

# THE LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY SOCIETY



**Journal No. 172, August 2024**

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## **From the Editor**

Please continue to contribute articles for future issues; the current themes are interesting Letchworth houses and their architects and ‘Letchworth Worthies’, about some of the less-celebrated early citizens. However, all relevant material is welcome. Garden City research has recently become easier with the digitisation by the British Newspaper archive of *The Citizen* for the years 1906–16. You can access this free of charge in our public library.

## **From the Treasurer**

If you are unsure of whether you have paid your subscription for 2023-24 ask the membership Secretary to check and the Treasurer for ways to pay. We do need all who are not life or honorary members to contribute, please. Contact details below.

## **Forthcoming Events**

**Monday 9 September 2024, 7pm**

A brief **AGM**, followed by: *The Camden Town Group and the Garden City*, an illustrated talk by Ros Allwood.

Ros Allwood is Cultural Services Manager, North Herts District Council, and a member of LGCS Council, well-known to us. Her museum career has taken her to several major museums in England, included organising notable exhibitions, and the contribution of articles to prestigious academic journals. She is an expert on several Camden Town artists.

Monday 24 March 2025, 7.30pm

*100 years of Letchworth Educational Settlement*, an illustrated talk by Dr Kate Thompson.

Opened in May 1920, it celebrated its centenary during the first Covid lockdown when its future was in jeopardy. Thanks to supporters, funds were raised to ensure the Settlement's survival and this illustrated talk will describe how it grew and changed with the times, serving not only the garden city but surrounding towns and villages.

Kate Thompson was County Archivist of Hertfordshire 1990–1999 and has lived in Letchworth since 1992. The then Chairman of Letchworth Settlement, Pam Burn, asked her to write its history, published in 2020.

Monday 23 June 2025

Daniel Stilwell, architectural historian specialising in the Arts & Crafts Movement, will talk on a topic appropriate to Letchworth.

These talks will take place in the Brunt Room, Letchworth Settlement, 229 Nevells Road SG6 4UB at 7.30pm. All are welcome, no booking required; entry is £4 for LGCS and LALG members, otherwise £5, exact cash, please. (You may join LGCS at the door to benefit from the reduced rate.)

### **LGCS Council members 2022–25**

Hon. Life President: Dr Mervyn Miller, 11 Silver Street, Ashwell.

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## Reports of Society Talks

### *Garden Cities and other Utopias*

A talk given by Kate Harwood of Hertfordshire Gardens Trust on 3 June 2024.

This was a wide-ranging presentation by an acknowledged expert on garden and landscape history in our county, well-illustrated with attractive images. It was startling to be told that the first planned urban settlements date from 5 BC and then to be taken through the development of towns like Winchelsea, London after the Great Fire, an early concept of a ‘green belt’ in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and those conceived by individuals, like New Lanark, the Chartists’ O’Connorville (near Chorleywood), Bournville and Saltaire. The speaker pointed out that some were products of enlightened self-interest by manufacturers. Other settlements were intended to be self-supporting communal arrangements, often designated a ‘colony’, with particular social beliefs. We were reminded that Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin worked on New Earswick, the Rowntree model village near York, and of lesser-known estates such as Childwickbury, near Harpenden, Ardeley, near Buntingford, and Stocken’s Green near Knebworth, inspired by Letchworth.

Kate emphasised the importance of Ebenezer Howard’s two editions of his book, with its ideas of zoning, satellite towns, an agricultural belt and their interpretation by Parker and Unwin in the form of grouped housing, green spaces and communal views. The Letchworth experience lead on to the garden suburbs in greater London and garden cities in Europe and across the world, not forgetting Welwyn Garden City. She pointed out that none of these early 20<sup>th</sup> century iterations anticipated the dominance of the motor car, the on-street parking of which blights our garden cities and suburbs. Perhaps that is a problem which may diminish if fewer people keep private transport in the future.

We were brought up to date by reference to the post-war new towns, the first being our neighbour Stevenage, pioneering and enterprising in 1946 but now coming to the end of the natural life of its housing stock and infrastructure. The celebrated Poundbury, near Dorchester, is both loved and reviled; apparently, the original residents now bemoan future expansion of the development, although it does genuinely combine dwellings and commercial enterprises, as Howard envisaged. Finally, Kate questioned (as have others) whether various planned garden villages in the UK would be little more than large housing estates, some, regrettably, on historic landscape sites. A current, controversial, case is the projected Gilston Garden Village, near Hunsdon.

Report by Philippa Parker

### *The Shaws in Hertfordshire the lives and friends of: George Bernard and Charlotte Shaw in the county, 1904–1950*

A talk given by Philippa Parker on 26 February 2024

Philippa Parker gave a talk about the Shaws of Hertfordshire, relating to the events that brought two natives of Ireland, George Bernard and Charlotte Shaw to the Home Counties. Philippa's interest in the Shaws comes from her 15-year involvement as a guide for the National Trust at Shaws' Corner in Ayot St Lawrence.

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in 1856 to not-very-affluent middle-class parents. His education was basic and to all intents and purposes he was self-taught. He was a bookworm throughout his life. His future wife, Charlotte, was born in 1857 in an affluent family at Roscarbery in Co Cork. An intelligent, energetic and artistic woman, the domestic life in rural Ireland was not for her. They both moved to England and met through friends made in the newly-founded and progressive movements of Fabianism and women's suffragism. Their marriage was a happy one. Philippa listed some famous names from the period including H.G. Wells, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and members of the Bloomsbury set. Fabianism, in particular, was a central theme to their lives.

Bernard and Charlotte lived initially in London in the Adelphi Terrace. They kept a home there for their lives together, moving to a luxurious serviced flat near Horseguards Avenue when the Adelphi Terrace was demolished. They found the New Rectory in Ayot St Lawrence as an alternative country residence. Newly built in 1902 (and later described by Harold Nicholson as an ugly red-brick villa) they rented it for £200 a year plus £52 a year for the rental of the furniture. This 6-bedroom house had cost £2000 to build and the rector could not afford to live in it. In 1920 they took the opportunity to buy the house for £6250 10/- (six thousand, two hundred and fifty pounds ten shillings or £6250.50, an astronomical sum in those days when villas in Metroland were going for £175) and lived there for the rest of their lives.

GBS was deeply involved in the Garden City movement, knew Ebenezer Howard, Frederic Osborn, Howard Pearsall and C. B. Purdom and used Barry Parker to design him a garage block to house his cars - he was a great motoring enthusiast and moderniser using Bassett-Lowke to install an 'electric plant' in 1930.

The Shaws came over as an adjusted warm couple. They were generous, helping people with education expenses and supporting progressive causes. GBS was very much involved with the Howard Cottage Society, investing heavily. He was popular in the village supporting local causes and treating all people equally no matter what their status. He was a successful businessman, becoming wealthy through his own efforts despite his modest background. Will his reputation last? Philippa told us that he is still studied in the US and Japan *inter alia* even though he is less performed than others (such as Oscar Wilde) and is certainly not as prominent as Shakespeare with whom he was sometimes compared in his time.

The audience very much enjoyed the presentation and asked plenty of questions before showing their appreciation of Philippa's talk.

Report by Peter Bathmaker

## Articles

*Tanglewood: a cottage in a town – a history of an early Letchworth Garden City house*



Drawing of unknown date by an unidentified artist.

Sollershott West is known for its archetypal Arts and Craft houses, which are excellent examples of the beauty and simplicity of craft methods of building yet adapted to the fast changing early twentieth century needs. *Tanglewood*, designed by Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott (1865–1945), contains many features associated with the Arts and Craft movement and gives a new definition to the concept of the local vernacular. By this I mean moving away from the shroud of Victorian architecture to a more functional and domestic, open-plan design, emphasising a roughcast, half-timbered country cottage type house, but in a town, even metropolitan, setting that appealed to the then expanding middle classes with artistic yearnings.

As Haigh (2004) notes, Arts and Crafts is much more than an aesthetic fin-de-siècle fashion; it was a complete world view and she notes how Scott embraced the concepts held by C F A Voysey and William Morris, all embodied in the ‘fundamental values of the artist-craftsman’.

Many characteristics of the early Garden City houses also were exemplified by the core of architects such as Parker and Unwin, Bidwell and Bennett and Courtenay Crickmer, developing, in the Garden City, the distinctive style of the era. Looking, for instance, at the above drawing of *Tanglewood* there is a front central bay and two different sized gables, one of which sweeps down nearly to the ground. The roof has brick chimneys and the body of the house comprises rough cast walls and irregular mullioned windows with leaded lights which are very typical of Scott’s signature style. Baillie Scott’s first houses in Letchworth included *Elmwood Cottages* (1905) which had such features, and these were transferred to the front elevation of *Tanglewood*. The ‘M’ gable dominating the back of the house is very characteristic of Scott’s design.

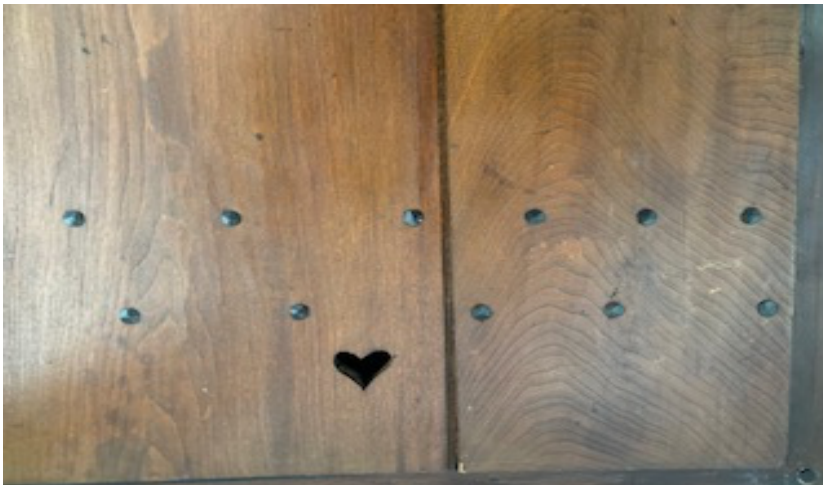
Scott used high quality materials combined with simple designs to give character and cohesion throughout the house. For example, window shutters featured heart shaped motifs and these are found on many of the cupboard doors in the house. Other features include carved wooden door handles and distinctive rustic ironmongery.



Left, front door (Cumming and Kaplan); note the carved detail along the outer porch. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century

Haigh (2004) quotes Scott, who, echoing Voisey, suggests that home-making should be ‘sane, practical and rational’. For example, Scott embraces the concept of the medieval hall but customises it to the design of the smaller townhouse. The dining room and sitting room within *Tanglewood* combine to form a 50-foot hall feature, broken up by ‘exposed principal beams, so the overall room is reduced to functionally distinct areas’ (Miller 2002). Our main sitting room, we believe, was an artist’s studio and features a square bay which floods with sunlight and warmth. A door opens directly from this room on to the external terrace and garden through a small open garden room. Such a feature favoured by Scott provides a very pleasant shelter to have a relaxing drink or meal overlooking the garden. Both the dining and the sitting areas feature original, hospitable, fireplaces with copper hoods. Winters before central heating could be bleak, however, and I spoke with the late Margaret Bidwell (Hugh Bidwell’s wife), who often visited *Tanglewood* in the mid twentieth

century and noted how the walls of the sitting/dining area were covered in blankets to keep in the warmth. To quote Margaret, ‘it was one of the coldest rooms I’ve ever been in’. She used to meet regularly with other Letchworth residents during the 1940s for play reading and singing.



Baillie Scott designed every detail, down to the hinges on the door. These features are found on cupboards and doors in *Tanglewood*.

The aesthetic of the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement is manifested in the garden which is very simple and unpretentious and stretches from the wide terrace to Sollershott Green, a spinney comprising some 8 acres of copse and meadow accessed by those residents whose houses back onto the boundary. Early photographs of the garden show a fairly traditional layout of flower beds surrounding a central lawn with a side path. There is a small pond and water feature. The garden has evolved over the years and in 2014 when Peter and I moved into the house it featured what the estate agent labelled a ‘woodland walk’. The reality was a dense copse consisting of a series of narrow pathways, surrounded by a feature of 28 coniferous trees which initially were probably

small plantings during the post-war period and very decorative at that time. However, trees grow big and this mini forest of pine trees not only took up nearly half the garden but limited opportunities for warmth and growth. We obtained Heritage Foundation permission to take down the conifers to expose the pretty windy paths and enable the garden to be developed with traditional and colourful flowerbeds.



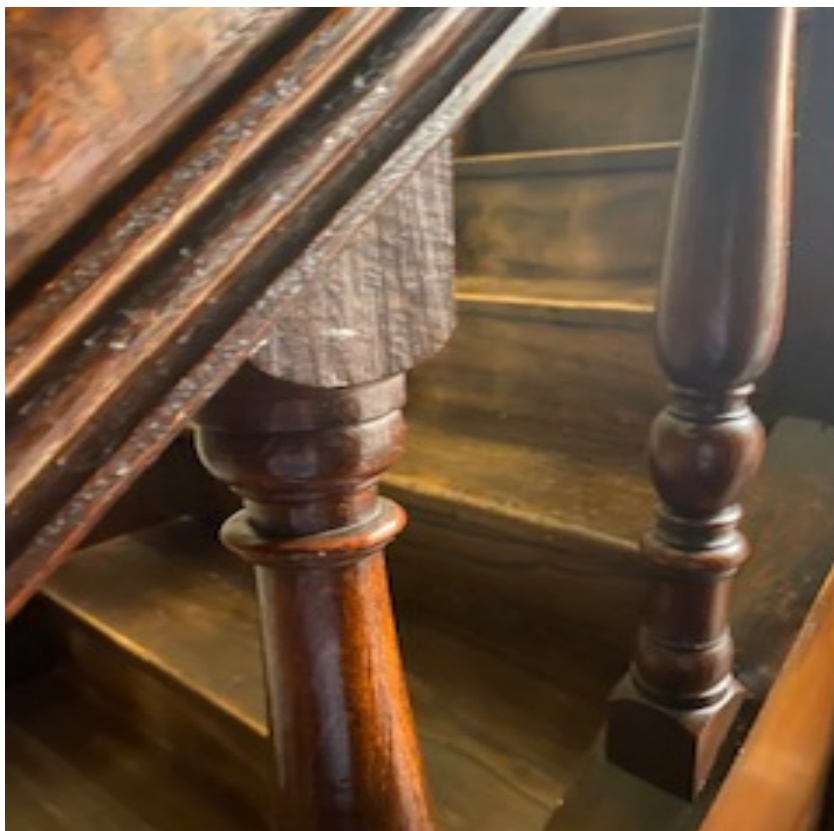
The garden room 2024

The house was commissioned in 1906/1907 by Mrs Juliet Branson (1851–1938), described in the 1911 Census as a self-employed artist working at home. She was a widow and her 22 year old daughter Enid moved in with her, as did a maid. Juliet is a great aunt, through marriage, of the entrepreneur Richard Branson. She lived in London previously and may well have chosen to live in Letchworth because of the migration to the Garden City of several artists and other like-minded creative people. Cumming and Kaplan (1991) note how the town ‘attracted men and women dedicated to the simple life and those who wore smocks and sandals, adopted vegetarianism or joined the Letchworth Morris Men’.

The house layout of the ground floor complemented the needs of the Branson trio because there is a door closing off half the entrance hall and main living area from the kitchen, the then scullery, and the downstairs cloakroom occupied by the maid. Juliet lived in *Tanglewood* until she was killed in a road traffic accident in Broadway in March 1938. Enid (born 1887) died in 1950 while resident in the Three Counties Asylum. Following Juliet’s death there were many residents of the house through the 1940s and 1950s and little is known about them. In 1958 Cecil Hall was bequeathed the property by H D Clapham who lived in Willian Way. Mr Hall is notable because he was President of the British Iris Society and planted the garden with an extensive array of irises,



most of which have now exceeded their lifespan and mainly produce leaves only, despite careful cultivation with garden feed. Apparently, there is an iris named 'Tanglewood' but despite extensive research I can't find out any more details.



Detail staircase 2024

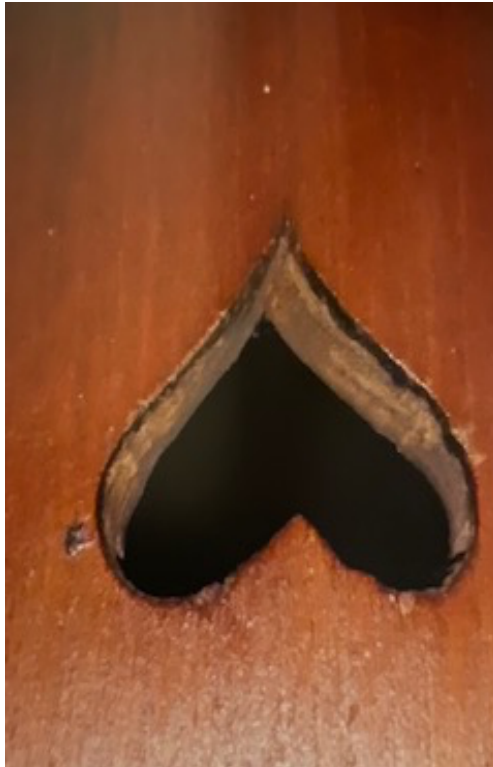
To conclude, *Tanglewood* is a typical example of Scott's vision for the suburban home, developed in the early twentieth century.

He wanted to move away, architecturally speaking, from the standard red-brick Victorian terraced home to an inherently artistic, structural, house. It is interesting to reflect that his ethic of simplicity and openness can be seen in the current trend towards larger combined living areas desired particularly by present day families. However, because of Scott's talent and creativity, *Tanglewood* is essentially a lovely home to live in and love.

#### Bibliography

- Cumming E and Kaplan W *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (Thames and Hudson 1991)  
Haigh D *Baillie Scott, the Artistic House* (Wiley, 2004)  
Miller M *Letchworth the First Garden City* (Phillimore, 2002)

Susan Bathmaker



## LETCHWORTH 'WORTHIES'

No. 2 *Charles Francis Ball CBE, JP: 'Letchworth's Chief Citizen'*

During his residence in Letchworth Garden City from 1904, and following his death at the relatively early age of 63, C. F. Ball was lauded as a prominent and active citizen. An anonymous writer in *The Citizen* newspaper called him 'A man, so many-sided [that it] evades all definitions...it was the spirit of the man –his abounding eagerness and utter sincerity which won the confidence of men everywhere.'<sup>1</sup> However, Ball had not always been such a model citizen, as we shall see.<sup>2</sup>

When in March 1919 he received the Freedom of the City of London as a member of the Worshipful Company of Glass Sellers Ball was described as a 'Public Works Contractor' of 336 Norton Way. The construction company he established, which operated in Letchworth until 1991, was responsible for building much of the town's infrastructure and housing, including the Electrical Power Station in Works Road, 1907, many of the roads and areas of the industrial estate, residential property and the refurbishment of The Wynd in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> He was regarded as being one of Letchworth's 'pioneer residents', given the honour of conducting the royal party around Hillbrow Estate during its 'coming of age' celebrations in 1926. Two years later, 1928 was particularly noteworthy for Ball as he was Master of his

livery company and received the CBE in the King's birthday honours list, Letchworth's first such recipient.

Charles Francis Ball was born on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1869 in Tiverton, (then) Somerset, son of a railway official. He was articled as a civil engineer to George H. Small, Borough Engineer of Penzance (his family's home town), in January 1884, held a similar post in Croydon, Surrey, and from February 1892 was Assistant to the Borough Engineer of Bristol, at a salary of £3 a week. His successful application to be admitted to the Institution of Civil Engineers in December 1894 lists the various public construction projects on which he had worked. His experience would have been just what was needed in the early years of Letchworth Garden City, where he lived at 336 Norton Way South.

Ball married Blanche Isabel Langdon (died 1943) in 1904 and had one child, Marjory Ball Lynch. After his death in 1933 his nephew, Stanley J. Ball, continued the business until it was forced to close in 1991.<sup>4</sup> Charles seems to have involved himself in all aspects of garden city life: he was a Freemason, an active member of the Cricket Club, Literary and Debating Society, was a magistrate and prominent Conservative politician, member of the town's Parish Council 1908–19, then of the Urban District Council 1919–24, a founder member of Letchworth Rotary Club from 1924 and served on the County Council as member for Baldock. No wonder that his CBE was awarded for 'political and public services'. However, he made one big mistake in his younger life and paid the price for it.

On 8<sup>th</sup> July 1897, at Bristol Assizes, Charles Francis Ball was tried for 'feloniously stealing... monies of the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of the City of Bristol, his masters.' Over the months from December 1895 to March 1897 Ball and his accomplice Isaac Jenkins Pearce, a sanitary engineer, stole at least £2000<sup>5</sup> by 'making false entries in... a wages sheet' 'with intent to defraud'. He and his accomplice had been 'charging for imaginary workmen'. Both men confessed to the crime and Ball was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude, serving it in Parkhurst Prison, Isle of Wight. In fact, he spent only a little over five years in prison so must have earned remission in some way, presumably by good behaviour. He was released on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1902 and returned to Bristol.

As was usual at the time, the case was widely reported in newspapers all over the UK. A report in *The Daily Telegraph and Courier* is typical; in all, Ball and his accomplice stole from Bristol Corporation the rough equivalent of two to three hundred thousand pounds at today's values. 'When apprehended Ball had on him title deeds and cash representing £4000.'<sup>6</sup> 'For Ball, it was urged [in mitigation] that full restitution had been made, but the judge said it was a grave case. Ball fainted on hearing his sentence.'<sup>7</sup> Throughout the trial it was noted that Ball looked ill and defeated; he must have realised the seriousness of his situation. What had possessed him to commit this crime over two years? We can only guess that he may have been influenced by the older man.

After his release from prison, Ball needed a fresh start and was, perhaps, enthused by the similarly new enterprise of the garden city in Hertfordshire. C.F. Ball's construction company operated out of various commercial addresses in Letchworth, including from the LNER sidings. Much of his work came from First Garden City Ltd. and A.W. Brunt states that 'he was implicitly trusted by them.'<sup>8</sup> Ball died on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1933 leaving a substantial estate (£87,589 8s 4d), including £500 to Letchworth Hospital, and was buried in Letchworth Cemetery. Public donations in his memory raised £675 which provided for the C.F. Ball Memorial Garden, opened by his widow in July 1936. The event was reported in detail in *The*

*Citizen* newspaper.<sup>9</sup> This garden, on the site of the town's first open-air swimming pool, is now part of Howard Park Gardens and there is a plaque to Ball mounted underneath the statue of Sappho.

Charles Ball made a serious mistake in his twenties, confessed the crime and served his sentence. Thereafter, he appears to have lived an exemplary life of civic service. Did his professional and social contacts know about his crime? If so, were they unconcerned? Nowadays, it would be almost impossible to conceal such an episode in one's past. Personally, I applaud the way he more than made up for it by his devotion to his adopted town.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Citizen* 16.6.1933. gardencitycollection.com LBM3000.68

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to David Cursons, Secretary of St Christopher [School] Club, for alerting me to this aspect of Ball's life and providing documentary evidence.

<sup>3</sup> There is material about Ball in the relevant Local History Guide in Letchworth's Public Library. He lived from 1907 at 8 Norton Way North, later renumbered as 336 Norton Way South.

<sup>4</sup> *The Comet* 30.10.1991.

<sup>5</sup> Newspaper accounts give varying sums between £2491 and £2600.

<sup>6</sup> *South Wales Echo* 1.4.1897, p.3.

<sup>7</sup> *Daily Telegraph and Courier* 9.7.1897, p.9. Pearce, aged 37, was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment.

<sup>8</sup> A.W.Brunt *Pageant of Letchworth 1903–14* (Letchworth Printers, 1942)

<sup>9</sup> *The Citizen* 31.7.1936. LBM3000.78. <sup>9</sup> *South Wales Echo* 1.4.1897, p.3.

<sup>9</sup> *Daily Telegraph and Courier* 9.7.1897, p.9. Pearce, aged 37, was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment.

<sup>9</sup> A.W.Brunt *Pageant of Letchworth 1903–14* (Letchworth Printers, 1942)

<sup>9</sup> *The Citizen* 31.7.1936. LBM3000.78.

Philippa Parker