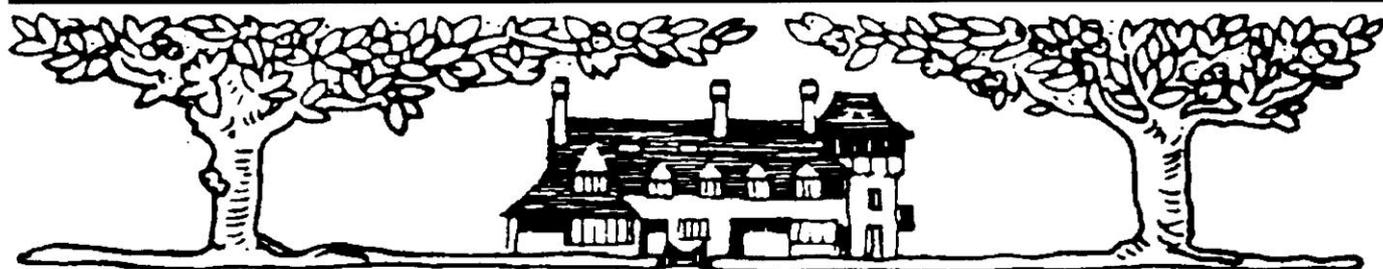


THE LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

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# JOURNAL

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## Forthcoming Events

At present we cannot hold any meetings but are hoping to resume doing so in November.

**Monday 8 November 2021**, 7.30pm, The Settlement. Ros Allwood will give an illustrated talk entitled *Innate Bohemians: Arts & Crafts in the early Garden City*.

**Copy for the June Journal by 15th May please.**



# From the Chairman

Dear Members,

It is now a year since Covid19 struck and lockdown began. It is more than a year since we had our last meeting of the Society with the result that we have lost three meetings and our AGM. Such a period of inactivity can spell doom to a small society such as ours. On this anniversary, as your Chairman, I thought it appropriate to send you all a loud and clear message that we are all still here and, thanks to Allan in keeping the journal going, Philippa in developing a new programme ready for when we can meet again, Ray for keeping us solvent and honest and all of the rest of you who have kept faith with our mission.

So far as our mission is concerned, our Garden City needs us more than ever. The decision by NHDC with the acquiescence of the Heritage Foundation has meant that the strong arguments for saving the townscape around the Town Lodge, including its façade, made so well by English Heritage and vigorously by Save Our Garden City and ourselves were effectively ignored. We lost other Cecil Hignett's art deco offerings a few years ago when the British Tabulating Machine's building in Ickniel Way and Marmet's pram factory were demolished. To express a personal point of view I have to wonder whether the bodies that are supposed to nurture Letchworth's heritage are really interested in it.

On a brighter note, I am sure we are all looking forward to the end of lockdown. We are hoping to have our first meeting in October when we shall have our postponed General Meeting followed by Ros Allwood's postponed talk on Arts & Crafts in early LGC. It will be good to see everybody there.

## **Industrial Letchworth: The First Garden City, 1903–1920**

This new book was written by members of Letchworth Local History Research Group (LLHRG) and published by Hertfordshire Publications on 1st February 2021. It grew out of the Group's successful exhibition held in the town in October 2015, called *Letchworth: England's first new industrial town?* Both titles are deliberately provocative, as we have tried to encourage readers to see Letchworth in a new light, as primarily a town which sought to attract industry and encourage small-scale private enterprise, as well as being a pleasant and healthful place to live.

LLHRG has grown from its origins as a small group of residents who came together to study the Letchworth data in the 1911 Census, the first one to include the garden city. (The 1921 Census will offer a fascinating comparison when it becomes available in January 1922.) The next project, the idea of the then leader, Mertsy Fisher, was to put on an exhibition about the town's industrial origins; it was felt that its architecture has been well-covered, as has, to a lesser extent, the social make up of the garden city. We also wanted to move on from the idea that Ebenezer Howard, visionary though he was, was the only begetter of Letchworth Garden City. Unfortunately, the label "the town built on a book" is a bit of a millstone. You will find in our study many of the other men and women who contributed to making Howard's ideas a practical reality – the investors, philanthropists, surveyors, solicitors, engineers, builders, business people, tradesmen and shopkeepers.

The exhibition was very popular and those who saw it wanted to know more about this period of Letchworth's history; we, in turn, had more to tell. The obvious next step was to produce a well-illustrated book, aimed at the general reader but authoritative, seeking to dispel some of the many myths about the town which have grown up over the years. Seven people had written text for the original exhibition panels and this formed the basis of the book. However, several further chapters of context were needed (for example, on how the enterprise was financed, on the existing state of agriculture in England and on the workings of the development company, First Garden City Ltd.). Some of the original members were no longer able to contribute so this additional material was largely written by two people who became the de facto editors, Janet Capstick and Philippa Parker.

Naively, perhaps, LLHRG intended to self-publish what was becoming a significant book and, in order to promote it Janet and Philippa contributed two articles to *Herts Past & Present*, the journal of the Hertfordshire Association for Local History. These were seen by a staff member of the University of Hertfordshire Press (UHP), whose local studies imprint is Hertfordshire Publications, and they were keen to take it on. This was thrilling for our small group but, because we hadn't worked with them from the start, conforming to their house style, the editorial work has been considerable. A professional publication has to be immaculate, so much time and effort has gone into ensuring the images are of high quality, and into proof reading, layout, fact-checking and so on. The lesson is that one should not be too humble about one's material and if you think there is a chance of mainstream publication work with a publisher from an early stage. We had hoped, appropriately, to have the book printed in Letchworth but that was

taken out of our hands, although our designer was local, until she relocated to the Isle of Arran and meetings went online.

To bring the book to publication UHP requires a subvention, so this was our next concern. The 2015 exhibition had been financially supported by LGC Heritage Foundation, North Hertfordshire District Council and a number of local businesses. However, by mid 2020 the state of the nation's finances was very different and we didn't feel able to approach these bodies again (and would have been unlikely to receive any contributions). Other charitable funding organisations were similarly short of money. We were feeling despondent until Janet got back in touch with a group of academics from the Centre for Research in Building Cultures at Grenoble Alpes University, France. A few years ago LLHRG had helped them in their research on garden cities for the 21st Century and, coincidentally, they were looking for a vehicle to publish their work. The upshot is that these French academics have contributed an afterword to our book and, courtesy of French government funding, have enabled publication. Needless to say, we are very grateful.

As the current leader of LLHRG I am puzzled (and somewhat dismayed) by how few residents are willing to engage in consistent, high quality, research into Letchworth's fascinating history. There are so many interesting early residents to be investigated and so many aspects of garden city life to be written about. We hope that our book will galvanise enthusiasm for work on the many topics that remain to be studied. Above all, we hope you will buy a copy, enjoy reading it and let us know what you think.

Philippa Parker

Leader, Letchworth Local History Research Group

# Renaming Letchworth Garden City

Several attempts in the 1960s and 70s to officially acknowledge the town's rightful heritage ended in failure!!

But at the Town Meeting in May 2003 - during the town's 100th Anniversary Year - Stuart Kenny, the then Director General of Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, announced to a packed audience at Plinston Hall that, following a 13 month campaign, Letchworth was officially changed to Letchworth Garden City. He received a tremendous ovation.

Stuart had felt it was wrong that Welwyn Garden City - Sir Ebenezer Howard's second Garden City - which was born 16 years after our town - was officially given its full title but the World's First Garden City was, throughout the country, just called Letchworth, which just wasn't right. Most historical papers just use Letchworth as the town's name but of course the Heritage Foundation has always been prefixed with Letchworth Garden City, as its official name.

He gave the task to re-negotiate the situation to the Foundation's PR and Media Manager Terry Gray who held this position from 1998 until his retirement in 2011.

Terry told the LGCS Journal that among his many other duties, he set about the "very challenging" task with "great vigour", especially as he is a Letchworth Garden City "lad" himself whose grandparents were pioneers of the town - and his grandfather was a personal friend of the great Sir Ebenezer Howard.

Terry explained: "It took 13 months to get approval after I spoke and wrote on many occasions to four departments at The Home Office, Herts County Council, North Herts District Council, Land Registry, mapping agencies, MP Sir Oliver Heald (who fully backed the campaign), several other agencies and crucially the Royal Mail, which had previously blocked the idea because it would cost so much to change all their systems.

"All the official bodies eventually gave their blessing but the Royal Mail were still the stumbling block, but just three days before the Town Meeting they emailed me to finally give their approval. I was elated and so was Stuart - and the other good news was that the whole project cost hardly anything, just labour and administration costs. I suppose I was like a dog without a bone and refused to give up. There were several occasions that different agencies raised objections, but thankfully they all eventually realised that the town was so proud to be the

World's First Garden City and it needed to be fully recognised by using the full name.

“The Royal Mail changed its systems very quickly, including changes of some postcodes, Letchworth Railway Station started using the full title, as did and do the BBC and most other media and several other places, businesses, including Sainsbury's on its customer announcements and major bodies both nationally and locally etc. gradually started using Letchworth Garden City - a few didn't and still don't because they think the full name is too long.

“But I received over 300 letters and emails of support from the residents of the town after getting approval,” Terry explained and “I had about six negative responses, but that was all. Several businesses and people just use the abbreviation LGC - that is fine” says Terry.

“We never expected everyone to use the town's full title on every occasion, but as many times as possible to bring home the importance of the town's full heritage,” he added.

It is asked “What's in a name?” says Terry - “well, being proud of the town and acknowledgement of its rightful place in History is and was very important to many thousands of Letchworthians”.

## **Planning again**

Members will probably already know that the planning application to demolish the Madonna School and other buildings in Gernon Road and build residential units was approved by NHDC's Planning Committee and the site has been fenced off in preparation.

Yet another planning application for turning a bit of Letchworth's Green Belt into housing has been made by the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation and it can be viewed online as application no. 21/00504/OP. The site incorporates part of the allotments north of Blackhorse Road from which its sole road access comes as shown in the layout overleaf.

At the time of writing I can say that all the comments posted concentrate on the access to and along Blackhorse Road which is already inadequate for the businesses and the waste tip which it serves. Further comments might help, but don't count on it!

Allan Lupton



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