

special birthday greetings to Wyndham Thomas CBE

Congratulations to one of the Association's most senior Vice-Presidents, an energetic TCPA supporter: Wyndham Thomas celebrated his 95th birthday on 1 February 2019. Rising from a strongly socialist family in a Welsh mining community, to the dizzying heights of the UK New Town and urban regeneration programmes, his story is remarkable.

Walking in the footsteps of his parents, Wyndham became a Labour councillor (and then the UK's youngest ever Mayor) for Hemel Hempstead, which was growing as a New Town. He stood as the Labour parliamentary candidate in the 1955 general election, with Aneurin Bevan speaking for him at a hustings rally. He was not elected and took up a scholarship at the London School of Economics on trade union studies, and was then appointed as Director of the TCPA, in which role he served from 1955 to 1967.

These were the closing years of Conservative government under Harold Macmillan and then from 1963 Sir Alec Douglas-Home, during which time the pendulum surprisingly swung back from *laissez-faire* to a more energetic attempt to gain some control over the economy. Government inquiries were initiated (to many of which the TCPA made submissions) on 'fields as diverse as railways, transport needs, ports, traffic in towns, company law, consumer protection, secondary and higher education, civil research and broadcasting'.¹ Between 1961 and 1964, there was an unexpected revival of the New Towns programme, too, with six designations in the North East and Central Scotland.

The incoming Harold Wilson government of 1964 had to confront the fact that the South East (and the West Midlands) were growing so fast that regional strategies were needed. *The South East Study* (1964) recommended action to be taken by central government, including the creation of new cities at Southampton-Portsmouth, Bletchley and Newbury, with New Towns at Ashford and Stansted and major expansions at Ipswich, Northampton, Peterborough and Swindon. The TCPA was busy in the action that followed, encouraging, advising and cajoling.

The Director of the TCPA and the Chair need to have a good relationship, and Wyndham's Chair was Peter Self of the London School of Economics (later Professor Emeritus), with other intellectual giants on



Wyndham Thomas was a member of the Board of London Dockland Development Corporation during the 1980s

the Executive including Maurice Ash, Derek Senior, Lewis Keeble, Michael Dower and David Eversley. President (and keeping a keen eye) was Sir Frederic Osborn ('FJO'). The TCPA's headquarters were still in King Street, in the working fruit vegetable and flower market at Covent Garden. On an adjacent corner was the headquarters of the Communist Party, a location quickly referred to by TCPA staff as 'Lost Causes Corner'. The Association's financial base was, as so often, fragile.

The rampant property speculation in the early 1960s agitated the TCPA, who were delighted that Conservative Minister Sir Keith Joseph proposed large-scale acquisition of land in areas where housing was scarce, and a 'betterment' or development tax to assist with funding. Alas, the Cabinet did not support him. So it fell to Wilson's Labour government to tackle the problem, and they

devised a Land Commission. Through Parliamentary process, instead of an adversarial posture that would attack land and house prices and developers' profits, the Commission was to be more advisory in nature, aiming to ease land supply problems and assist in overcoming planning delays.

Having led the negotiations with the Crown Estate to move the Association into Crown Estate property at 17 Carlton House Terrace on favourable terms, Wyndham left us to be a Member of that Land Commission, on which he served for a year, before being appointed as General Manager of Peterborough New Town Development Corporation.

In that powerful post he distinguished himself in establishing what he came to call a 'partnership New Town', making great effort to draw Peterborough City Council into the core of the Development Corporation's project as if it was theirs, too. This rooted the New Town project well, and it was significant that in due course the council honoured Wyndham with the Freedom of the City of Peterborough in 2012, at a very happy ceremony (during which, typically, Wyndham used the platform to deliver an insightful thorough-going speech on relevant planning issues of the day).

Peterborough was the first New Town to have a very large pre-existing city nucleus. The *Expansion Study of Peterborough* by Sir Henry Wells had been published in 1963, and Hancock-Hawkes produced the *Draft Basic Plan* in September 1968, by which time the Development Corporation was in place. For a General Manager and a new Board to be handed a masterplan at an advanced state of preparation is, in practical terms, a nightmare. There is the need to appear to be at peace with the work done, but to confront the actual task of implementation and of carrying the local people and institutions along with the task. There is also the human need for the Corporation to put its own thumbprints on the plan. A diplomatic dance with the Ministry and their appointed consultants ensues.

At Peterborough this was a challenge to which Wyndham could rise, with his charm, wiliness, and awesome organisational skills. He is blessed with a captivating voice and wondrous dexterity with words.

After some bumping and jostling, Wyndham adjusted and re-told the vision, which was approved as the masterplan in May 1971.² The vision claimed to be the first attempt at scale to achieve the Social City envisaged by Ebenezer Howard – a cluster of separate Garden Cities in a green setting linked to a somewhat larger 'central city'. FJO was a bit sniffy about this claim – 'it is difficult to appreciate the parallel', he wrote³ – but a cluster of clustered neighbourhoods it is.

By the time of Margaret Thatcher's premature dissolution of the New Towns, including Peterborough Development Corporation, which was closed in September 1988, Wyndham had already started a new phase of his career, deploying his skills and experience as Chair of Inner City Enterprises, and then from 1981 to 1988 on the Board of London Docklands Development Corporation (where he tried to exert some discipline in its spending). Wyndham also chaired the House Builders' Federation Committee of Inquiry into Private Housebuilding and the Inner Cities, which reported in 1987.

Wyndham and his wife Betty were married in 1947, and Betty has provided the strong family support for what is an extraordinary career. They have lived in Peterborough since Wyndham committed to build the New Town. One of their daughters – Sally – served as Vice-Chair at the TCPA until 2018, and in her work chases housing and social planning issues (and the need to capture a fair share of land values in the public interest), which must be pleasing to her father.

Enough said for a happy birthday: the TCPA says cheers to you and yours, Wyndham! Many happy returns!

David Lock

● **David Lock CBE** is a Vice-President and Past Chair of the TCPA.

Notes

- 1 Dennis Hardy: *New Towns to Green Politics: Campaigning for Town and Country Planning 1946-1990*. E&FN Spon, 1991, p.65 – the TCPA's 'official history' and a fabulous overview of the decades since 1945 told from the Association's perspective
- 2 This tale is told with plans in Chapter 7: 'Townships in a park' in the Corporation's official history, *The Peterborough Effect: Reshaping a City*, by Terence Bendixson (Peterborough Development Corporation, 1988)
- 3 F Osborn and A Whittick: *New Towns: Their Origins, Achievements and Progress*. Leonard Hill, 1977, p.250