

# HOUSE OF THE WEEK

Tommy Barker reports



**K**insale's Alms Houses (or Gift Houses,) aren't standard 'House of the Week' material - in effect, they are houses of the century. Try, oh, the 17th century, and they were established - in the charitable words of the day - to give relief to eight distressed and impotent citizens of Kinsale.

Among the earlier habitable houses in the tourism-blessed and scenery-graced harbour town, this small cluster of houses on a height above bustling Kinsale dates to 1682, and features on just about every guide reference and walking tour of the town.

Variously known as the Gift Houses, or the Alms Houses, they were established by the locally-born Sir Robert Southwell, a powerful diplomat, ambassador and politician who died in 1702, as a member of Parliament for Lostwithiel in Cornwall, having leased his little-used Kinsale home as a naval office in the 1680s.

A memorial to the Southwell family, in carved Carrara marble (by Arnold Quellin of London), is in the even-older St Multose church in Kinsale, which has Norman roots of 1190 making it the oldest building in Kinsale, and the second oldest church in Ireland in continuous use for worship.

Another Southwell memorial in ways, at the venerable age of 333 years, are these four self-contained cottages plus a finer supervisor's house. They are set to be sold, for the very first time in their long existence as they are deemed no longer to suit the purpose for which they were endowed, having generally been used for centuries to accommodate the widows of Protestant tradesmen in the town. Given their significant heritage status, their pending sale is likely to see matters other than money dictate who'll next take them in charge - and to what purpose.

The decision to sell Kinsale's Alms Houses has been taken with reluctance by the Church of Ireland's Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross, Dr Paul Colton, who is the sole trustee and patron of 26 other charities. The disposal has to be ratified by the Charities Regulatory Authority.

The entire property is listed and protected, and the special

sale, very loosely guiding at €340,000 via estate agent Malcolm Tyrrell of Cohalan Downing, is to proceed by public tender by October 2 and "the highest tender may not necessarily be accepted," he counsels.

Because of the narrow structure of the trust, Bishop Colton says he is personally liable as an individual for them, but that there is no money in any trust to maintain them, to insure them and "they are not fit for purpose. You would be worried about fire safety, accidents and falls. You could imagine what HIQA would make of them today," he observes.

The last resident left in the past year or so and the four c 500 sq ft two-bed cottages, in two picturesque semi-detached buildings, plus finer supervisor's house, are in generally poor condition, needing considerable outlay to refurbish and bring to comfortable standards and safety criteria.

Up steps and in a gated courtyard setting, with lovely, rambling gardens, they were last refurbished in 1965-1970, and have pitched slate roofs with lead barrel roofed dormers, repointed limestone rubble walls, slate-hung gables, some very old exposed internal beams, and latticed windows (some in steel, others in timber).

The chimneys and the supervisor's house porch are in red brick, with a stone carved crest inscribed with the date 1682 over the main door to the old supervisor's residence.

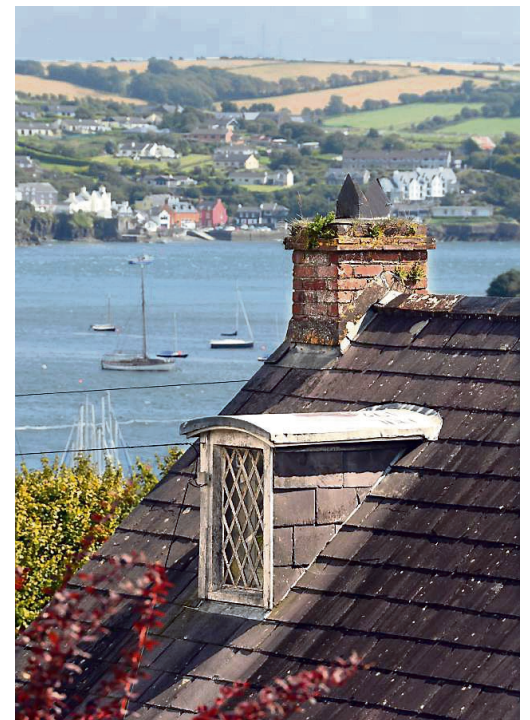
The overall site is one third of an acre, near Kinsale's Municipal Offices with a narrow public road by Winters Hill forming a second boundary.

Interest is expected from those with heritage and building conservation credentials, as well as possible niche tourism accommodation, with Kinsale as the southernmost point of the Wild Atlantic Way, and one of the country's most visited and admired locations, guaranteeing queues of guests who'd be keen to repay alms to stay a night or few here.

There are a number of other alms houses in Irish towns and cities, now in a variety of uses, while in the UK the Almshouse Association represents 1,700 independent almshouse charities, providing homes for over 35,000 people.

**VERDICT:** A very special case.

Pictures: Denis Scannell



## Kinsale, Cork

€350,000

Size: 2,700 sq ft over five houses

Bedrooms: 10

Bathrooms: 5

BER: Exempt

Best feature: Kinsale heritage

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