is suggested that the siting of the proposed development towards the south end of its plot, and the density/scale of intervening buildings, means that the development would have minimal or no impact on, and cause no harm to, the Grade II listed Wratten Cottage.

The proposed development site lies immediately outside the Hitchin Conservation Area, which kinks out to take in the almshouses: this part was added to the CA in a 2009 review. The almshouses are addressed below, and as they appear to have been the sole reason for this boundary extension, it is considered further with those buildings below. As for the generality of the CA and its character areas, most of it is clearly beyond any likelihood of impact/harm because of distance, topography, and the density of urban/suburban development (whether old or new). Character Area 7 (Priory Park and Hitchin Hill) is the nearest part of the CA (see Figure 3). Direct or indirect effects on the Priory parkland are extremely limited, largely because the Radcliffe House (and other) office buildings in the old kitchen garden have already severely traduced the visual and historic interest/significance of this area. There will be a limited degree of visual impact on the old boundary wall along the east side of Old Charlton Road (identified as 'important' in the CA appraisal), but the wall has already been badly affected by the building of Radcliffe House and the other office blocks close to it. The almshouses and bungalows already provide a visual frame on the west side of the road. The new building will of course be taller, but a distance of 20m or more from the boundary wall means that any setting impact will be at a very low level, and not definable as harmful.

The William Brown Almshouses (and the CA extension around them) lie on the north side of the site. They are recognised buildings of local importance (this does not apply to the 1990s component) and as part of the CA. This was extended deliberately to include them. The buildings are therefore non-designated heritage asset, while also forming a distinct and distinctive element of the CA. Their character is low-key and low rise, typical for buildings of this category. That does not mean that they need to or should dictate the scale of development nearby. Indeed this has demonstrably not been the case hitherto – as Figure 12 shows, there has been extensive office and house building of various scales and storeys in the immediate environs from the 1890s onwards (see also Figure 7). These include two series of terraced houses on the east side of Old Charlton Road, of 2.5 storeys, with 1-5 Kitchen Garden Court being directly opposite the almshouses and the junction between Old Charlton Road with Wratten Road East. The newer housing in the area is mixed in height, but 2.5 and 3 storeys are common. The office blocks (Midland House, Radcliffe House etc) are generally much larger in size as well as massing. Accordingly, there is established precedent for 2.5- and 3-storey buildings (or larger) in the area immediately around the almshouses.

The existing bungalows press tight against the south boundary of the almshouse gardens – indeed Birchwood is built within a few feet of the boundary. Birchwood and Willow Close are an attached pair. The proposed new Retirement Living development is pushed back almost to the south end of the pair, providing much greater breathing space for the single-storey almshouses. It will be about the same distance to the south as 1-5 Kitchen Garden Court are to the east, and only a few metres closer than Radcliffe House. The new build is obviously larger in scale (plan, elevation and massing) than the almshouses, but so are the other modern buildings in the vicinity. A 2.5 and 3-storey block on this site should not be intrinsically unacceptable, or defined as harmful to the setting of the non-designated almshouses. While acknowledging the scale of the proposed development, we suggest that it will have a very limited impact on the setting of the William Brown Almshouses (and thus by definition Character Area 7 of the Conservation Area). It will not cause harm to the settings of these heritage assets, and is therefore in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework and the *North Herts Local Plan 2011-2031*.



PERSPECTIVE ILLUSTRATION

Figure 16: A watercolour depiction of the proposed Retirement Living scheme from Old Charlton Road looking south-west. The William Brown Almshouses are out of picture to the right, showing the enhanced open space here.

5 Conclusions

This Heritage Statement has involved extensive research into the historic development of the Old Charlton Road area on the south-west margins of Hitchin. The proposal site is currently occupied by four mid-20th century bungalows, which are of no historic, architectural or other heritage interest or merit. They are outside the town's Conservation Area. Thus heritage and setting issues do not arise as far as the site itself is concerned. Heritage assets are a feature of the surrounding area, however, with a listed building (Wratten Cottage) and a pair of locally-listed 20th-century almshouses within 100m. The latter are also contained within (and were the reason for) a small extension of the Hitchin Conservation Area. This report has examined these (and other) heritage assets, and assessed their significance. It finds that their settings would not be adversely affected by the proposed Retirement Living development due to other modern buildings/development also within their settings, the local topography, distances from the new build, and the inherent character/quality of the design. The heritage assets will not be harmed. McCarthy & Stone/Ridge have provided a high-quality design which will succeed in enhancing the area while respecting and preserving the settings of the nearby heritage assets, and improving the retirement housing in the area. The National Planning Policy Framework tests in paragraphs 212-215 are not engaged. Local plan policies are also adhered to.

Appendix 1: The William Brown Almshouses

[Charity overview, WILLIAM BROWN ALMSHOUSES CHARITY - 211759, Register of Charities - The Charity Commission](#)

[Hitchin: Priory church and charities | British History Online \(british-history.ac.uk\)](#) 'Hitchin: Priory church and charities', in A History of the County of Hertford: Volume 3, (London, 1912) pp. 12-21. Pre-dates and thus does not mention the Wm Brown Almshouses.

[Hitchin. William Brown | Almshouses, Hitchin | Herts Memories](#) by Colin Wilson

William Brown, of Lyle's Row, Hitchin, died in early 1929 at the age of 88, leaving his widow Mary as one of his executors. His effects amounted to just over £12,500, a considerable sum for those days. He left stocks and shares to help with maintenance of the almshouses. He also left money to the Bethel Chapel (Grace Baptist, in Queen Street), showing his Evangelical Protestant Christian beliefs.

His will became the governing document of the William Brown Almshouse Trust. Nearly a decade later, in 1938, as World War II was brewing, the almshouses were completed. Beneficiaries were people born or resident in Hitchin. They were to be deserving people who could not find accommodation and security in the local community to suit their particular requirements and needs. The focus was on the elderly.

The charity is run by 6 trustees who meet 2 – 3 times a year. As with most similar charities, they are unpaid. They are supported by a paid clerk.

Most of the income of about £35000 income is from residents' contributions, with some from investments. As may be expected, about half the outgoings are for repairs and improvements – some residents may have special requirements.

The charity is registered with the Charity Commission ref 211759 and affiliated to the Almshouse Association.

References

Documents held at HALS

DE/Ha/B2143 (1929-1979): Early accounts include entries relating to the administration of the will and estate of William Brown, deceased

DE/Ha/B2144 (1932-1939) Stock receipts, correspondence, and papers relating to the investments made by the trustees of the William Brown Almshouse Charity

DE/Ha/B2145 (1938-1953) Comprises an envelope containing signed terms of tenancy, 1938, and contents insurance certificates, 1947 and 1953, of Ada Parsons in respect of 14 Charlton Road, Hitchin, Hertfordshire

DE/Ha/B2146 (1948-1971) Applications for tenancies of a William Brown Almshouse

DE/Ha/B2147 (1949-1961) Envelope endorsed 'Miscellaneous'. Comprises mainly correspondence of the trustees of the William Brown Almshouse Charity with Hertfordshire County Council and with the National Association of Almshouses concerning grants sought by the trustees from the County Council for repairs and improvements to the charity's almshouses

DE/Ha/B2148 (1954-1958) Receipted invoices and vouchers in respect of expenditure of the trustees of the William Brown Almshouse Charity at Hitchin, Hertfordshire

DE/Ha/B2149 (1962-1974) The correspondence mainly relates to financial and property maintenance matters. Papers include some applications for tenancy of a William Brown Almshouse, 1970-1974 Lists of tenants of the almshouses (in connection with the issuing of television licences), 1970-1973 Blank application forms for and terms of tenancy of the almshouses, c1970s; with some correspondence and papers concerning investments in respect of the William Brown Charity for the Ministry of Bethel Chapel in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, 1969 and 1972

DE/Ha/B2150 (Sep 1977-May 1978) Includes copies of an extract from the will of William Brown proved in 1929 relating to the terms of the trust for the benefit of Bethel Chapel and of the 1938 acceptance by the Minister and Deacon