

### **WELWYN GARDEN CITY: A UNIQUE HERITAGE.**

When Ebenezer Howard bought the land for his second garden city at auction in 1919, he could not even afford the ten per cent deposit, let alone ever be able to repay the enormous capital sum. Yet such was his belief in his idea that he was willing to take the huge personal risk.

Fortunately, other people agreed with his vision and were willing to join him, no matter the cost. His fellow Directors of Welwyn Garden City Limited bravely personally guaranteed enormous bank loans for the first decade when the town's survival was far from certain. The company chairman, Sir Theodore Chambers and a number of the principal directors chose to live in the town from the beginning and to play a leading role in its development. The Company employees from typists to the Architect worked for many years in wooden huts where the first job on a winter morning was to thaw the ink which had frozen overnight.

The first pioneer residents lived in newly built houses but without electricity or gas, using open fires for cooking and heating, as it took some months for such basic services to be connected. As money was so short WGC Limited economised by not tarmacking the roads. Fine in dry weather, but when it rained the heavy clay soil was soon a quagmire making wellingtons essential footwear. This gave rise to the famous "Mud Modes" cartoon published in Punch magazine in March 1924 and to Londoners apparently referring to residents of the new garden city as " Big frogs in a little muddy puddle".

Yet despite these hardships people did choose to live in the town, some giving up bigger houses in London to join in what they saw as a new beginning for both urban design and social community. As early as 1922 there were over 40 different clubs and societies for a population of only a few hundred. A football tournament of 1924 saw teams from throughout the town competing against each other. Valley Green played their neighbours in Brocket Close, Council Houses United played a team from Welwyn Stores, all part of building the "new hope, new life and new civilisation" that Howard wrote about in his seminal book published in 1898, "Tomorrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform". The Horticultural Society was founded in 1922 to share plants and expertise and to help residents who had never had a garden before. It is still going strong today. One of the first buildings in the Peartree area of the town was a community center which acted as a meeting place for workers new to the town. During the Depression of the 1930's a residential hostel was added to house young boys sent to work in the town from

the north. Both buildings are now a YMCA.

As a post war New Town people were moved to Welwyn Garden City from London in the 1950's. One such new resident describing it as so wonderful to have a family home and unbelievable that there should be so much green and open space. A couple who moved here in 2010 commented that they could not believe how many trees there were in the town.

This spirit has continued through the decades, especially as the beauty of Louis de Soissons' design has become apparent for all to see. It is his superb interpretation of Howard's key idea of a "marriage of town and country", which helps to give Welwyn Garden City its unique character. One of the largest exhibitions on urban design ever mounted was at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1994. de Soissons's plan for WGC was included, such is its iconic status worldwide. **1.**

The design of the town has always played a vital role in its development, with landscaping a key element. As C.B. Purdom, one of the directors of WGC Limited the company which built the town, wrote;

"A feature is made throughout the town of the horticultural and arboricultural treatment of roads, groups of trees being planted to break lengths of houses and masses of flowering shrubs or roses being planted wherever possible". **2.**

The number of trees used is remarkable and some 140 different varieties are recorded. Every road has a different combination of species to give the greatest possible variety to the appearance of the streets in the town.

The main town center consists of two roads, Parkway and Howardsgate at right angles to each other, both planted formally with grassed areas in the middle. Parkway is nearly a kilometre long and sixty-five metres wide, Howardsgate is shorter but the same width. Both are modelled on the wide French boulevards familiar to de Soissons from his years studying in Paris. A large semicircular area at the northern end of Parkway, the Campus, which extends to four and a half acres planted with grass, trees and garden beds, completes the design. The whole scheme was planned with careful consideration of the views from key vantage points and provides amazing vistas in all directions. In Welwyn Garden City you can shop or take a lunch time break surrounded by trees, lawns and flowers, without having to walk outside the center.

de Soissons believed that streets themselves should be positively enjoyable places along which to move, with vignettes and views consciously developed to give pleasure. **3.** He deliberately chose to use a large number of cul-de-sacs for housing, not only for aesthetic reasons, but because people get to know each other more easily when houses are in small groups. Many

houses were built around an open green area, ideal for children to play safely away from heavy through traffic. He continued this in the post-war New Town, together with his brilliant landscaping, and also kept to his chosen neo-Georgian style of architecture so that there is a unity of design in Welwyn Garden City. Although many other architects worked on the town throughout, all designs had to meet with de Soissons's approval to ensure that everything agreed with his high standards and his carefully crafted vision of what a garden city should look like.

The industrial area centred on Broadwater Road was treated with equal care. Lombardy poplars were planted along the length of the eastern side of Broadwater Road to screen the small sectional factories and provide a green aspect to the industrial area. The western side of the road, visible from the town center and backing on to the railway line, was for large plots with buildings of architectural merit to showcase the town, particularly to anyone travelling by train. de Soissons's modern 1924 Shredded Wheat factory building was clad in white tiles to shine in the sun. The Roche building, designed by Otto Salvisberg in 1938, is the only industrial building of his in the UK. Both of course are now grade 2 listed. In the 1960's and 1970's Roche added two further buildings in Broadwater Road, both designed to their usual demanding standards using high quality materials by Cubitt Atkinson and Partners. One won the Office of the Year Award in 1979 whilst Building 25 as it was designated by Roche, later became the Bio Park. Images of the designs are in the RIBA Library.

Architects have always mocked the town and belittled de Soissons's neo-Georgian style, but the town's residents see such criticism as totally unfounded. An attempt to "modernise" the town by building an 18-storey block of flats in Parkway in 1962 was met with horror and huge objections, which helped to ensure that the application was defeated. Maybe townsfolk, like Sir Frederic Osborn who kept a list, realise that many architects in favour of such high-rise buildings actually live in houses with gardens. 4.

The magnificent town center is unsurpassed and merits an entry in the Twentieth Century Society's recent book; " 100 Twentieth Century Gardens and Landscapes" 2020.

Sir Frederic Osborn described the center of the town as; " one of the most beautiful examples of formal landscape planning in Europe", and the view down Parkway as; "one of the unforgettable sights of England".5. He may have been biased but I am sure that many of us would agree with him. Little wonder that Welwyn Garden City attracts visitors from around the world and always has done. The American planner Clarence Stein, who went on to design Radburn in the USA, came here and met Howard, whom he acknowledged as a great influence on his thinking, in 1924. 6. As early as 1922 a visit of delegates from the IFHP conference included people from Russia and Brazil and so it has continued through the decades. For

example, pre covid saw visits from planning students from countries as diverse as South Korea and Switzerland. Surely few other modern English towns can compete.

Welwyn Garden City is unique. For over 100 years it has been internationally recognised as the finest example of Howard's Garden City idea and the residents of the town are immensely proud of it. What a national disaster if they are the only ones who care enough to protect it.

It can also be argued that with the current housing crisis and the demanding regulatory nature of town building, Welwyn Garden City stands as a living lesson and a tangible precedent of the value of designing for the long term to create places of high environmental and community quality that endure, thrive and will continue to do so for centuries to come.<sup>7</sup>.

Although there are indeed buildings within WGC which are of heritage value and have been recognised as such, the heritage of the town is more than its individual buildings. Its heritage is bound up with the way in which the town was planned and the progressive ideology and ethos behind this endeavor that sought to create a sense of health and wellbeing amongst ordinary people. Its heritage is the setting, the layout, the vistas and views and the open spaces. It is its very identity and sense of place.

## Angela Eserin

**Angela Eserin has lived in WGC since 1970. She is a local historian and published author. Angela has studied and catalogued the large collection of the papers of Sir Frederick Osborn, (Howard's main disciple, Chair of the TCPA, post-war advocate of the New Towns and long-time resident of WGC). The papers were later removed from WGC library to HALS. She conducts (Howard's talks and guided walks on WGC and has even appeared in Una Stubbs episode of 'Who do you think you are'. She is a Trustee of the WGC Heritage Trust.**

## References

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