

welwyn garden city's centenary



The lantern parade by local schoolchildren at the launch of the Welwyn Garden City Centenary celebrations

Let's cast our minds back before the Atlee Government's Town and Country Planning Act 1947. There were regulations about the use of land to protect public health and to promote agricultural advancement, but the need for 'planning permission' did not exist.

Having privately published his book *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in 1898, and seen it enthusiastically taken up and commercially re-printed in 1899, Ebenezer 'Ben' Howard had been delighted so quickly to have gained influential supporters in all walks of life, and to see the foundation of a powerful and influential fan club – the Garden City Association (GCA), which much later became the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA).

Even though the propogandist GCA had set up a Garden City Pioneer Company in 1902 to focus on finding a site for the first demonstration project

(they were homing in on the Chartley Castle Estate in Staffordshire after visits to sites in Warwickshire, Essex and Nottinghamshire¹), they were alerted at short notice to an auction of farmland in Hertfordshire, and successfully bid for land for what was to become Letchworth Garden City. The more wealthy backers of the GCA assembled the money to honour the auction bid.

While there was no planning system to constrain the Company in acquiring land and declaring it to be for a proposed Garden City, there was no planning system to protect potentially competing neighbouring land from market forces, so further land had to be bought by subterfuge before the project could be announced formally in October 1903 by First Garden City Limited.

Progress was painfully slow. Raising soft development loans was as difficult as it is now,

and the Company was under financial stress. It was also strained from the tensions between the pioneer purists and the development pragmatists, from press scrutiny (often hostile or mocking), and from a degree of agitation that their masterplanner Raymond Unwin so quickly won a commission simultaneously to plan a much more grand 'competitor' scheme in the same vector of Outer London, at Hampstead Garden Suburb.²

Less than 20 years later, and after the First World War, came Welwyn, the second Garden City. The GCA (by then renamed as the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association) was rapidly gaining international recognition, and major conferences and publications focused on the progress at Letchworth. The argument became focused on the need for government to take up the Garden City invention (as Howard called it) and embark on a major national programme. 'Land Fit for Heroes' put breeze in the sails of the campaign, but the government prevaricated and – after huge lobbying – only went so far as to enable local authorities to acquire land for the purpose if they wished. Weak, buck passing. Rather like government policy on the subject today.

Howard (now 70) was impatient, saying 'if you wait for the authorities to build new towns you will be older than Methusala before they start',³ and declared he would find a second site himself. He had already been in (fruitless) correspondence with Lord Salisbury to try to persuade the reluctant gent to sell land for a second Garden City, and so had

been looking at the area around the Hatfield House Estate in broad terms.⁴

Then, Howard happened to see an advert for a major land auction to be held on 30 May 1919 in the Welwyn area. With only days to go, and in great excitement, he briefed the Chair of the Association,

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Richard Reiss, who with others helped quickly raise most of the money for the £5,000 deposit to buy the 1,500 acre shooting estate (the 'mesmerised' auctioneer staked Howard for the balance). The balance of £50,000 had to be raised fast from Association supporters, both individuals and institutions, and at twice the price per acre (making a total of £100,000 to be raised) Lord Salisbury was persuaded to sell a further 700 acres to reach the minimum viably sized site for the project. A public flotation was a flop (investors were not attracted to the limited dividend of 7%).⁵



Night-time illuminations at the Welwyn Garden City Centenary launch

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The post-war economic depression would have brought the whole project to a halt, but through persistent campaigning by the Association the new Housing Act was amended to empower the government to provide loans specifically for the development of Garden Cities. By the skin of its teeth, it might be said, in 1919 Welwyn Garden City was born.⁶

So 100 years of development later – after a saga way beyond the scope of this column – on Friday 17 January 2020 the Centenary celebrations were launched in Welwyn Garden City, with music, night-time illuminations, speeches and a wonderful lantern parade by local schools. It was cold but dry: the rain, almost constant since September, had stopped.

The driver of the Centenary year has been the Welwyn Garden City Centenary Foundation,⁷ working under the Chairmanship of Peter Waine and energised by Board member Graeme Bell OBE (a TCPA Vice-President and 30 years a local resident). Peter and the Foundation's Patron, the Marquess of Salisbury,⁸ both spoke enthusiastically of Welwyn Garden City and its message for modern times, from the balcony of the Howard Centre above the crowd. The schoolchildren, with their families and friendship groups, made a sparkling progression through the streets. It was a happy landmark moment.

The Centenary programme for 2020 is a full one.⁹ A carnival will take place on 11 July. Over 50 of the town's sports and leisure clubs are planning events and competitions to run throughout the year, alongside the town's music and performing arts groups with a festival. A sculpture of Sir Ebenezer Howard by sculptor Ben Twiston-Davies has been commissioned and is being cast in bronze right now. A Centenary Walk will circle the periphery of Welwyn Garden City. Four new City of Trees trails will be launched. Other highlights in the calendar include performances from 24 April until 2 May of *City of Tomorrow*, written by the Garden City's poet and playwright Glyn Maxwell. An International Symposium on Garden Cities and New Towns is to be held on 10-11 September.¹⁰ The hardy second Garden City in the world is worth a visit this special year.

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Notes

1 R Beevers: *The Garden City Utopia: A Critical Biography of Ebenezer Howard*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p.85

- 2 There was a theological debate on whether 'Garden Suburb' was an acceptable diminutive derivative of 'Garden City'. The pragmatists won: both were eventually embraced by the movement as siblings. The definitive book on the project is Mervyn Miller's *Hampstead Garden Suburb: Arts and Crafts Utopia?* (Phillimore, 2006)
- 3 *The Garden City Utopia* (see note 1), p.160
- 4 This correspondence, and the start-up at Welwyn Garden City, is described in Dennis Hardy's *From Garden Cities to New Towns: Campaigning for Town and Country Planning 1899-1946* (Spon, 1991) – the first of his two-volume history of the TCPA. The work by the late Robert Beevers (d.2010), *The Garden City Utopia* (see note 1) focused on Howard himself rather than his projects (his proclaimed 'critical perspective' is confirmed in the controversialist title of his final chapter, 'A heroic simpleton?')
- 5 *The Garden City Utopia* (see note 1), chap. 13
- 6 For more early design and development information, see Louis de Soissons and Arthur Kenyon's *Site Planning in Practice at Welwyn Garden City*, facsimile reprint with new essays by Paul Roberts and Isabelle Taylor (Turnbury Consulting Ltd, 2017)
- 7 The Welwyn Garden City Centenary Foundation and its programme is sponsored in part by the Lady Margaret Patterson Osborn Trust, established by the family of TCPA and Welwyn Garden City stalwart Sir Frederic Osborn, in memory of their mother. Foundation Chair Peter Waine is a former national Chairman of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and of both the National Fruit Collection and the Tree Council. He is a Director of the Gardens Trust, and a former Chairman of the Welwyn Garden City Society
- 8 Robert Cecil is the Seventh Marquess of Salisbury. His great-grandfather, the Fourth Marquess, became a supporter of Ebenezer Howard and strong advocate of the Garden City movement – he was elected to represent Great Britain as Vice-President of the TCPA-founded International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation (IFHP) nearly a century ago. The family seat, Hatfield House, adjoins the Garden City on the south side
- 9 See the Welwyn Garden City Centenary Foundation's website, at www.wgc100.org
- 10 Further details are available from the 'Events' pages of the TCPA website, at www.tcpa.org.uk/Event/celebrating-welwyn-garden-city-at-100