THE NEW TOWN

the answer to Megalopolis

by Sir Frederic Osborn and Arnold Whittic

introduction by Lewis Mumford

26·4 per cent, in the USSR by 73·1 per cent, in Japan by 79·4 per cent, and in China by 98·5 per cent.[1] These countries have as yet hardly begun to take a grip on adventitious trends that must be injuring their people's living conditions to a devastating degree and needlessly hampering their industrial and commercial efficiency. Their statisticians now accurately calculate the growth and distribution of their populations and ably project them into the future; but they seem in general to accept the pattern of growth as inevitable. We see no reason to accept it.

Correcting the existing maldistribution will be a colossal and daunting task. A far greater scope for planning however lies in the considered placing of the additional people expected to arrive 'out of the cradle endlessly rocking'. The latest estimates of the UN Population Branch are that by the year 2,000 the world population, now just over 3,000 millions, will more than double; the higher estimate is that it will rise to 6,900 millions. We do not here discuss whether such an abundancy of life is desirable, or the means by which the anticipated numbers can be fed—a problem on which expert opinions widely differ, but which does not appear to be insoluble.[2] These millions of extra human beings must, we assume, be regarded as on their way in. If the existing trend to great cities continues the estimate is that by the year 2,000 the population of the million-cities will rise from 285 to 1,285 millions, and of cities of 100,000 and over from 590 to 2,644 millions, or 42 per cent of the world total.[3]

That the nations of the world, led by those most advanced in urbanization, must preclude this terrifying prospect by developing methods of controlling the size and distribution of cities seems to us imperative. The experiments made by Great Britain in this direction, small enough in relation to its own urban problems, may seem trivial in relation to those of the world at large. But they are significant, because they point the way.

It will be historically a sort of *amende honorable* to the world if Britain, the classic land of industrialism and its urban consequences, proves through a policy of dispersal and new-town building to be the pioneer of a more humane, gracious and efficient pattern of town and country arrangement.

[1]Homer Hoyt: op. cit.
[2]See Colin Clark: *Journal of Royal Statistical Society*, 1962.
[3]Homer Hoyt: op. cit. See also Chapter XI.

Chapter IV

THE EXPERIMENTAL NEW TOWNS

'Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one: O let me escape thither, (is it not a little one?) and my soul shall live.'
—*Genesis xix, 20: (Lot's appeal)*

HOWARD'S book of 1898 had as a practical outcome, surprisingly soon, the foundation in 1903–4 of the First Garden City, at Letchworth, Hertfordshire, 35 miles north of London. The book had aroused much interest and press comment, the reactions ranging from wild enthusiasm to lofty scorn, scepticism prevailing. Even the news-sheet of the constructively revolutionary Fabian Society giggled at the naivety of a man who wanted new towns built in a country urbanised by the Romans 2,000 years earlier.

The disbelievers would certainly not have been converted by the handwritten minutes (still preserved) of the tiny group of men who, with Howard, founded in 1899 the Garden City Association (now the Town and Country Planning Association). These men were neither well-known nor wealthy, but they were united in a conviction that what was generally regarded as a simple-minded idealistic scheme was practicable and could be carried out by private effort. They fixed the subscription to the Association at one shilling a year, held meetings under the auspices of all sorts of bodies all over the country at which Howard and other members lectured, and quickly recruited an appreciable following—though neither then nor at any time since did the Association become anything like a mass movement.

Through the energy and concentration of this small but devoted membership, sufficient interest was aroused to encourage the Association to hold, in 1901–2, two large conferences, at which the attendance included delegates of hundreds of local authorities. It is of historic significance that these conferences were held at Bournville in the West Midlands, and Port Sunlight on Merseyside. These new-type industrial villages, which pioneered the planned and planted layout of good family homes with gardens in close relationship to healthy and efficient modern factories, were then arousing hopeful interest, and were valuable signposts to the more comprehensive form of urban development envisaged by Howard and his followers. The choice of venue is also a reminder of the important part played by a few imaginative industrialists, among them George Cadbury and William Henry Lever (later Lord Leverhulme), the founders of these two villages, in getting the garden city idea considered as a practicable proposition.

Like the writings of many other far-sighted reformers, Howard's *To-morrow*, essentially sound and practical as it was in its analysis and proposals, was tinged by a rosy hope of a better society, and a belief in the basic goodness of mankind, confession of which is distasteful to statesmen, business-men and many responsible persons, who fear that any suspicion that they entertain such sentiments may injure their reputation for toughness in this competitive world. And because the book was written in a simple and persuasive style, without the definitions, qualifications, and reservations customary in technical and scientific works, most professors and students of economics and political science disregarded it as just another idealistic Utopia. Even, however, if its proposals had been expressed in cold-blooded terms by an industrialist respected for his success or by a sociologist of academic repute, instead of by an unknown shorthand writer, the notion of building a completely new town by private enterprise in modern England would have seemed to most realistic people in 1898–1903 a romantic, fantastic dream.

For indeed the initiation of the Letchworth experiment was an almost incredibly daring venture. There was no precedent for it apart from a series of dismal failures in small-scale community founding. It could never have happened but for Howard's intense conviction and extraordinary determination, and the effect that his sincerity and talent for persuasion had on men of standing and experience in practical affairs. It could never have happened if Howard had not had the good fortune to enlist the support of a particular group, capable and courageous in business and conscious of social responsibility.

PROGRAMME OF THE LETCHWORTH COMPANY

In the very effective propaganda of the Garden City Association, and in its promotion of the Letchworth scheme, a leading part was taken by a Chancery barrister, (Sir) Ralph Neville, QC (later Mr. Justice Neville), who became Chairman of the Association and also of the company it formed in 1903 to build the town—First Garden City Limited. Neville, and the industrialists (mostly like himself Liberals in politics) who joined him and Howard on the board of this company, along with its first manager (Dr.) Thomas Adams, extracted the essence from Howard's programme and propounded it in terms acceptable to possible investors without denuding it of its essentially public-spirited aims. The original prospectus of First Garden City Ltd. indeed, should be regarded as the definitive statement of the actual aims of the garden city movement rather than Howard's book, which was of immense inspirational importance, but was never treated as a Bible or an Athanasian Creed. The main objects of the company were stated as follows:

'To develop an estate of about 3,800 acres, between Hitchin and Baldock, on the lines suggested by Mr. Ebenezer Howard in his book *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, with any necessary modifications. It is believed the result will be not only to promote a great social improvement, but to provide for those who can afford to wait an investment that will prove a sound one.

'The *root* idea of Mr. Howard's book is to deal at once with the two vital questions of *overcrowding* in our towns and the *depopulation* of our rural districts, and to thereby reduce the congestion of population in the great towns, or at least arrest its progress.

'The difficulty of dealing with the housing question in our overcrowded industrial centres becomes increasingly apparent with every fresh attempt at amendment. The expense is enormous, while improvement in any one direction frequently increases the evil in another. The only satisfactory way out of the difficulty is to start afresh and establish a new town to which those manufacturers whose businesses admit of such removal may go.'

There followed provisions for the five per cent limit on dividends and for the application of any surplus increments of profits and land values for the benefit of the inhabitants of the town. The prospectus then alluded to the planning possibilities inherent in the scheme:

'The control of the site of a town from its commencement obviously offers an unparalleled opportunity for the provision of open spaces and allotments while land is cheap, and also for the supply of power, light and water on advantageous terms.'

It added:

'Sound physical condition is surely the foundation of all human development, and the directors submit to the public a scheme for securing it in a particular instance which they believe contains all the elements of success, and which, if carried to a successful issue, will lead to that redistribution of the people upon the land, in which alone, as they believe, is to be found a solution of the problem—How to maintain and increase industrial efficiency without impairing the national physique.'

We do not in this book describe in detail the development of Letchworth, well covered in other books.[1] Certain aspects of it, however, relevant to the general subject of new towns, call for mention.

Though the essential principles of the first garden city were the same as those of the later new towns, the circumstances of its foundation were very different. The idea was imaginative and had a popular appeal, but as a private enterprise venture it was not unnaturally regarded by most hard-headed business-men as speculative in the highest degree. The odds were heavily loaded against an investor in the company's shares: on the one hand a serious risk of the loss of his capital, and on the other a prospect, after some years, of an annual return of five per cent at the maximum. (The interest on Consols at the time was 2½ per cent.) The company's prospectus was perfectly frank about the proposition. None but persons willing to accept the chance of loss and the limit of gain in the hope of social benefit could be expected to invest on such terms. And in the event the company, whose authorised capital was £300,000, went to allotment on £40,000, subscribed in the main by its

[1]See C. B. Purdom: *The Garden City* (1913), and *The Building of Satellite Towns* (1949).

own public-spirited directors. At the end of the first year (1904) the total share capital subscribed was only £100,000. The company had already committed itself to the purchase of the site for £160,000 (£42 an acre), so that it had at the very outset to raise much money by means of mortgages and debentures, on which interest had to be paid before new revenues could be created.

The company being thus under-capitalized from the start, development was necessarily slow. The site was wholly rural: roads, sewers, water works, gas and electricity works, and all the supply mains for these services, had to be provided *de novo*. The company had no money to finance houses, factories or shops: it had to induce industrialists, retailers and residents to come in and build their own premises on leasehold sites—without any real assurance that a town would in fact be successfully created, or, even if it were, how long it would take. In the circumstances it is amazing that lessees willing to venture their own capital in building on the estate could be attracted at all.

Anticipating a later stage in our story, we may compare the situation of First Garden City Ltd. with that of a new town development corporation under the New Towns Act of 1946, with its governmental sponsorship, its millions of Treasury money available for estate works, housing and other buildings, and the precedents of Letchworth and Welwyn to show that new towns could be created and become satisfactory places to live and work in. At Harlow New Town, for example, in the first ten years a capital of £35 million was invested by the development corporation (nearly £20m. in housing), 40,000 people had been housed, and 75 factory firms had been attracted. The Letchworth Company in its first ten years had expended £400,000 and drawn in a population of 8,000. In 1903–13 there was in England hardly any public housing; at Letchworth the workers' dwellings had to be provided in the main by public utility societies, for which the risk-taking capital had to be subscribed by philanthropic investors with interest limited to 4% per annum. Some houses were built by owner-occupiers, but Letchworth was too far from London or any other centre to attract many commuters. In the main the early residents had to find employment locally in the industries and businesses courageous enough to choose a place of such speculative promise. Among the early settlers there was also a sprinkling of families of independent means and of artists and other self-employed persons. These groups, with the few shop-keepers and builders, and the staff and workers of the estate company, made up the pioneer population.

SOCIAL ATMOSPHERE OF LETCHWORTH

What is remarkable is the social and mental energy this small community in its earliest days developed. There was no theatre or cinema or public house; no church or chapel building; only two or three small and weak retail shops (the future civic centre was an empty windblown prairie); radio and television were undreamed of; the one public meeting place (apart from a county school) was a small hall (paid for by

private subscriptions). Equipped playing fields came very slowly. Yet an extremely vigorous and enjoyable community life sprang into being from very early days. The absence of commercial entertainment threw people back on their own resources, and there was no lack of spontaneous leadership in founding and running a wide variety of societies and clubs—for music, drama, politics, religion, sports, rambling, dancing, gardening, natural history, arts and crafts, and serious study. Meetings and performances took place in any makeshift building available, such as an old farm barn, and in the living-rooms of private houses. Everybody knew everybody, and met nearly everybody in some activity or other, and class and income barriers were at a minimum. A friendly democratic atmosphere and a prevailing tolerance of different views and degrees of formality in dress and manners therefore developed, and in later days, when social stratification and more standardized conventions began to invade, older residents looked back on the pioneering period as a golden age.

For people migrating from inner London to the first garden city half a century ago the change of physical and social environment was revolutionary to a degree unimaginable by those who settle in a new town today. To a typical city dweller who had not tried it, life in Letchworth must have seemed denuded of all amenities except fresh air, horizon light, and a cottage with a garden—seductive things to him, but surely insufficient compensation for the loss of the bright lights, the swarming vitality, and the kaleidoscopic attractions and opportunities of the metropolis. And such a man (we describe an actual experience), when to take up a job he moved to the garden city, was at first badly shaken to discover that the anonymity to which he had been accustomed had disappeared. He found himself in a society in which as a personality he was known in the round. Where he lived, where he worked, his political or religious views, his family connections, and (except within his private dwelling) his leisure pursuits, were more or less common knowledge. In the big cities only fragmented aspects of his goings-on were known, to different sets of associates; as a complete being he didn't exist for anybody but himself. This had given him a sense of complete personal freedom, which he had come to value highly. But now he became a personality in a society; for the freedom of a disregarded cipher he had to accept the responsibility of a citizen; what he did or said had influence in proportion to his mental or moral repute; for the first time in his life, he 'counted'—a very uncomfortable feeling for a native Londoner.

Of course a person of negative or easily intimidable character is nearly as much of a cipher in a small new community as in a big old one. There were plenty of this usefully accommodating sort in Letchworth in the early days. (They are by no means to be despised; if not the salt of the earth, they are its silicon base.) But the proportion of colourful personalities was above the national average. This added to the interest of life. As in the later new towns, the great majority of settlers in Letchworth went there just to get a job with the special advantage of a

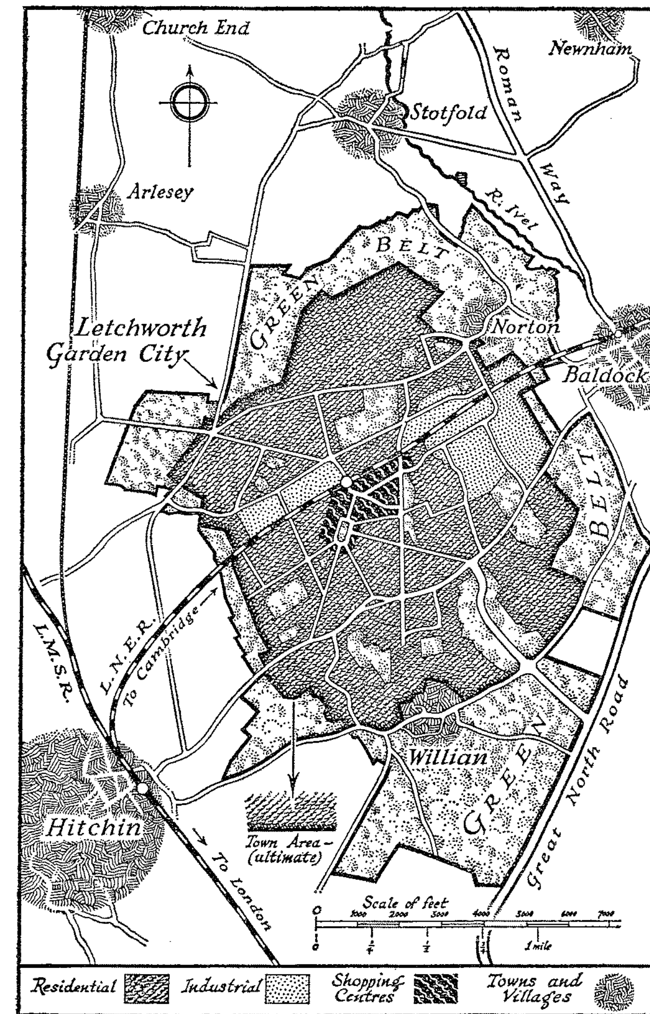
nice home nearby. But an appreciable minority were attracted by the principles that were to be tested—the pre-planning, the quasi-public ownership of the site with its prospect of a community share in rising land values, the return to a closer relationship of urban and rural activities, and so on. Among these were a sprinkling of people holding views then somewhat ahead of the time, though since generally or very widely accepted: on votes for women, democratic socialism, and vegetarianism, for instance. But there were a few who even in the present less conventional (or is it just differently conventional?) period would be looked on as 'cranks': extreme Simple-Lifers and dress reformers, for example. Bare ankles and sandals are not yet commonplaces in Piccadilly, though beards and hatlessness and soft collars now are. In the 1900's all these were equally subjects of public ridicule. The popular press, which never troubled to understand the town-planning, housing and land-development innovations in the garden city scheme, seized on these visible eccentricities of a tiny minority, and for years made Letchworth a national figure of fun. Moral for reformers: if you have a bright new idea, and want to get it accepted, take care to be dull and conformist in every other aspect of your existence!

No new town today, wherever situated, can be so insulated from commercial and professional entertainment or the prevailing mass-culture as Letchworth at first was. As we shall see, the development of many forms of communication have altered the position entirely. There may be losses as well as gains in the change. A 'do-it-yourself' community, with its amateur activities in the arts and sport, adds to the pleasures of spectatorship those of creation and participation. These enhance the understanding and appreciation of professional work if that is also accessible.

The early life of Letchworth was for many, probably most of its citizens, immensely stimulating and enjoyable, and elicited much originality and in some aspects quite high standards. Later phases do not, we think, support a claim for Letchworth to any permanent superiority or distinction as a community. No town or nation anywhere has yet found the formula for high cultural standards both in participation and reception—amateur and professional. Good health and general popular contentment with surroundings and ways of life, however, are much, and these the first garden city can certainly claim. It is the first predominantly manufacturing and all-classes town of which this can be said.

LETCHWORTH—THE PLAN

The town plan, for which Raymond Unwin and his partner, Barry Parker, were responsible, is simple and straightforward, and of the informal type with which their names are identified—a radical departure from the rigid or geometrical forms of most earlier plans. Fundamentally the main road scheme is radial, with intersecting roads at such distances as permitted 'super-blocks' of fair size having a wide diversity of layout in closes and cul-de-sacs, while at the same time avoiding sharp corners



Drawing reproduced from Garden Cities of Tomorrow (Faber and Faber 1946)

PLAN OF LETCHWORTH

FIG. 1

or inconvenient shapes of single plots. Cross-roads were not deliberately avoided, as they are in later practice, by staggered entries of minor into major roads; but corners were all kept open so that danger at junctions was minimized. Carriageways were at first rather narrow, for reasons of economy in capital cost, and often were unkerbed or had temporary kerbs of wood. Footpaths were similarly narrow, and sometimes omitted. But provision was wisely made for later widening by a general use of grass verges; no through road was less than 40 feet wide between the frontages of plots. Thus, though Letchworth was built 'on a shoestring', its planning looked ahead, and later widenings of carriageways and footpaths have not necessitated cutting into the building plots.

Great attention was paid to landscaping and planting. Flowering and foliage trees and shrubs were introduced in an unprecedented variety of species and arrangements, and all over the town there are decorative green spaces of an infinite variety of shape and size. The positioning of roads and buildings was influenced by an almost religious care for the retention of existing fine trees or attractive spinneys. Only in the ceremonial centres of great capitals and the parades of holiday resorts had planting and landscaping on this lavish scale and with this diversity been practised before. It was a new thing for an industrial town. And the example has had enormous influence all over the world.

Letchworth, originating in a reaction against the crowded conditions in great cities, set definite limits on housing density. Zones of different maximum densities were allocated, as in many municipal ordinances under the system of planning control of new development then emerging in a number of European states. There is an element of prestige, of class distinction—one might say, of snobbery—in the prescription of zones of progressively lower density for fewer people as you go higher up the income scale; and the Letchworth company, which planned for a 'balanced' population, could no more disregard this than any other developer. But Raymond Unwin was particularly concerned to set a standard of absolute maximum density for the lowest-income families. He was of course aware of the maximum of seven houses an acre (including service roads) prevailing in the first parts of Bournville. This must have seemed to him needlessly or impracticably low. Under his advice Letchworth adopted the maximum of 10 houses an acre including access roads, and 12 an acre without roads; but this included the smaller public greens in the local layout, and a modicum of space behind the house gardens for allotments and children's playgrounds. Unwin was an extremely able and resourceful planner, who knew exactly how far the wastage of road space and frontage could be reduced by ingenious layout; but he was (unlike some later planners) equally clear about the importance for the amenities of occupiers of certain key dimensions inside and outside dwellings, and extremely sensitive to popular likings. After very careful study and experiment he decided on a series of desirable minimum component dimensions: a light angle of 15°, just permitting sun to reach living rooms in mid-winter (in the latitude of S.E.

England) over the tops of 2-storey terrace houses; a distance between rows of windows of 70 feet; a set-back of house windows of 20 or 25 feet from public roads or footways; and so on. All such standards are in a sense arbitrary: why 70 feet for example? why not 69 feet? Therefore all can cheerfully be cut, and if the cuts are made gradually they may be little noticed. The Letchworth density maximum has been assailed; and under the changed conditions of today it can be slightly revised upward. But it is no argument against it that it was 'arbitrary', or based on a series of definite minimum component dimensions.

The standards of floor-space in the Letchworth regulations were, by those of our more affluent age, low. To keep rents within the capacity of unskilled workers—about 5s. a week—cottages had to be built for as little as £150 each. In the smallest three-bedroom terrace houses, baths had to be placed in sculleries, room-heating appliances made to serve for cooking and hot water, and other fittings were few. But they were skilfully designed, and were a great advance on the by-law houses in the old cities.

ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER OF LETCHWORTH

Architecturally the early Letchworth housing schemes and individual houses attained, and exhibit today, considerable charm. Their planning, grouping, landscaping and external design have had vast influence on development throughout the world. And it was through the same school of planners' admirable later work at Hampstead Garden Suburb, where Unwin and Parker had for a longer period full control, that the types of building and layout evolved at Letchworth became so widely diffused—unfortunately mostly in 'garden suburbs' rather than in garden cities or new towns.

The architecture of Letchworth in some of its later stages cannot be said to be equally distinguished. Much of it is quietly and modestly good, but in general it is not much superior in aesthetic quality to the mass of new development in England of its time. The main reason for this is that the company felt itself compelled for many years, in order to dispose of building sites, to give way to the prevailing tastes of owner-occupiers and speculative builders, and the often clashing tastes of clients' architects. In the company's leases there were strong covenants subjecting all exterior design to the approval of the town architect, and it is arguable that the control of design was weaker than it need have been; but that there were real difficulties in applying it must be admitted. Moreover it should not be forgotten that the aesthetic canons of trained architects are not identical with those of the public at large.

Letchworth discovered that the majority of home-seekers are not acutely architecture-conscious or desirous of visual harmony; their taste is rather for variety and as much as possible of individuality, especially in dwellings. Much more important to them than external appearance is internal accommodation and comfort, privacy from the passer-by in the road, and adequacy in garden plots. But there is a popular appreci-

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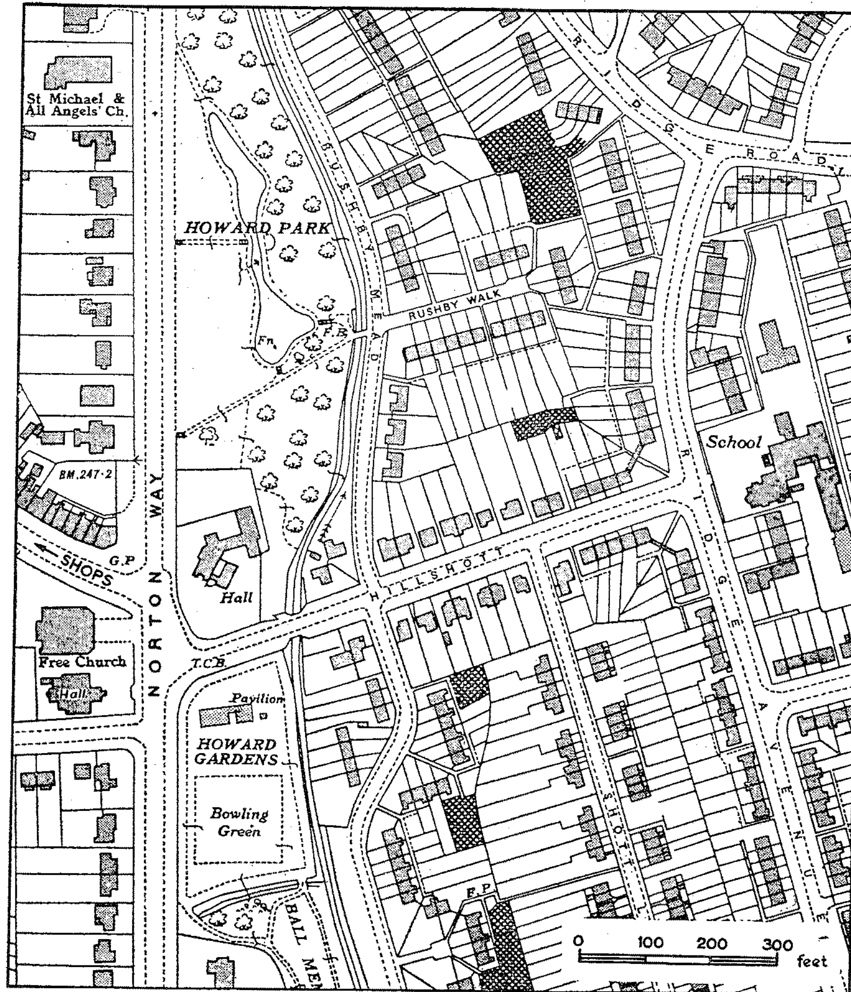

FIG. 2—Part of one of the earliest residential sections of First Garden City (Letchworth), about 1904–06. Low-rent housing in terraces of 4 to 6, at about 10 houses an acre including access roads and small internal open spaces. Detached houses and pairs on larger plots. Pedestrian access paths connecting backs of houses and open spaces proved unpopular and some were later merged in gardens. Those that remain are shown on plan (1962). The layout was influenced by the position of large trees on the site; but these and the subsequent planting are not shown.

(a) Town centre and part of south-east residential district; agricultural belt in distance.

Plate 1. Letchworth.

(b) Early residential development, mainly low-rent terrace housing at about 10 houses an acre. Primary school in centre. Factory zone in distance.

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Plate 2.
Letchworth.

(a) Leys Avenue. One of the earliest groups of shops (about 1905).

(b) Group of three houses in Norton Way (about 1905). The middle house was occupied by Ebenezer Howard. Architects: Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin.

(c) Gernon Road. Terrace of six houses for renting. Architects: R. Bennett and W. Bidwell (about 1905).

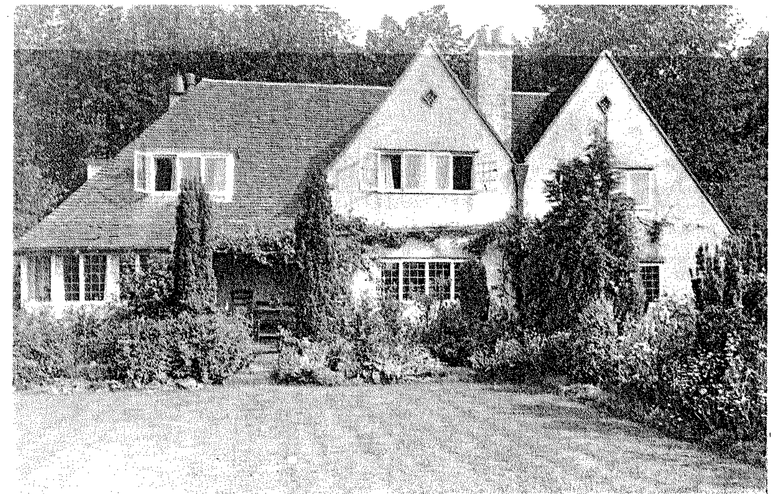

Plate 3.
Letchworth.

(a) An early residence for an owner-occupier. Architects: Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin.

(b) Sollershott. Group of houses with open front gardens (about 1910). Architect: C. M. Crickmer.

(c) A typical cul-de-sac with low-rent terrace housing (about 1908).

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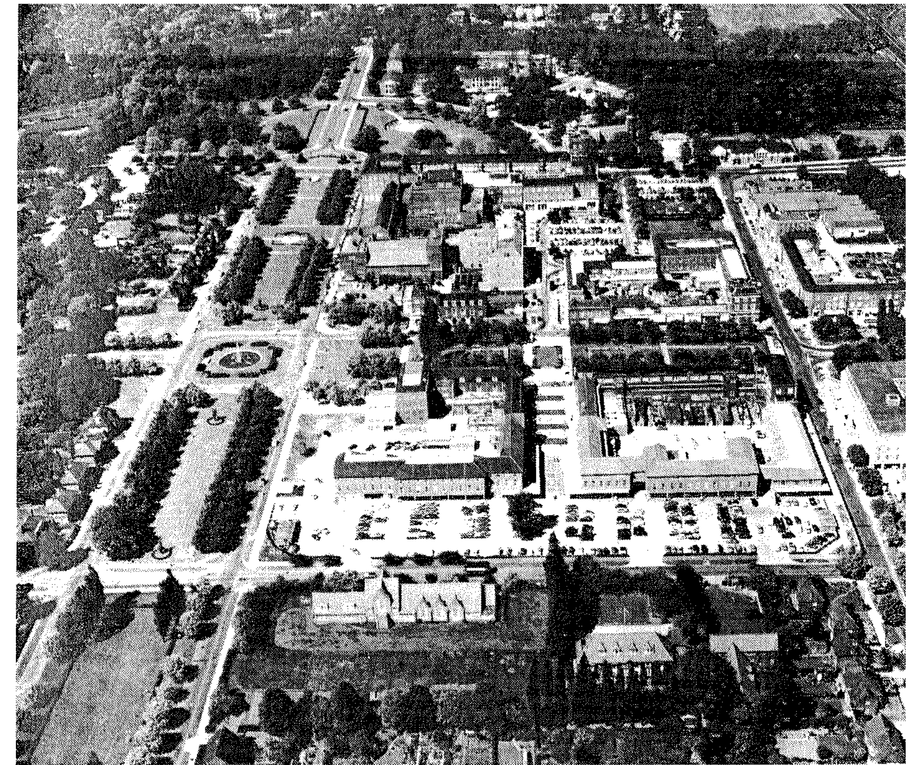
(a) Rushby Mead. Terrace houses built by a housing society for rental (about 1908).

Plate 4. Letchworth.

(b) Rushby Walk. Garden view of housing society cottages.



(a) Town Centre, looking north; Parkway on left, leading to The Campus. Latest (pedestrian) part of shopping centre in middle foreground. Architects: Louis de Soissons and Partners.

Plate 5. Welwyn Garden City.

(b) Welwyn Department Store (1939). Architects: Louis de Soissons and Partners.

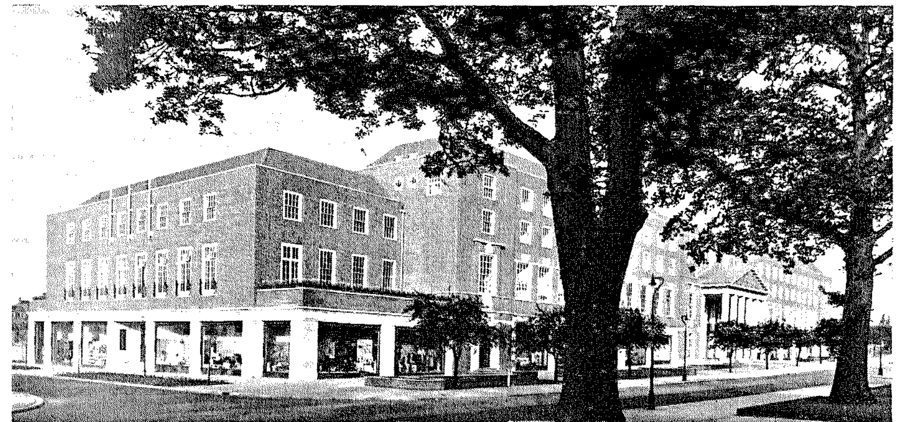


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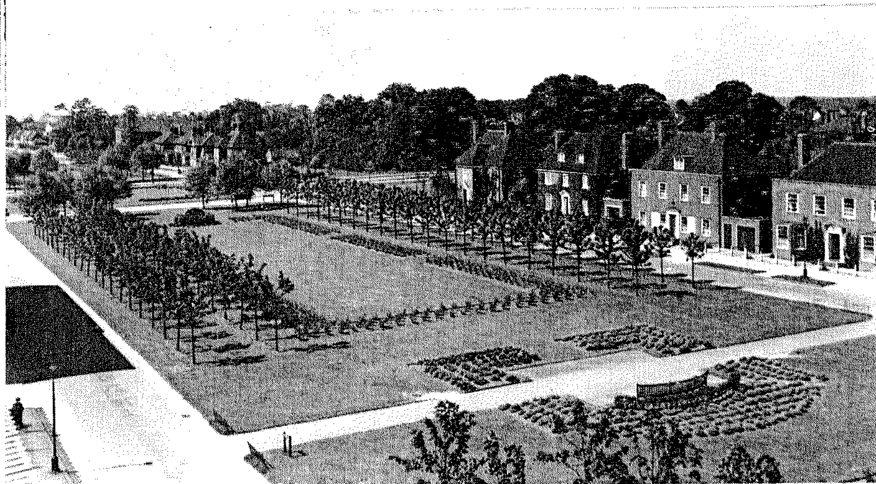
Plate 6.
Welwyn Garden City.

(a) Council Offices (1930)
Architects: C. H. Elsom and Partner.



(b) Parkway, looking south; an early photograph. Double avenues of pleached limes, and formal beds of roses and other shrubs. Twin carriageways. Width between buildings: 200 feet.

(c) Handside Lane. First housing scheme. (1920-21) with open forecourts. Architect: C. M. Crickmer.

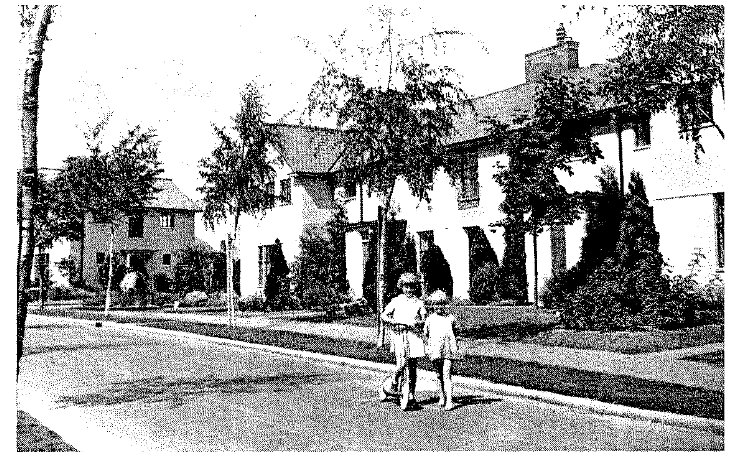
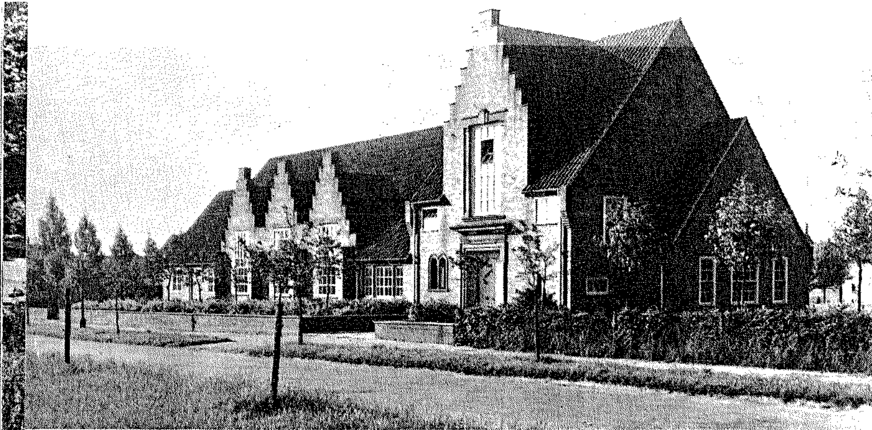


Plate 7.
Welwyn Garden City.

(a) Attimore Road. Terrace houses for renting, (1930) (?).
Architects: M. Hennell and C. H. James.

(b) Mandeville Rise. Detached houses for owner-occupiers, (1936).

(c) Dellcott Close (1921). An early example of fine landscaping of open forecourts.



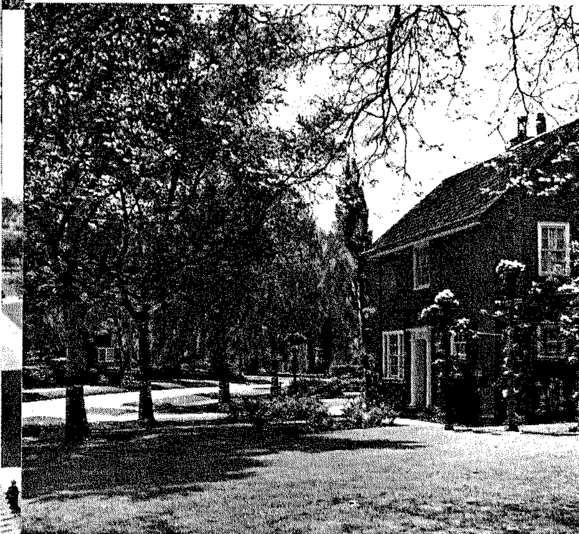


Plate 8.

Welwyn Garden City.

(a) The Free Church, Parkway, (about 1930). Architects: Louis de Soissons and A. W. Kenyon.

(b) Valley Road (about 1925) open forecourt planted for play of light and shadow. Architects: M. Hennell and C. H. James.

(c) Marley Road. Block of four houses for rental, (about 1945). Architects: Louis de Soissons and Partners.

ation of the beauty of trees, shrubs, flowers and grass, and near-unanimity in aesthetic judgment thereon. Letchworth, by its attention to domestic convenience and to landscaping and planting, catered for these deep human desires.

SUCCESS OF THE TOWN

Industrially and commercially it can be claimed that Letchworth has been a conspicuous success. The firms who first went there must have had outstanding courage to choose a location with such uncertain prospects. But the town now has many factories of varying sizes, prosperous and productive, and a balance of employment that has enabled it to weather the dislocations of war and economic depressions, as well as to adapt its economy to changes in demand and methods. Its shopping arrangements exhibit no novelty of layout or organisation; the now-fashionable pedestrian precinct would not have been accepted by shopkeepers when the town plan was prepared. The main centre fulfils its function adequately, and because there are only very small sub-centres it is a place of resort for almost the whole population. Like every centre, old or new, it is now embarrassed by the car-parking problem, but not to the degree that is clogging the hearts of large cities.

Letchworth will seem to the outside observer to have become, after half a century, a pleasant and very well-planned town, bright and free of squalor, but no longer revolutionary in character. Possibly it has lost some of its early social sparkle and self-conscious enthusiasm. But enquiry among its citizens discloses no evidence of serious discontent, though there are sporadic demands, as in almost any other town or city, for a more imaginative policy of improvement in community facilities.

The estate company always tended to a policy of restricting itself to the functions of a good ground-landlord and leaving most of the building and social development to other agencies and the residents themselves. No one could fairly accuse it of an excess of paternalism or 'do-goodism'. Its achievement was however a notable one. It created a town as healthy as any in the world, a well-serviced town in which every family can live in a house with a good garden within easy distance of work, the town centre and open country. It demonstrated that a town based on modern industry can be economically and socially viable, even if built well out of the immediate sphere of influence of a metropolitan centre. And it proved that a new town with an agricultural belt can bring stimulus and the advantage of alternative employment and many services to the surrounding villages and countryside without prejudice to commercial agriculture.

Letchworth at the end of 1962 had a population of about 26,000, 8,300 houses, 100 manufacturing establishments, 200 shops, 16 schools (for over 5,000 pupils), 20 churches and chapels, and many public buildings and meeting places. Its rateable value was about £570,000 and its rates were 24s. 6d. in the £ (county 16s. $3\frac{3}{4}$d., UDC 8s. $2\frac{1}{4}$d.).

The area of the urban district is 4,897 acres, and its present (1961) and planned use (1971) is as follows:

	1961	*Development Plan*
Residential	1,388 acres	1,698 acres
Industrial	245	284
Shops and Offices	28	32
Civic Buildings	16	21
Open Space, Public	95	175
,, ,, Private	222	173
Educational	15	34
	2,009 acres	2,417 acres
Green Belt (approx.)		2,000
As yet unzoned		480
		4,897 acres

The present overall density of the built-up town area is about 11¾ persons an acre. Open space (public and private) is about 13½ acres a 1,000 population.

THE SECOND EXPERIMENT

We shall discuss in a later chapter the reasons why Howard's first garden city, though it was regarded by town planners at home and abroad with admiration verging on awe, and Howard himself was internationally honoured as the symbol of a new urban idealism, did not find understanding imitators, private or public, for decades. It might indeed have enjoyed a mere *succes d'estime* and been left on the map as a vestige of an impracticable early-20th century ideal, had Howard not attempted a second demonstration of his concept, with the aid of a younger group of associates, in 1919–20.

The site of Welwyn Garden City was, like that of Letchworth, an open stretch of land, with no existing nucleus, no public services, and only a few narrow dead-end roads. Again the creation of a new town had to be undertaken with inadequate financial resources and without governmental endorsement or encouragement. Welwyn's location (on the main railway 20 miles from King's Cross Station) was certainly more advantageous for making a start. On the other hand Howard's second group of associates, though very able, were not nationally known as successful and dynamic industrialists. All the money available to Howard in 1919, when with almost insane daring he bought the central part (1,250 acres) of the site at an auction sale, was a sum of £5,000 borrowed from a few friends—not quite enough to pay the 10 per cent. deposit required. (The balance was advanced by his agent, the late Norman Savill of the well-known London firm of surveyors.)

The land Howard had committed himself to purchase not being nearly sufficient for a self-contained town, he and his friends had next

to persuade a reluctant adjoining landowner (the fourth Marquess of Salisbury) to dispose of a large additional acreage. Obviously the prospect that the scheme would come to anything must have seemed far from certain, and it was only after much hesitation that the owner agreed to sell. There was the precedent of Letchworth to go on, but at that date First Garden City Ltd. was still in arrears with its cumulative dividend of five per cent., was indeed only paying 2½ per cent. p.a., and was looked on as a poor proposition in business circles. Lord Salisbury, however, did agree to sell enough land to round off a satisfactory site, and though he imposed certain powers of repurchase if the project should fail, he accepted a price that was fair, indeed generous, to the purchasers.

Howard then selected a provisional board of directors, a company was formed, and a prospectus issued offering the public £250,000 in shares entitled to a maximum dividend of 7 per cent., any surplus (as in the constitution of the Letchworth company) to be used for the benefit of the future town and its inhabitants. History repeated itself. The Welwyn flotation, which coincided with the post-war financial recession, resulted in subscriptions of only £90,000—again less than the sum the company had contracted to pay for the land purchases of 2,378 acres (£105,000). Like First Garden City Ltd., therefore, Welwyn Garden City Ltd. had to finance its early development by bank advances and mortgage loans, on which interest had to be paid before revenues could be created by development. And every urban service had to be provided—roads, water supply, sewerage, surface-water drainage, electricity and gas. No statutory undertakings for any of these purposes existed within miles of the intended town area. Small wonder that the local inhabitants, the residents in the county, and the business world generally, regarded the project as doomed to certain failure!

THE WELWYN POLICY

The intentions of the Welwyn company, as expressed in its prospectus, were in principle the same as those of its Letchworth predecessor:

'The town has been planned as a garden city with a permanent agricultural and rural belt, and with provisions for the needs of a population of 40,000 to 50,000. It will thus be seen that the scheme is entirely distinct from a garden suburb, which by providing for the housing of the people working in an adjoining district does nothing to relieve congestion and transport difficulties. . . . The method of planning proposed to be adopted by the company will not only reduce the cost of development, but will also preserve the amenities and health of the town.'

There follows an explanation of the limit of dividend on shares, the important part that the use of surplus revenues for the amenities of the town would play in attracting industrialists and residents, and the cover that the creation of urban values would provide for the shareholders' interests.

'The essence of the company's undertaking is the conversion of

agricultural land having a comparatively small value into urban land ripe for building, and capable of producing good ground-rents . . . . The capital value of the land will increase *pari passu* with development. The combination of the estates which have been purchased from Lord Desborough and the Marquess of Salisbury has considerably enhanced the value of the whole.'

Then there is this interesting passage:

'The revenue-producing capacity of the company's undertaking may be gauged from the fact that the area of the proposed town and the population to be provided for will approximate to those of Cheltenham, Colchester, Eastbourne, Southport, Carlisle, Luton or Dewsbury, according to the census of 1911. Within this area the company will command, in addition to its ownership of the fee-simple of the land, a virtual monopoly in respect of a large number of enterprises of a profitable nature. The revenue consequent upon this monopoly will be employed by the company, after due provision for the shareholders, interests, on behalf of the public purposes of the new town.'

The terms of this last paragraph of the prospectus indicate a considerable change of emphasis in development policy from that of the Letchworth company. This was largely due to the personalities and experiences of the four directors who were to play the most active part —Sir Theodore Chambers, Ebenezer Howard, C. B. Purdom and R. L. Reiss, all of whom took up residence in the town, spent most of their time and thought on its affairs, and entered energetically into its social and cultural life. Several members of the staff also—F. J. Osborn (Secretary and Estate Manager and for ten years Clerk of the Parish Council and UDC, who had had experience of housing in London and Letchworth and had become an enthusiastic propagandist of the garden city concept), Captain W. E. James (Engineer and Surveyor to both the company and the Council), and Louis de Soissons, Consultant Town Planner and Architect—lived in the town from the start and were active in many aspects of its life. As citizens these men and others of the staff became in effect a powerful link between the company and the emerging community; the company never had, and never needed, public relations officers or social organizers.

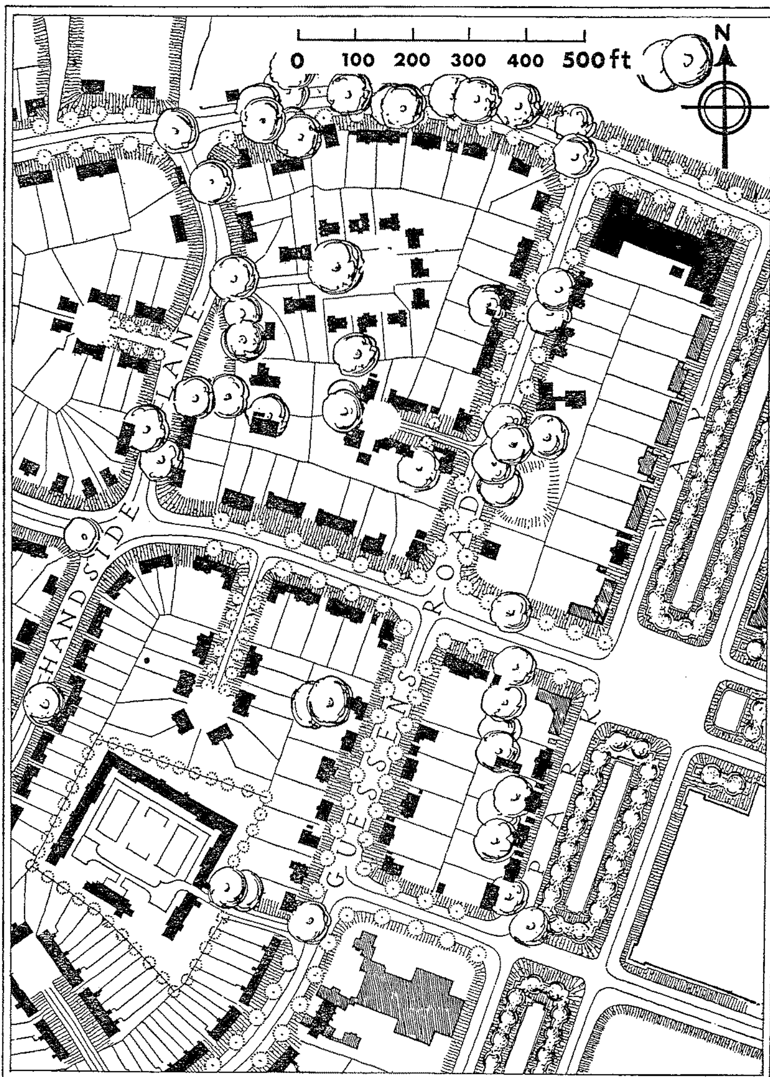
The choice by Howard of Sir Theodore Chambers as chairman of the company proved most fortunate. He had great personal charm, wide connections in political, financial and technical circles, endless enthusiasm and considerable powers of persuasion. A surveyor by profession, he had become interested in town development and the idea of dispersal of industry and population from London before he had heard of the garden city movement, and it was a pamphlet that he had written on the subject that led, through another surveyor, Norman Savill (already mentioned), to his introduction to Howard. Chambers had acquired much knowledge of land values through his professional practice in London, and also through the prominent part he had taken in the Conservative Party's opposition to Lloyd George's land taxation

scheme, in the course of which he had come to see the strength of the other side's case. It is curious, and indeed of importance, that another active director, R. L. Reiss, had been one of Lloyd George's chief lieutenants in the Liberal Party's side of the same struggle, and had perhaps seen the strength of the anti-land-tax case. At any rate, both had come to much the same understanding of the vast importance of the appreciation of land values in urban development, from radically opposed starting-points. Howard, of course, besides being the inspirer of the Welwyn scheme, had had experience of Letchworth's development as a director of First Garden City Ltd. And C. B. Purdom, who had been on the staff of the Letchworth company and a resident of the older town from its beginning, had been a critical observer of its development and finance throughout.

CONSERVATION OF LAND VALUES

This assembly and blend of experiences accounts for the firm line that the Welwyn directors took on the conservation of land values. They were determined not to allow any leakage of increment that could be caulked. They had to grant leases to house-owners at current market values, and this was true also of sites for industrial premises, since persons and firms had, as at Letchworth, to be given strong inducements to settle in the town. But they stood out resolutely against granting long building leases for retail shops and commercial properties, though they had some offers from firms that were at fairly early dates willing to take sites at low ground rents.

Retailers were reluctant to run shops at a loss for an uncertain period before the growth of population would make them remunerative, and it seemed, in the circumstances, likely to be a long time before anything like a comprehensive shopping service could be provided by normal methods of development. The company therefore started its own departmental store, which for purposes of capitalization had to be given a temporary monopoly. This monopoly became a subject of prolonged and at times lively controversy within the town. It was in fact the only way in which a reasonably adequate shopping service could be provided for the town when its population was small without giving away to retail firms or property speculators a big slice of future central land values (as had happened at Letchworth). But experienced as the directors were in estate development, they were novices at running a retail store, and it was difficult, for the salaries they could afford, to recruit top-level management. Moreover, the fact of monopoly caused residents to exaggerate mercilessly any inefficiencies of the single shop, and to agitate vociferously for the admission of others to create normal competitive conditions. Though the issue was a useful counter for local politicians—for those of the Left who could represent the company as a capitalist exploiter and for those of the Right who could represent it as a socialistic destroyer of free enterprise—it may be doubted if there was very severe public discontent. For most residents baiting the company was an amusing and harmless game.



Drawing reproduced from Site Planning in Practice at Welwyn Garden City (Ernest Benn Ltd., 1927).

FIG. 3 — Part of SW neighbourhood of Welwyn Garden City (1920–26), near north end of Parkway. An example of variety of cul-de-sac planning and influence of preservation of existing trees. Parkway, 200 feet wide, has two one-way carriage roads, two double rows of pleached limes, and central lawns with rose beds. In the Town Square the Queen Elizabeth Fountain was placed in 1956. At the south is a church, and in top right corner a temporary departmental store, since transferred. Houses in this section vary from 4 to 8 habitable rooms, and net densities from 12 to about 4 an acre.

The directors were strong enough to stick to their guns, and the Welwyn Department Store, once the symbol of all that seemed most hated in the policy of the company, is now, by common consent, the brightest star in its main centre, and the attraction that brings shoppers from a wide area of Hertfordshire and North London, to the profit of the many other shops now established in its vicinity, as well as of the giant financial amalgamation that has taken over the Store.

The estate company, pursuing logically the policy of conserving land values, did not (with rare exceptions) grant building leases for commercial properties. It financed and built the shop premises, and let them on short leases at rack rents, at the expiry of which the lessees (entitled under British law to security of tenure) continue occupation at a rent fixed by agreement, or if necessary by arbitration. Thus revenues from the commercial area rise with the increase of population.

A similar policy was followed to some extent in the industrial area. While large firms mostly took sites on 999-year leases and built their own factories, many sectional factories were built by the estate company and let on occupation leases, usually for 7, 14 or 21 years, sometimes for less. Besides making it easy for firms to start production in the town, these rented factories have proved very important to the development corporation that has succeeded the company, since on the renewal of the leases rents can be adjusted to current market values. When there are changes in money values and increases of building costs, rents rise well above the original levels. On the other hand, after a period of inflation, the holders of long leases of factory and house sites continue to enjoy rents much below the current market value—a leakage foreseen but considered inevitable and of far less quantitative importance than in the disposal of commercial sites.

The Welwyn Company, despite the chronic shortage of share capital in its early years, contrived, by such expedients as the issue of debentures at fixed interest and borrowing on mortgage, to finance many other developments, some of which, notably the electricity undertaking and a building company, proved profitable. Others, such as the theatre, the gravel plant, the brickworks, and the light railway, were less remunerative and were later disposed of or discontinued.

The company's original constitution, limiting dividends and earmarking surplus revenues and increments of value for the benefit of the town, must have been a factor in reconciling business and residential lessees, and tenants, to the deliberate and declared policy of exploiting to the full the monopoly created by single ownership of a complete town site. Another confidence-giving factor was the institution of the Civic Directors—three persons, exercising full powers, appointed by the Parish Council and later by the Urban District Council. These elements of the constitution could be, and were, cited in answer to critics within the town.

Both the dividend limit and the Civic Directors, however, disappeared in 1934, not through bad faith on the part of the shareholders,

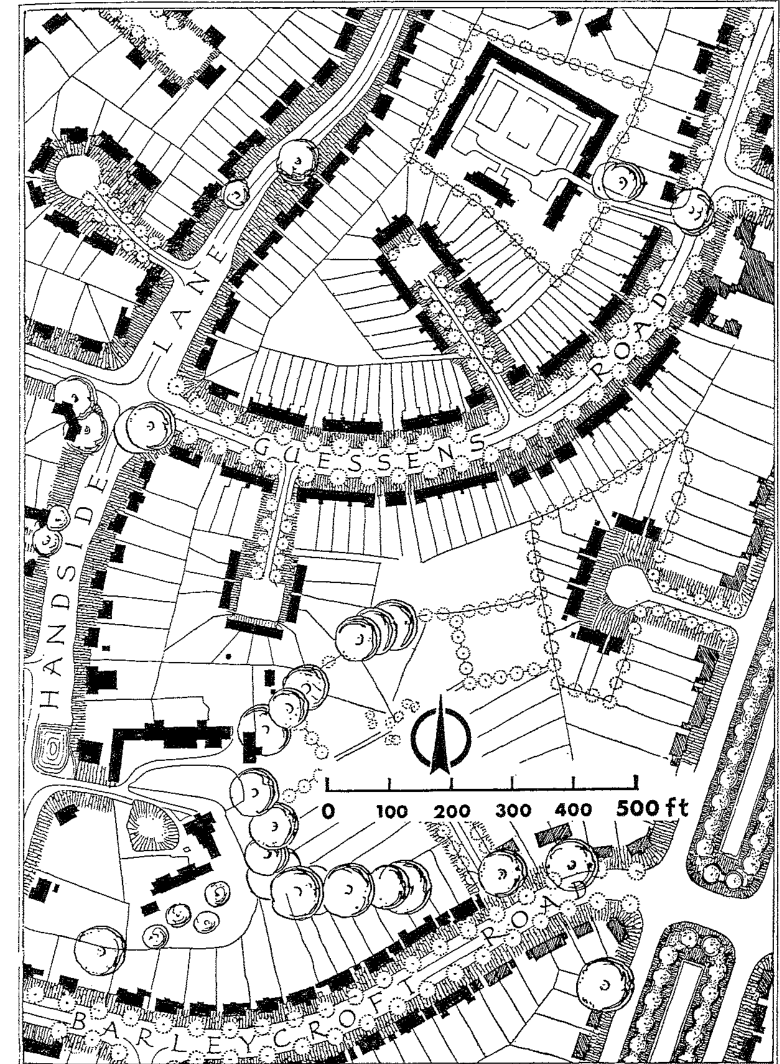
but because of a financial crisis and a reconstruction in which the debenture holders, who were not parties to the 'contract' between the shareholders and the town, took over the equity. New men were placed on the board, though several of the former directors remained, the capital was reorganised, the £1 ordinary shares were reduced to two shillings, and various classes of debentures were converted to shares without any dividend limit. One of the major causes of this drastic change was the national economic slump of the 1920s and a heavy fall of price levels subsequent to the company's initial capital expenditure. Another was that a sufficiency of share capital having proved unobtainable despite immense efforts, the large amounts of fixed-interest securities issued at a pretty high rate of interest (6%) made the company too highly geared—which might not have mattered for a property company in normal times, but was a serious disability on a general fall of price-levels. The directors were in the hands of the debenture holders; whether they could have made a better bargain with them and saved more of the future revenues or increments of value for the town or the original shareholders is a question that may be asked, but which it would be futile at this date to attempt to answer.

MAINTENANCE OF PLANNING STANDARDS

It is to the credit of the company under its new shareholding control that it did not, after the reconstruction, in any way lower its standards. The planning and development of Welwyn Garden City became famous as the best example of whole-town design. The company maintained throughout the 28 years of its existence its architectural control, its insistence on good building quality, its standard of planting and landscaping, and its policy of providing all the social amenities it could afford.

There are some architectural lapses, due to the necessity of conciliating important prospective lessees at times when disposals of sites were specially difficult or the firms concerned specially desirable to attract, and some patches of over-standardization of design, especially in low-rent housing schemes. But these falls from grace are few. A general standard of design and harmony much above that of the first garden city, and in its time only rivalled by Hampstead Garden Suburb, was achieved. Welwyn is not a suburb, but (like Letchworth) a self-contained industrial town in which something like 90 per cent. of the population work as well as reside. In that category it must take rank as a town-planning masterpiece.

The fashion in architecture has since changed: the Georgian style that Louis de Soissons took from Welwyn's Hertfordshire surroundings, freshened and adapted with great success to contemporary domestic and business requirements, no longer seems to devotees of a later convention 'exciting' (their word); even the superb planting and spacious landscaping of the earlier section of Welwyn are derided as 'romantic' or 'non-urban' by some fashion-obsessed critics. But to the families who live



Drawing reproduced from Site Planning in Practice at Welwyn Garden City (Ernest Benn Ltd., 1927).

FIG. 4—Layout of part of earliest (SW) neighbourhood of Welwyn Garden City (1920–26). Groups of 50 to 100 lowest-rented terrace houses alternate with groups of owner-occupied and medium-rented types and one quadrangle of flats with hotel. Old farm buildings and fine trees, carefully preserved, influenced the plan. Note characteristic use of culs-de-sac, each different and treated as architectural unit. First houses (Handside Lane) have open fore-courts, as have most culs-de-sac and some later roads; all back gardens are enclosed by hedges. Planting of trees and flowering shrubs is profuse and highly varied, enhancing the architectural variety. Town plan by Louis de Soissons.

and work in it, and to most visitors, professional or lay, Welwyn Garden City is a supremely pleasing town visually, as well as efficient technically and human in scale.

At the time of its takeover in 1948 by a government development corporation under the New Towns Act Welwyn Garden City had a population of 18,500. Its development since that date is dealt with in a later chapter.

Chapter V

TOWN GROWTH AND GOVERNMENTAL INTERVENTION

'While planning theory holds that it is never too early to begin planning, experience shows that there will be no public outcry for planning, and little, if any, effective planning done, below a certain threshold of local difficulties. In other words, the situation has to get worse before anyone will stir himself to try to make it better.'

—DENNIS O'HARROW, 1961

As the major instruments of civilization towns have brought to mankind gifts of incalculable magnitude, at the price of terrible deprivations. No accountant-philosopher could prepare a millennial balance sheet of their material and moral assets and liabilities. But the ratio of ills to blessings has been so high, especially in the accounts of large towns, that it is lamentable that recognition of the need for control of their extent and location has come so late. In the literature of political philosophy such a recognition has been absent until the last few years. Neither the prescriptions for desirable town size by Plato and Aristotle, the protests of poets, divines and novelists, nor the projects for colonial settlements and small-scale communities, not even More's *Utopia*, seem to have extended the concept of local and voluntary limitation of urban size to that of generalized governmental regulation. So far as we know, the first academic hint of it was given by Professor Alfred Marshall in his evidence to the Royal Commission on Imperial and Local Taxation (in 1899, the year after the publication of Howard's book).

'The central government should see to it that towns and industrial districts do not continue to increase without ample provision for that fresh air and wholesome play which are required to maintain the vigour of the people and their place among nations. . . . . . We need not only to widen our streets and increase the playgrounds in the midst of our towns. We need also to prevent one town from growing into another, or into a neighbouring village; we need to keep intermediate stretches of country in dairy farms, etc., as well as public pleasure grounds.'

Of course the municipal regulation of certain details of internal town development has existed from very early times. In all towns, whether originally planned or not, there had to be rules to maintain the width of public streets and passageways against the constant efforts of frontagers to encroach on them with building extensions or enclosures for the