

Proof of Evidence
Tony Skottowe
On behalf of Rule 6 Party
Welwyn Garden City Heritage Trust and
Keep the G in WGC

Appeal reference: APP/C1950/W/22/3294860
BioPark, Broadwater Road, Welwyn Garden City

June 2022

TONY SKOTTOWE, LOCAL RESIDENT AND CHAIR OF WGC HERITAGE TRUST

LIVING THE GARDEN CITY

1. Background

Tony Skottowe was educated at Highgate School and gained a B.Sc. (Eng.) in Electrical Engineering at Kings College, London. He has worked as a marketing specialist in industrial electronics at home and abroad, teaching mathematics and computer science to A level' and as an Investment Research Manager for an independent investment advisory company.

He has lived in WGC since 1973 and had connections with it via its music theatre society for some years prior to that. He has been involved in local politics for many years and has served as a local Councillor and LibDem Group Leader. In 2006, with colleagues, he founded the WGC Heritage Trust and has spent much of the last 16 years promoting the town at home and abroad. He has visited a number of the 'European 'Garden Cities', also Saitama City in Japan, and established links with likeminded groups in numerous other countries. He has given many talks to local groups about WGC and also to foreign visiting groups, including three government sponsored parties from China.

2. Introduction to Welwyn Garden City

My first acquaintance with Welwyn Garden City (WGC) took place in the late 1960s when my wife and I moved, with our two small children to Wheathampstead. My wife was a classically trained singer and was anxious to find an outlet for her talents.

She was recommended to the Welwyn Thaliens and was soon well established with the company. When possible, I drove her to WGC for rehearsals and was invited to join the technical group who built the scenery and ran the performances. The atmosphere in the group was welcoming and it was stimulating to be involved in performances of major musicals just released for amateur companies. We were also proud to be part of a group founded in 1929, one of the many societies in the town which have contributed to the active social life here since the very beginning.

We finally moved to WGC in 1973. A key factor in our choice was the quality of schools in the town and the fact that my wife, who had felt isolated the only time we lived in a village in the country, could have a house with a garden within a short walk of a town centre and supermarkets. My impression of the town up until this point had mostly been formed by the people I knew and a superficial acquaintance with the place itself. Already at that time I felt at home and 'welcomed', not just by the residents, but by the town itself, which sounds odd but is the best description I can offer. It was easy to appreciate how Howard's vision of marrying together the best of Town and Country affected the everyday experience and sense of wellbeing felt by residents. WGC is undoubtedly an extremely beautiful place, with its abundance of trees, its brilliantly designed layout and ability to continually be interesting to walk around. In the words of David Ames, Letchworth Garden City Foundation, 'Garden Cities are about creating great places where people want to live – for everybody'.

Many new developments these days are referred to as 'garden' developments, including the Bio Park Scheme named, Broadwater Gardens. As pointed out by the TCPA the term garden should not be applied to proposals which are far from 'Howard's hopeful ideas' (TCPA 2021 p1)¹

One of our neighbours, Lorraine Dewar² tells the story of how she and her family came to live here. They were driving around Hertfordshire looking for a place to call home and found themselves lost in WGC's industrial area of Mundells, then home to Avdel and Smith Kline French. **'Head for the town centre so we can find our way out of here'**, resulted in them driving into Parkway. The vista that greeted them had such an impact that at that very moment they decided this was where they had to live and quickly found a house where they are still living.

A change of employment beckoned for me when a member of Welwyn Thaliens persuaded me to join him to teach mathematics, and later computer studies at Monks Walk School, so becoming embedded in the community. It was then that I began to appreciate fully the joy of living in WGC and its community. When we decided to establish Welwyn Opera in 1977, the diverse friendships developed within the town brought forth specialists or people who knew experts with astonishing speed, indicating the huge diversity of people the town attracts to live here.

¹ TCPA (2021) Tomorrow 125 – A Practical Path to a Hopeful Future (Online)

² Lorraine Dewar is Treasurer of the WGC Heritage Trust (WGCHT)

3. The Turning Point

The beginning of my gradual move to total commitment to WGC came in 1981 when David Owen came to WGC and I joined the SDP. To succeed in local politics means knowing both the place and the people you wish to represent so I needed to meet and talk with my fellow residents. I joined the TCPA some while later and became absorbed in the history of the town, both its founder, Ebenezer Howard, and its town planner, Louis de Soissons.

As I learned more, the beautiful surroundings I had hitherto almost taken for granted assumed enormous importance. WGC was no accident but a carefully planned town based on one man's outstanding principles. Enormous care and attention had gone into its inception and design, even down to the choice of each tree. Gradually, from contacts with more and more residents, the depth of feeling became more apparent. People were 'glad to be home' after their holidays and the town seemed to 'welcome you with a hug'. As I grew into the town and learnt about its origins and the intentions of its creators, I became determined to safeguard something so unique.

In 2006 an application was made for the demolition of a number of houses in Bridge Road that predated the creation of the town, and their replacement with 24 properties of totally inappropriate design. Along with my neighbour, Lorraine Dewar, Dr Dennis Lewis, a previous leader of the WHBC and Anthony Fisher of Homerfield, we set about to oppose the demolition generating over 200 letters of objection. During the campaign I met and talked with quite a few residents and that was the foundation of my later success in getting elected as councillor for Handside. The application was withdrawn on the morning of the hearing.

Realising the strength of feeling that exists in the town for the protection of its heritage we decided to create the WGC Heritage Trust which we founded in December 2006 to protect and promote the town's history and heritage. Shortly after the formation Angela Eserin³, a librarian with special responsibility for Local Studies, who had catalogued the Sir Frederic Osborn archive, was persuaded to join the Board and remains a trustee and our historian to this day.

In keeping with the Trust's declared objectives, we embarked on three community projects based on Ebenezer Howard's description of a garden city as a place where people can 'Live, Work and Play'. We received significant funding support from the Heritage Lottery Fund totalling £165,000. All three projects were based on obtaining interviews from residents of the town and the results were made available to the public in a week-long exhibition. In total close to 700 digital audio recordings were made, which now form an invaluable archive. The exhibitions attracted significant numbers of visitors, the second and third saw over a 1000 people attend.

The information gathered during the three Lottery funded projects was remarkable as memories of resident's experiences brought the town back to life. However, the most

³ Angela Eserin is a Trustee of the WGCHT

extraordinary of the three was **'Where Do You Think We Played?'**⁴ WGC is well known for its wealth of clubs but the details for the period from 1920 to 1970 is astonishing in terms of the range and number of activities that were available to residents. Quite a few have faded away over time but a number of societies/clubs operating even after the Covid pandemic, owe their existence to the early pioneers and the encouragement and support of the WGC Company.

When not involved in projects the Trustees have given lectures in WGC and beyond on its history and worked with the TCPA, and more recently the RTPi.

An indication of the international importance of WGC is the number of foreign visitors the town has attracted from the 1920's right up to today. The Heritage Trust is often requested to arrange tours for foreign parties and provide talks on the history of what is seen as the jewel in the crown of the Garden City Movement. We have hosted parties from countries as diverse as France, Germany, Belgium, South Korea, Switzerland, Italy, the USA.⁵

We have also had direct requests from the UK offices of the Peoples Republic of China to host an official party of members wishing to learn about garden cities. A lovely illustration that the town is well known in China comes from local resident Malcolm Day⁶ who was on business in Wuhan. When his host asked him where he came from, he replied **'A town just north of London.'** His host persisted, however **'No, no! What town?'** when told it was WGC he exclaimed **'Ah! Ebenezer Howard!'**

As Chair of the Trust, I have now visited France, Belgium, Hungary and Poland. International work also arose via an invitation from Plaine Commune in Paris to participate in an Interreg project in 2010. Entitled **The Valorisation of Garden Cities** its aims were to generate a large-scale project in NW Europe with substantial funding from Brussels. The Trust eventually approached the TCPA to lead on the project as our capacity for funding was extremely limited.

As part of the town's centenary celebrations in 2020 the Trust commissioned a new history of WGC by Professor Mark Clapson and published by the History Press entitled "Live, Work and Play".

4. Conclusion

Having known WGC for over 50 years I feel it has a very special place in resident's lives and also on the national and international stage.

People have always moved to Welwyn Garden City for a variety of reasons – poor housing conditions and overcrowding elsewhere, mental and physical wellbeing and social and economic opportunity. Many of these challenges persist today and would be

⁴ Appendix 3 - Where do You Think You Played, A Look at Leisure in WGC 1920-1970's WGC Heritage Trust

⁵ Appendix 6a/d and 7 attached to Tim Parton Proof of evidence are an indicator of the international importance of WGC

⁶ Dr Day's email on his experience is included in the appendix

recognised by Howard. His vision for creating an environment, which has a positive impact on the social as well as physical and mental wellbeing of people, is as relevant today as it ever was. His ideas are not a hindrance to development but a solution to today's issues.

'..our present is defined by other pressing problems – from racial inequality and climate change to a broken housing delivery model – which requires urgent answers ... we propose that the combination of moral philosophy and practical action embodied in Howard's approach remains our best hope in planning for a resilient future'. (Ellis and Lock 2020 p226)⁷

In addition to the focus on careful planning, architectural design and density, the social justice components of Howard's philosophy should be at the heart of any development that proports to follow the principles and ethos he established.

The mix of town and country so central to Howard's ideas is also as vital now as it was in Howard's day, arguably even more so. Those that move here from elsewhere often comment on the green open spaces of the town.

The young son of a family who moved here in 1961 told his Mum, "***That it seems as if the sun is shining all the time***", a "***reflection of the cleanness and greenness of the place which was very much a garden compared with the streets of London***".⁸

Angela Eserin, who had only lived in the heart of the Black Country before moving here in 1970, recalls sitting in the back garden of her house here in the peace of a magical summer evening and looking up to see a tawny owl, which lived in the big oak tree in the adjacent allotment, peering down at her from the corner of her roof. Such a complete contrast with the dirty, busy urban environment with which she was so familiar.

Welwyn Garden City was designed with the needs of its community in mind, their health and wellbeing and the way they relate to their environment and to each other. Almost impossible to define, Welwyn Garden City engenders a sense of place which plays a powerful part in how people feel in their everyday lives living in this town.

The creation of a community continues through the generations. The question is where do the attributes that support this come from as they apply to people born here and seem to be taken up rapidly by recent arrivals? By all accounts Letchworth is similar so is it that the Garden City ethos as it permeates through these towns, becomes absorbed by its residents old and new? One thing is for sure, this sense of place is fragile and can be easily overwhelmed by development that is not in keeping with the original principles and ethos of the town.

⁷ Ellis, H & Lock, K. (2020) A Practical Path to a Hopeful Tomorrow, TCPA

⁸ Appendix 2 - Welwyn Garden City, A Brave Vision DVD/Video – Jean Watson Interview

WGC and its heritage is deserving of special care in planning considerations. There are only two Garden Cities, which in itself should mean that particular care is taken to safeguard them.

5. Summary of Proof of Evidence

I have known WGC since the 1960's and moved to the town in 1973. My wife and I came here because we wanted the quality of life the town afforded, a home with a garden and easy access to local amenities and good schools. The town was extraordinarily welcoming, both in terms its residents and of itself, because of its unique sense of place – it felt like a place for everybody.

I began to understand what it meant to live in a garden city and why people move here. Its not enough to refer to something as a 'garden', like the Bio Park development. It has to go deeper than that to generate the unique sense of place people feel here.

As I learned more, I understood that WGC was no accident but a carefully planned town based on one man's outstanding principles. Enormous care and attention had gone into its inception and design.

Realising the strength of feeling that exists in the town for the protection of its heritage we decided to create the WGC Heritage Trust, founded in December 2006 to protect and promote the town's history and heritage. We are regularly asked to give lectures and tours to national and international audiences, an indication of the town's status around the world.

Having lived here for almost 50 years I understand the value of WGC to the people who live here.

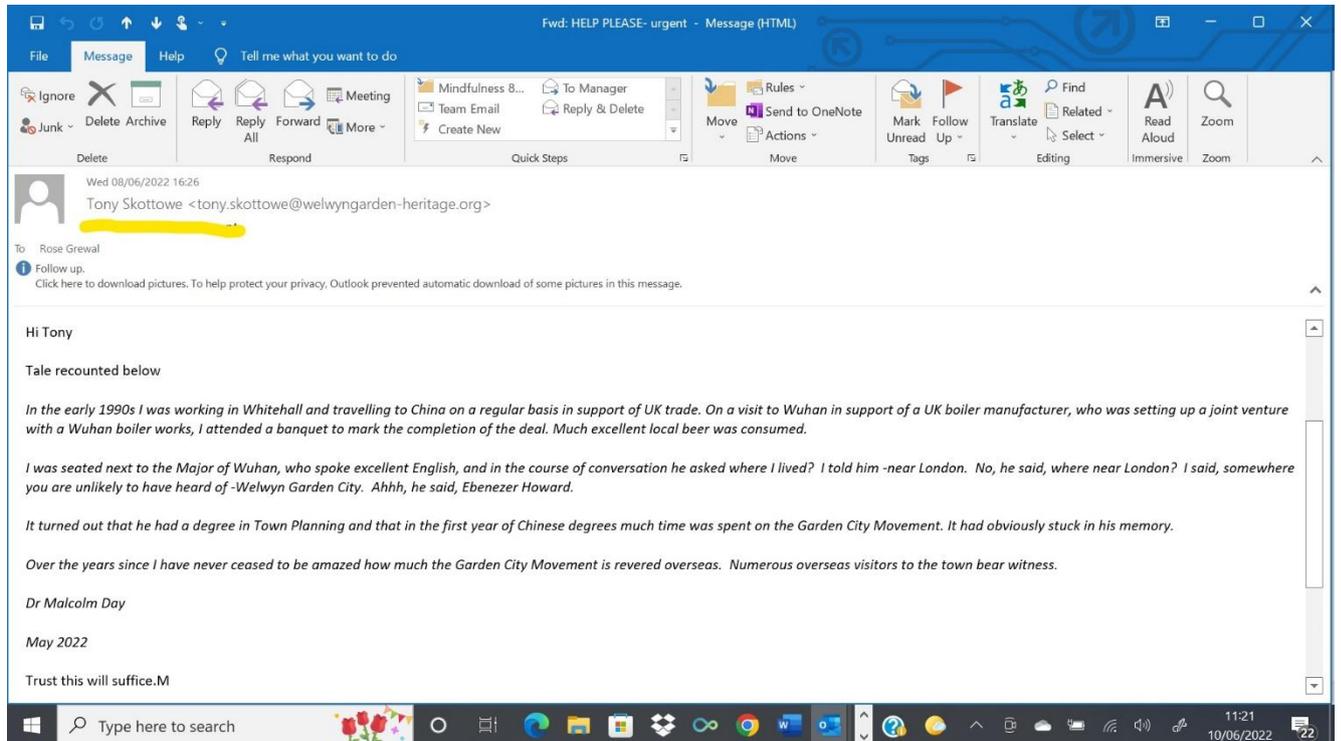
The issues that led to the creation of WGC are as relevant today as they ever were and Howard's ideas are a solution to these issues and not a hindrance. As well as adhering to the principles of good design and planning and the merging of town and country, the social justice components of his philosophy should be at the heart of new development.

Welwyn Garden City was designed with the needs of its community in mind, their health and wellbeing and the way they relate to their environment and to each other, which plays a part in how people feel in their everyday lives. This sense of place is fragile and can be easily overwhelmed by development that is not in keeping with the original principles and ethos of the town. There are only two garden cities and special care should be taken to safeguard them.

6. References

- TCPA (2021) Tomorrow 125 – A Practical Path to a Hopeful Future (Online)
- Heritage Trust
- Ellis, H & Lock, K. (2020) A Practical Path to a Hopeful Tomorrow, TCPA
- Welwyn Garden City, A Brave Vision DVD/Video – Jean Watson Interview
- Where do You Think You Played, A Look at Leisure in WGC 1920-1970's WGC

Appendix 1 – Correspondence with Dr Day



Appendix 2 - Welwyn Garden City, A Brave Vision DVD/Video – Jean Watson Interview

Appendix 3 - Where do You Think You Played, A Look at Leisure in WGC 1920-1970's WGC

Submitted by post