

INTRODUCTION OF LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY

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Letchworth garden city was born out of the dreams and ambitions of one of the greatest social visionaries who ever lived – Ebenezer Howard. He saw the garden city model as an alternative to the poor environment and quality of life in the Victorian slums of London. At the turn of the 20th century, about 330,000 Londoners had one room dwellings. His skill lay in creating the vision and devising some of the key enabling mechanisms. He was of course, no town planner, and certainly not an architect. He needed others to help create the skeleton of the garden city, far less put flesh on the bones.

What motivated Howard apart from the grim realities of London living? Undoubtedly he had been motivated by many and indeed disparate men. Early socialist literature sowed the most important seeds.

Through the diagram depicting three magnets, town, country, and town country, Howard attempted to prove that neither town nor country could, by themselves, afford the residents a full productive life. Town and country must be married and out of this joyous union would spring a new hope, a new life, and a new civilisation.

Howard felt that he could demonstrate that the best of town and country could exist in a way which was practical and sound, whether viewed from the ethical or the economic standpoint.

In physical terms, Howard's garden city was to be a 6,000-acre estate to be held in trust by development companies with security for both debt-holders and citizens. 1,000 acres would constitute the garden city itself, which Howard depicted schematically in circular form with a population of 30,000. Around it he proposed an agricultural green belt with a further population of 2,000, providing the city with food and raw materials. A main railway line was joined to the city by connecting sidings that, in turn, fed into a branch line circling the entire town. Municipal buildings surrounded a small park at the city centre core. Behind them, and separated by a further park, was a circular shopping arcade, a Crystal Palace, effectively.

Around this, a series of concentric avenues circled towards the countryside. Mid-way between centre and outer circumference lay Grand Avenue – a third circular park, in which were situated six schools and churches. On the outer ring, were factories, warehouses, coal and timber yards in front of the railways. Traversing the avenues were six magnificent boulevards which divided the city into six wards. Howard hoped that these wards would function as neighbourhoods. Houses of various styles were to be built on lots averaging 20 foot x 130 foot. Some properties would have common gardens and cooperative kitchens.

Although the company would be the city's sole landlord, it would lease to a variety of enterprises, some capitalists, some cooperative. Howard assumed that the city could exist on revenues and rents, calculated so as to pay interest to the development company on its investment. That would allow a gradual reduction of debt, and finance municipal maintenance and construction. He argued that the rents would be considerably reduced by the fact that the city was to be built on land that was in the countryside and therefore untouched by rising metropolitan or suburban prices. Howard imagined that most of the houses would be constructed by building societies, cooperatives, or even the company itself. City government would be entrusted to an elected board of management of both men and women.

Of course, the above ambition was never translated into reality as Letchworth Garden City.

Why? Well from the start there was conflict between the property men, the money men, and the visionaries. Howard refused to understand how important the promise of the 5% return was to investors and was told unequivocally by his board that cherished projects had to be put aside to put the investment onto a business footing. There was another side to the ethical question and that was loyalty to the board. That sounds familiar. Howard, indeed, became a casualty of the process of compromise, being removed from his position of managing director and relegated to the task of writing and lecturing while attending to the design of Letchworth.

So what do we conclude from the history surrounding the development of Letchworth?

My first conclusion is that many of Letchworth's founders certainly the utopologists and the middle class idealists, perhaps less so the ordinary working men who had come to get a job, would not have been entirely proud of the garden city as it was originally developed. I suspect they got a bit of everything, but not as much as they wanted of anything. But, of course, the fundamentals were there and indeed still are.

Let us look at these. By doing so, we will get a feel of how the world's first garden city has stood the test of time.

First, the marrying of town and country. The notion that lechworthians would live off the produce of the rural estate never really came to fruition. In part this was down to agricultural economics, in part the relatively poor quality of some of the farmland. Curiously, a hundred years on, we have reintroduced cattle which in time will produce lechworth's own organic beef. In terms of physically linking town and country, we are achieving more today than ever. In the last five years alone, the heritage foundation has made the countryside more attractive by planting 14 miles of hedgerows, 40,000 trees, improved access to the countryside through the garden city greenway. The greenway is a 13.8 mile circular route circumnavigating the urban estate, for walkers, cyclists and horse-riders. All in all, some £1.25m has been spent 'marrying town and country', and in so doing increasing the biodiversity of the estate significantly.

Secondly, howard sought a structured town with discreet industrial, housing and shopping areas. That vision is still largely intact, albeit, of course, we have had to respond to changes in industrial and residential developments over the years. Initially, lechworth was considered to have significant potential for industrial business. The provision of land, labour, and infrastructure at competitive prices was crucial. Expansion space was also important as many inner-city businesses found themselves constrained in the major british cities.

Manufacturing, with a high value-added content, small raw material inputs and a high skill content to produce goods with a high ratio of value to weight, was gaining in importance in the first decade of the 20th century, and lechworth considered itself well placed to attract such businesses. Ewart and son, manufacturers of hot water geezers were the first lessees in 1905, printing and engineering were the most notable early successes.

The emergence of a consumer based manufacturing sector was very much an early 20th century phenomenon. A number of firms in this category were established before 1914 in lechworth. Herz and falk embroidery company and meredews, cabinet makers, quickly settled in lechworth.

Of course, the arts and crafts movement encouraged the growth of craft workshops.

In terms of finding a prime place in the history of the garden city of course, the spirella company merits more than a mention. It was an american concern, founded by william wallace concade which ended up developing the magnificent spirella building and employing eventually some 4,500 members of staff. Through the middle part of the 20th century, a few key firms became dominant – spirella, dents, icl, k&l, shelvoke and drewry and borg warner. By the mid seventies however, high inflation followed by economic recession dealt severe blows to the lechworth manufacturing base and created the need in the late 1970's for a new industrial revolution based on information technology and electronics. This is very much the case now. Such industry as remains in lechworth garden city is at the high value-added end of the market, with economic activity being dominated by the service sector.

I am sure the founders of lechworth would have expected us to respond to changing times. I am sure also that they would have applauded the strategic work which has been undertaken continually by the heritage foundation; in relation to the various parts of the town, a strategy for the regeneration of the town centre – developed with great success – an urban design strategy – a strategy for revitalising the industrial areas.

The economic success of the town was fundamental to the early founders, hence, as i mentioned earlier, some of the differences of view between howard and his board. Economic success remains a huge priority for the heritage foundation. Since lechworth garden city heritage foundation was set up in 1995, the value of the garden city estate has increased by over 135%.

How has this been delivered? Initially, a sound, reasonably diverse industrial base was developed in lechworth and was then eroded. By the 1990's it was being substantially replaced by more service sector oriented businesses and that has been sustained, indeed enhanced, in recent years.

The heritage foundation has invested hugely in providing the type of business space which businesses need in the 21st century. The splendid spirella building, restored by the foundation at a cost of some £11m, is perhaps the most visible example. We considered residential and other options before deciding on office use. Believe me, it was a high-risk investment at the time, given that lechworth did not have a

reputation as a strong office location. However, the new spirella has proved to be a huge success. The building was fully let within a year and since then rents have increased by over 50%. The building won one of the united kingdom's property oscars, with the foundation being awarded the innovation of the year award at the property awards in 1999. More recently, one of the most disliked buildings in lechworth, the old icl building opposite kennedy gardens was transformed into top quality high technology business space by the foundation at a cost of some £4.5m. It is already more than 50% let. New developments on the business park and industrial areas continued this trend of producing quality space which meets the needs of businesses operating in the growth sectors of the economy. Only in the last month, we have agreed the disposal of a site in the industrial area to altro flooring for their subsidiary, autoglym who make high quality car cleaning products.

Of course, our views on the overall interests of the garden city do not always 'square' with government policy. In the uk today, the government is pushing for more and more housing on 'brownfield' i.e. Regenerated sites in towns and cities. While we are happy with more housing, the heritage foundation believes we must also prioritise our employment land. There is no point in an increased population but no new jobs. Let me move on to another important aspect of the early garden city.

Architectural style and substance were always important. The founders initial ambitions were interpreted and translated into an architectural style which was applauded and valued. Changes in national legislation, which allowed people to buy the freeholds of their homes could have been a major threat, bringing with it the loss of controls in leases. Instead, a scheme of management was agreed in the high court which exerts similar controls. Now, more than ever, the preservation and restoration of key properties is being taken seriously, from the grand scale restoration of the spirella building to the Broadway cinema, transformed from a down at heel single screen operation to a three screen state of the art art deco cinema. Individual residential properties are just as important in their totality and the heritage foundation has produced a design guide and detailed guidance notes which encourages best practice. We also encourage this through giving heritage grants. Essentially, we are encouraging high standards in terms of planning and architecture.

The joy of living a healthy lifestyle was important to Howard and his followers. It still is. These days we don't encourage sleeping in the open air, which used to happen at the idiosyncratic cloisters. However, mainly thanks to grants from the heritage foundation, lechworth's range of sports facilities is unsurpassed. We also have a splendid Norton Common to stroll on and our country walks.

A key principle of Howard's vision was the involvement of the community in the management of the town. The heritage foundation's structure offers greater involvement than ever. We have six elected governors, 10 nominated governors from clubs and societies, whose activities mirror the heritage foundation's charitable objects, and 14 general governors, who we have even advertised for. Not for lechworth now clandestine appointments by a secretary of state for the environment. We have a board of management elected by the governors. Democracy in action. Our founders would be proud.

People were to live close enough to work so that they could walk. Many still could, although they are too lazy to, preferring the motor car whose massive intervention lechworth's founders could not have envisaged, and which they certainly would not have welcomed. Interestingly, though, our greenway, which I referred to earlier, has, in places, encouraged more people to take to their bikes rather than use cars.

Shopping has played its part in the development of lechworth. Howard had no love for what he described as 'the absurd and wasteful multiplication of shops', yet his crystal palace was there for shopping, which required the 'joy of deliberation and selection' – speciality retail in other words. Well, we hardly have a plethora of national multiple retailers in lechworth, but we do have a splendid array of speciality retail, some of it thriving under our own 'crystal palace', the glass topped refurbished arcade. The regeneration of lechworth retailing, the key strut of town centre rejuvenation, has been perhaps the most visible of the foundation's achievements in recent years. The garden city's retailing offer was in desperate difficulties by the mid-1990s. Sainsbury's supermarket had moved to the business park some years before and this had been hugely debilitating for the town centre. North Hertfordshire College – the prime further education provider in the area, which had a substantial town centre presence – albeit not a very pretty one – was keen to sell its land to a supermarket. However, that land, in itself, could not produce a site large enough, and in the right location, to attract a supermarket which would bring the footfall into the town centre which was so desperately required. The local authority was persuaded to join the college and the heritage foundation in marketing an enlarged site, including a council owned car park, and the site was eventually sold to William Morrisons Supermarket plc, an aggressively expanding supermarket operator. Their development, including the restoration of two existing buildings has proved

to be a huge success, bringing some 30,000 people per week into Letchworth town centre.

Key to the regeneration of Letchworth town centre was the introduction of leisure elements to sit alongside retail. As I mentioned previously, the foundation set up Broadway Cinema Ltd and redeveloped the Art Deco cinema. Also, rather controversially, the foundation brought three new bars into Letchworth town centre. Letchworth had been known as a 'dry' town for a long time, and, indeed, in the past, local people had been allowed to vote to decide whether or not it should remain so. Such overt democracy was quickly set aside in the interest of town centre revitalisation.

A further initiative of town centre revitalisation was the transformation of empty property above shops into flats, under the living over the shops initiative. Again, this proved immediately successful, attracting people to live in the town centre. Part of the attraction of living there was of course the rapidly improving facilities there. Restaurants started to open to supplement the bars and cinema nightlife. Positively, to my mind, many of the town centre flat dwellers do not own cars. They work in London, travel by train, and enjoy the quiet life at weekends in the garden city.

However town centres still face many challenges in the UK and the foundation is now pressing ahead with plans to rejuvenate two major town centre sites in the Wynd and Arena areas. We propose to add almost 8000 sq metres of new retail space, over 220 new flats and an additional 500 car parking spaces.

The original plans for Letchworth stressed the importance of a railway. It is still massively important, albeit for different reasons. Many thousands of people now commute from Letchworth to work in London and, curiously perhaps, as many people come in to Letchworth to work as leave it in the morning.

The flame of innovation, which played such a part in creating the world's first garden city, I can assure you still burns as brightly as ever. In opening the Spirella building, the Prince of Wales acknowledged that we were an example to others in the UK must follow in relation to regenerating derelict listed buildings. A major BBC television series on the restoration of important old buildings in the UK recently held up the Spirella building as an example of how things should be done. It was described as probably the most attractive industrial building in the country.

Clearly, in physical terms, Letchworth is not a mirror image of what it was in its formative years. It is a town, after all, not a museum. Times have changed and the garden city has adjusted accordingly. However, the fundamental principles remain largely intact and the good people of the garden city still enjoy the best of town and the best of country.

However, most fundamental to Howard's vision was the retention of value, of profit within the garden city. The Heritage Foundation structure now meets that aspiration and does so in a highly visible way. Every penny made through the property and farming activities of the foundation and its subsidiary companies is either reinvested in the garden city or distributed by way of our charitable activities. Since the foundation was set up over £15.5 million, has been distributed through direct or indirect charitable expenditure.

There are many admirable places in the world where planners and architects have followed the 'physical model' of the garden city. To my knowledge, there are none where the value of the development is retained entirely within it. Therein lies the uniqueness of Letchworth Garden City; therein lies the challenge for others to follow.

For them to do so, will require a broader, longer term view to be taken by governments than has been evident to date. A significant part of the initial investment to set up a new community will have to come from the public purse. Added to some of the developer's profits, the income from the public sector capital dowry needs to be the lifeblood of the added value elements of the community 'offer'. It is futile for governments to make the up front public sector investment, then claw it back, as has happened in so many cases – not least the new towns built from the 1950's in the UK.

The Letchworth Garden City model, with the Heritage Foundation operating as an industrial and provident society is imperfect; however, 100 years on from the advent of the first garden city, I suspect that it is as good as it gets.

The worrying thought is that under the planning regimes which currently apply in the UK, Letchworth Garden City could not now be built.

One hundred years on from its birth, I believe that the best contribution Letchworth Garden City can make

now is to continually re-examine and refresh itself to make sure the garden city concept remains relevant in the 21st century.

That should not, and must not, be an inward looking exercise; lechworth garden city must learn from the new garden cities every bit as much as they learn from it.

To my mind, there is no better way of creating sustainable new communities than following the garden city model. It is a model which china could usefully explore in some detail. You have the land in public ownership, you have huge requirements for housing, most importantly as a nation you have the dynamism, drive and vision to avoid replicating the mistakes made by so many other countries as they met huge demands for new housing. Their mistakes have led to communities being bulldozed within decades.

China can do much better and I am confident that it will.