

# the osborns at welwyn garden city

**David Lock** outlines the contribution of Frederic and Margaret Osborn to the development and life of Welwyn Garden City



**16 Guessens Road, Welwyn Garden City, formerly home of Frederic and Margaret Osborn**

In the TCPA's work to prove the worth of Garden Cities and new towns as a strategic tool in the social, economic and environmental planning of any civilised nation, the family home of Frederic Osborn and his wife Margaret at 16 Guessens Road in Welwyn Garden City was for around 50 years in effect a 'field headquarters' for the movement. They were highly active in national and international campaigning. At the same time they committed themselves to their pioneering life in the Garden City itself, gaining incontrovertible first-hand experience of the theory in practice. Yet theirs was also a family home, with children Tom and Margaret exposed to the thrill of it all.

The Osborns came to be in Welwyn Garden City thanks to Frederic. Born in 1885, his childhood home was in Clapham Road in Lambeth, London.<sup>1</sup> When he was 11 his father fell seriously ill and lost his job, and at the age of 15 Frederic had to leave council school and go to work. After a few years in different clerking positions he settled as the

clerk and book-keeper to a housing society which owned tenant blocks built in the 1870s for workers, with investors receiving a limited dividend ('5% philanthropy').

In 1912 – at the age of 27 – Osborn was appointed Secretary and Manager of the [Ebenezer] Howard Cottage Society at Letchworth. His duties included 'settling families into new houses and collecting rents', and he 'became involved in estate development generally, and got to know people's likes and dislikes in housing',<sup>2</sup> and was 'overwhelmed by the beauty and freshness of Letchworth as a blend of town and country'.<sup>3</sup> This move had profound consequences. Letchworth was only nine years old when Osborn arrived, and had about 2,000 houses with a population of about 7,000, and 12 factories. He was exhilarated and convinced by the great experiment, and became an outspoken advocate of the Garden City idea and supporter of Howard.

Osborn had become involved in the Labour Party and personally was 'anti-war' in the lead-up to



Source: F. J. O. – Practical Idealist, by Arnold Whittick

**Margaret and Frederic Osborn talking with Lilly Medin and her grandson Michael at their home in Västerås, during a TCPA study tour of Sweden in September 1954**

hostilities starting in 1914. He did not declare himself formally a 'conscientious objector', but quietly moved back to London and evaded national service by undertaking research in the British Museum.

In 1916 Osborn married Margaret Paterson Rob of Glasgow, whom he had met at a Fabian Society summer school. Margaret was born in 1890 and had graduated from Glasgow University, after which her work as a teacher of handicapped children and in the slums of her native city aroused a passionate and life-long concern for the problems of poverty and environment. Margaret obtained a job with an anti-war printing establishment in London and supported her husband. Margaret was to have a salutary influence on Osborn's subsequent life. She had an extensive knowledge of Scottish, English, American and French poetry and prose, and was keen on current affairs. It was to prove a very happy marriage, providing a relaxing domestic background to Osborn's crusade, to which he had now become dedicated.<sup>4</sup>

Within two years, in 1918 and with others, Osborn

formed the New Townsmen Group of campaigners, for which he authored *New Towns after the War*.<sup>5</sup> He was now in high-profile campaigning mode.

On 30 May 1919 Howard successfully bid at auction, without sufficient funds even for a deposit, for the 590 hectare (1,458 acre) Panshanger Estate near Welwyn, which he had spotted from the train to Letchworth years earlier as a possible Garden City site and had looked around with Osborn and CB Purdom. It was fortuitous it came up for auction. Howard showed the site secretly to the Association Chairman RL Reiss a few days before the auction, who said he would raise the money if Howard could win the bid.<sup>6</sup>

After the auction Howard appointed Osborn to proceed with forming a company and organising the project.<sup>7</sup> By October this involved buying more land including 689 acres (279 hectares) from Lord Salisbury at Hatfield House, whom Howard had been badgering for some time. Osborn was Welwyn Garden City Ltd's Company Secretary, Estates Manager, and publicist. He considered Howard, himself, CB Purdom and

RL Reiss to be the 'co-founders' of Welwyn Garden City.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time – it seems 'conflict of interest', as we know it, cannot have existed – Osborn had been appointed as the Clerk for the Parish Council, and also Clerk, Finance and Rating Officer for the Urban District Council.<sup>9</sup> He would say that he enjoyed writing letters to himself, and replying, as it was very efficient. This local life was in addition to his national and international activities as a campaigner, which involved writing articles, speaking at conferences, and writing letters to anyone who seemed to him to be useful or important for the cause.

In 1921 Frederic and Margaret moved into 8 Brockswood Lane in Welwyn Garden City, one of the first roads to be constructed, joining the earliest pioneer residents. That year their son Thomas was born in the house – 'the first boy born in Welwyn Garden City', he used to boast, a baby girl having beaten him to the post – and in 1923 their daughter Margaret was born. In 1925 the family moved to a new house at 16 Guessens Road, which was to remain the family home. Margaret died in 1970 and FJO (as he became known) in 1978. Living the dream in Welwyn Garden City, FJO made few major decisions without consulting his wife Margaret, and he habitually read his memoranda to her before finalising them. Later in his letters to Lewis Mumford and others he often referred to her reactions.<sup>10</sup>

Locally, Margaret Osborn proved to a great asset to the growing community of the Garden City. For the next 50 years she devoted herself to local social welfare, educational, and cultural interests. She was appointed a magistrate in 1939 and served for many years as Chairman of the Matrimonial and Juvenile Court and of the Probation Committee. In 1938 she conducted an inquiry into labour conditions in Welwyn Garden City. She was a strenuous advocate of peace through collective security. Margaret had become a keen member of the League of Nations (and after the Second World War was a founder member of the Welwyn Garden City branch of the United Nations Association).

Margaret was an active supporter of the TCPA in her own right, and a contributor to this journal. She travelled with her husband FJO on study tours and attended congresses of the International Federation for Housing and Planning (IFHP) and was known and respected by planning enthusiasts and academics all over the world. Hazel Evans' obituary of Margaret in this journal said:

*'She was a quiet warrior but a warrior none the less, and the people of her own Welwyn Garden City have paid heartfelt tribute to her example and her influence.'*<sup>11</sup>

FJO wrote from experience of pioneer life in Garden Cities in *Green Belt Cities*,<sup>12</sup> recording the

physical difficulties on unmade roads, few shops, and poor public transport and other deficiencies. But he observed:

*'A small but growing number of people mostly of urban habits, [finding] themselves thrown together, strangers to each other, and greater strangers to the scattered rural population whose land they were invading... the group being so mixed, it might be thought that any sort of social 'getting together' would be difficult. The contrary proved the case. Social energy was released at its highest power; barriers of class and income were for the time being ignored... Everybody without exception went to the same meetings and functions, to the same religious meetings, political discussions, dances, social gatherings, tennis parties, amateur plays, impromptu concerts... There was no established social hierarchy to thwart people's spontaneous friendliness.'*

FJO 'rejoiced' that both Letchworth and Welwyn 'are small enough, and are intended always to be small enough, for personalities and particular interests to influence their character; and that their social and community life is additional to and does not replace their family life'. 'Here,' commented Osborn's biographer, Arnold Whittick, 'are strong arguments for restricting the size of towns and making them thereby a good soil for an active community life...'.<sup>13</sup>

It was to Welwyn Garden City's drama pursuits that FJO was particularly attracted, and in 1929 he became Chairman of the Welwyn Garden City Drama Festival, with Flora Robson as stage director. Osborn wrote and produced plays and sketches, some of which have been revived at Welwyn Garden City's Barn Theatre.

Of importance to the viability of the Osborn family home was that, when FJO's employment with Welwyn Garden City Limited was terminated in 1936 (it is suspected that he fell out with the Chairman, Sir Theodore Chambers), Murphy Radio in Welwyn Garden City (later Marconi) appointed him as Finance Director and agreed that he could continue his national campaign for new towns. That year FJO also became Honorary Secretary of the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association (now the TCPA), forming a powerful partnership there with Gilbert McAllister, who was Business Secretary and Editor.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, aside from FJO's recognised life as a campaigner for Garden Cities and new towns nationally and internationally, he was at the same time engaged locally until 1936 in his work for the Welwyn Garden City Company and both of the local authorities, and in the life of the Garden City generally. Margaret's commitment to the movement enabled her to act as FJO's sounding board and

counsellor, and fellow campaigner at large, while having a full civic life in Welwyn Garden City (and in wider Hertfordshire too), all while running the family home and raising Tom and Margaret.<sup>15</sup>

The children were not exempt from the Osborn zeal. His daughter Margaret wrote that:

*'Our indoctrination started early. It was FJO's wont to try out various writings on the family – usually over lunch. We never knew just what he was working at in his little bolt-hole of a study upstairs, and when he came down to join us at table he could have in his hand anything from a new verse parody to a sliver of his evidence to the Barlow Commission on industrial location. Brickbats aimed at him from devotees of the fashionable tower-block architects might also be read out.'*<sup>16</sup>

The TCPA and CPRE shared the same President in the early days, and in some counties in recent decades CPRE branches have agreed that it is better to plan properly to do a few things well and at scale, such as planned new towns and growth areas, rather than allow careless developers free rein and let many ugly buildings pop up randomly and unsustainably.

At the time of writing, both organisations have joined with others to express dismay at the 'race to the bottom', as the Johnson government continues the chaotic dismantling of the planning system. This heads us further and further in exactly the wrong direction, almost perfectly misreading the public mood after months of everyone seeing what is sustainable and what is not, during the COVID-19 lockdown. The private development sector cannot be trusted absolutely, and needs a planning framework to stop a free-for-all and to enable business plans to be shaped. Beacons of light in this enveloping darkness, such as Welwyn Garden City, will eventually show the way. Once again.

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## Notes

- 1 A Whittick: *F. J. O. – Practical Idealist: A Biography of Sir Frederic Osborn*. TCPA, 1987, Chap. 1. Copies of the book are available from the TCPA (price £10)
- 2 *F. J. O. – Practical Idealist* (see note 1), p.19
- 3 FJ Osborn: 'Early days in a new town'. *Town & Country Planning*, 1968, Vol. 36, Jan.-Feb., 121-125 – one of Osborn's five 'Escaped Londoner' talks for the BBC, three of which are reprinted in full in *F. J. O. – Practical Idealist* (see note 1)
- 4 *F. J. O. – Practical Idealist* (see note 1), pp.25-26
- 5 *New Towns after the War*. JM Dent, 1918, revised and reprinted 1942, and reprinted 1943. The New Townsmen comprised Howard, Osborn, CB Purdom and WG Taylor. Purdom was a member of staff of First Garden City Ltd at Letchworth, and became the first Welwyn Garden City Company Finance Director, Managing Director of Welwyn Stores Ltd and of Welwyn Restaurants Ltd, and a powerful propagandist for the Garden City movement: his book *The Building of Satellite Towns* (1925) is essential reading. His colleagues found him increasingly difficult to work with as Welwyn Garden City got under way and, after much stress, by 1928 he was encouraged to resign. His wound did not heal and was revisited by him several times, ultimately as part of his biography, *Life Over Again* (JM Dent, 1951). The writer has not yet discovered WG Taylor
- 6 Richard Reiss was a Liberal politician and Howard supporter, and raised the auction sum from other supporters in the City of London. He became a Director (later Deputy Chairman) of the Company, later a member of the Board of the New Town Development Corporation appointed in 1948 to complete and expand the Garden City. His biography *R. L. Reiss* (privately published, undated) was completed from a draft by his wife Celia sometime after his death in 1959. He had a track record in housing policy and land reform before and after the First World War, and had been invited by the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association (now the TCPA) to be its Chairman. In 1922 he was also elected to the Board of Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust Ltd
- 7 *F. J. O. – Practical Idealist* (see note 1), p.31
- 8 A full account may be found in FJ Osborn: *Genesis of Welwyn Garden City*. TCPA 1970, produced for the 50th Jubilee – the quote here is itself cited in *F. J. O. – Practical Idealist* (see note 1), p.32
- 9 FJ Osborn and A Whittick: *New Towns: Their Origins, Achievements and Progress*. Leonard Hill, 1977, Third Edition, p.26
- 10 *F. J. O. – Practical Idealist* (see note 1), p.25-26
- 11 H Evans: 'Obituary: Lady Osborn MA, JP'. *Town & Country Planning*, 1970, Vol. 38, Sept., 381
- 12 FJ Osborn: *Green Belt Cities*. Faber & Faber, 1946, 'Chapter VI: Social life and culture'
- 13 *F. J. O. – Practical Idealist* (see note 1), p.37
- 14 *F. J. O. – Practical Idealist* (see note 1), p.56. *Homes, Towns and Countryside*, containing essays edited by Gilbert and Elizabeth McAllister (Batsford, 1945), stands as powerful advocacy for the movement
- 15 Son Tom became a doctor at the Medical Research Council, researching treatment for tuberculosis and leading to the BCG vaccination for children. The Lady Margaret Paterson Osborn Trust was established in 1988 by Dr Tom Osborn and his sister Margaret to support the amenities of Welwyn Garden City and promote the town planning and housing ideals to which their father had devoted his life. The Trust is named for their mother because, as Margaret put it, 'for 50 years her support, her capacity, and above all her judgment were crucial to our father's achievements'. The Trust has provided core funding to the Welwyn Garden City Centenary Foundation, and assisted some of its projects, including the Centenary Conference (now deferred to April 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic), for which this article is to be developed as a paper
- 16 M Fenton: 'Tom Osborn – an appreciation'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2004, Vol. 73, Sept., 243