THE LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

JOURNAL No. 169, February 2023

Contents

From the Editor

To my relief, I received no adverse comments about Journal 168, so I assume that members are broadly satisfied. If not, or if you have suggestions and contributions, please get in touch.

Forthcoming Events

LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY SOCIETY 2022-2023 programme of illustrated talks.

Monday 13 February 2023: *Mirror in the Bike* Shed: an illustrated talk about M.H. Baillie Scott's remarkable bike shed at HGS, with connections to LGC. Given by Anthony Davis, FRSA, architectural historian and London guide.

Monday 17 April 2023: *May Morris, Egypt and Coptic Textiles.* The contribution of Morris's study of ancient Egyptian textiles following her visit to Egypt in 1897, and the connections with Arts & Crafts

design. Given by Thomas Cooper, PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, whose work focusses on Arts & Crafts textiles and May Morris.

Monday 11 September (provisional) Matthew Simons will talk about Letchworth's Alec Hunter, textile designer and authority on folk dance. Details to follow.

These talks take place in the Brunt Room, Letchworth Settlement, 229 Nevells Road, SG6 4UB, at 7.30pm. All welcome; admission is £4 for members of LGCS or LALG, £5 for non-members. (You may join LGCS at the door to benefit from the members' rate.)

Contact: Philippa Parker, Secretary LGCS:
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CHANGE OF VENUE The talk on 13 February will take place in NCL Room, ground floor, Mrs Howard Memorial Hall, 7.30pm, **not** at Letchworth Settlement.

LGCS Council members 2022–25

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From the Treasurer

If you think you may not have paid your subscription for 2022–2023 or need to update your contact details (email and phone are especially important) please check with the Treasurer and/or Membership Secretary.

Talk by Douglas Kent, BSc, MSc, MRICS Technical and Research Director of SPAB, reported by Rosamond Allwood

Saving Old Buildings – An introduction to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

Douglas gave us a fascinating talk about the history and work of the SPAB and illustrated many of his points with reference to his own timber-framed hall house in the middle of Saffron Walden, which he has been restoring for some years.

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was founded by William Morris in 1877, as a response to the work of many Victorian architects whose 'restoration' of old buildings was causing them harm. An example was that of Lord Grimthorpe's work at St Albans Cathedral, where he designed a completely new front, and used inappropriate materials like cement mortar. Members of the SPAB instead aimed to repair rather than replace all damaged parts of ancient buildings, using the original methods and materials. This conservative repair, retaining the integrity of the original building, is still the Society's aim today.

With offices in Spitalfields, the SPAB is a charity with around 7000 members. It is the country's oldest preservation body and is a statutory consultee when there is any proposal to demolish a Listed Building. It advises on pre-1714 buildings; the Georgian Group, the Victorian and Twentieth Century Societies take on more recent buildings. The SPAB runs campaigns and courses, it provides casework advice, and it undertakes technical research into building materials; for example, working with the National Trust to find suitable and lasting alternatives to lead paint. It has a free independent technical advice line, part-funded by Historic England. It has an educational role, with scholarships for young architects and surveyors, a William Morris craft fellowship, and twice-yearly five-day courses, with lectures and site visits. The Society also has various awards, given for good repair work in churches and other old buildings. Over the years, the SPAB has commented on various local buildings – in 1909 on plans for a new roof and floor in the church of St Mary the Virgin in old Letchworth, again in 1940 when the church had death-watch beetle, and more recently on plans to enlarge Letchworth Hall Hotel.

In the last part of his talk, Douglas showed us slides of his wonderful pargetted house 25-27, Church Street, Saffron Walden. The medieval Grade 1 Listed house was an inn, then from the 1750s was two cottages, with nine rooms. It has an oak frame, with wattle and daub, and later brickwork. During restoration Douglas has found 21 layers of wallpaper, from early Victorian through the 20th century. The front of the building has jettied gables jutting over the pavement, with unique decoration in pargetting (external plasterwork). This has been damaged by heavy lorries, repaired and re-limewashed over the years, hiding much of the detail. Over three years the old cement and limewash was removed, giving a better surface for redecoration, using a combination of ancient and modern materials. This ensured that the new finish was more water-resistant yet still able to breathe. Douglas finished with an apt William Morris quote: 'We are only trustees for those that come after us.'

The SPAB Advice line is 0207 456 0916. www.spab.org.uk

Image: Douglas Kent, of his house in Saffron Walden

Railways and the Garden City by Peter Bathmaker

One of the stipulations for selecting the site of a Garden City was that it should be on a railway. This was in the 1890s when, apart from the canals (which provided a very specialised type of transport for specific goods) the only two kinds of transport available were the railways and horses pulling various kinds of vehicles. Horses and carts could only haul very limited tonnages. The rest had to go by rail. The railways developed in phases. First were the main lines, what are now often called the inter-city routes, that linked the major towns; then came the secondary lines that linked smaller towns and centres of production such as mines and factories to the main lines, finally came the branch lines that connected small towns and centres of industry. The Garden City was designed with this model in mind. When we look at how Letchworth developed, the railway was key. First Garden City Ltd. was keen to ensure that the town had a good rail connexion, particularly to support the industry that was one of the 'three magnets' in Howard's plan.

First, the location of the Garden City. Letchworth was established on the Great Northern Railway's Shepreth branch. (Those of us who take an interest in these things may have noted that the bridges on the line are signed 'SBR' for Shepreth Branch). One of the first facilities to be built by the GNR was a passenger station. This was the first of three. It was built in 1903 and was more like a 'halt', many of its passengers being construction workers and people coming to work building the early Garden City. This station only lasted until 1905 when it was replaced by the second station. This was in Station Way, its site still visible on the Hitchin side of Neville's Bridge, opposite the Spirella building. The fence marking the GNR's boundary stands far back from the road with a wide verge. The wooden platforms were built on this land. The station, which was always intended to be temporary, ran down towards the bridge that carries Spring Road under the railway, near which the kink in the fence indicates where the station ended. The early pictures of Letchworth often include this station, with crowds of people getting off on the down side of the station from a GNR 'rail-motor' – a carriage with a small steam locomotive built in one end. These rail-motors were the precursors the later diesel trains which many of us remember. They were renowned for

giving a rough ride and being dirty and difficult to clean; with part of the carriage being occupied by a steam engine with the coal, soot and exhaust steam and smoke associated with it, this was hardly surprising. The station also had a signal box, which is visible in the foreground of photographs of the station.

This second station opened on 15 April 1905 and lasted until 1913. The present, third, station was opened on 18th of May 1913. This now fully operational station handled both passengers and parcels. The railways carried parcels either on passenger trains or freight trains. Passenger parcels tended to be smaller and were more expensive to send than freight-train parcels. There were tariffs for different classes of parcel, including, the rather macabre tariff for corpses. The parcels office is now occupied by La Concha, the tapas bar.

F G C Ltd. recognised that, in order to attract business into the town, it was important to put into place facilities that would be needed by what were then state-of-the-art companies. Apart from some high-quality housing for employees they built the power station and the gasworks. Gas was by the early 1900s an old technology (although still important for lighting and heating and as process fuel and the source of coal-tar for the manufacture of chemicals) but electricity was in its infancy. Leading edge companies were attracted to the availability of power to run machinery using electric motors rather than steam engines, and for lighting. Both the power station and the gasworks needed coal, and lots of it. FGC Ltd. built a railway system to bring in the coal. This was the Letchworth Industrial Railway. It had an extensive system on the south side of Works Road. The connexion from the running line was on the Cambridge side of the station where the new, large, signal box stood. This signal box survived until the 1970s when new signalling replaced all the signal boxes between Hitchin and Cambridge. On the other side of the line (parallel with Icknield Way) the GNR built a large goods yard with sidings and a large goods shed into which wagons could be run for loading and unloading into a secure and weather-proof area. The goods yard was also where the coal merchants were based.

Railway goods traffic is handled in three ways, referred to as ‘wagonload’, ‘trainload’ or ‘parcels’ traffic. With trainload a single customer pays for an entire train to go from one place to another in one journey. A typical traffic to be dealt with in this way is coal going from a coalmine directly into a power station. FGC’s power station in Letchworth would have been supplied with its coal in this way. Most traffic though, particularly at the turn of the 20th century, would have been wagonload traffic or parcels traffic. Wagonload traffic is where a consigner fills a single wagon with his goods, which is then collected by a scheduled goods train (called a ‘trip’ working) and is passed through the system in the same way a letter passes through the postal system. The trip train takes the wagon and all the other wagons it has collected into a marshalling yard where the train is broken up and the wagons shunted around into trains that go towards the destination of the consignees, either directly or through an intermediate marshalling yard and then on a final trip-working to their destination.

Parcels or ‘freight sundries’ were the smaller consignments. They would be taken to a goods station managed by a Goods Agent (the goods equivalent of the Station Master in a passenger station) who also handled the administration of wagonload and trainload freight, and be loaded into wagons along with other parcels for the same destination (usually another goods station) and then treated like wagonload freight. It should be noted that these parcels were not usually neat packages wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string, but often hefty pieces of machinery weighing up to a ton. Incoming parcels would be unloaded in the goods shed and collected by the consignee with a horse and cart or delivered by the railway company.

The extensive facilities in the Garden City were a major attraction for businesses thinking of moving into the town. Companies needing large quantities of raw materials found FGC’s industrial railway particularly attractive because they could both receive these raw materials and dispatch finished products using railway wagons shunted into their works without going

to the expense of installing a private siding connected to the main line. Moreover, because there were several companies on the railway that all had the same needs, the amount of traffic generated was considerable and justified a daily service from the railway company, thus speeding up delivery times and cutting costs. The customers on the industrial railway included Meredew (who had their own timber yard), Kryn and Lahy, with their large metal works, Letchworth Bacon Co., Victaulic Co., Hertfordshire Rubber Co., J.M. Dent & Sons, J.A. Pratt & Co., C.F. Ball, Eastwood & Co., Heatley Gresham, Herts County Council, Mastic Roofing and Paving, J. Stanton & Co, Remus Co. and W.H. Smith & Son. The railway closed in the late 1960s. Some of us will remember one of its last remnants, the white level crossing gate in Works Road opposite the mini-roundabout at the end of First Avenue. This was all that remained of three level crossings, the others being across Dunham's Lane and Green Lane.

The companies on the Icknield Way side of the line tended to be those where the incoming raw materials and outgoing finished products were less bulky and more suited to being treated as parcels. This included the Country Gentlemen's Association, the Spirella Company, and many others.

Every day a train with wagons to be delivered to consignees in Letchworth would be despatched from the marshalling yard at Ferme Park which straddles both sides of East Coast Main Line at Hornsey. It is still there, although on the upside (the side going towards London) the 'Up-yard' is now the main depot for passenger trains that operate the Great Northern and Thameslink services and, on the downside (the side going out of London) the 'Down-yard' is used as sidings for track maintenance equipment. This trip working would detach the wagons for Letchworth in the goods yard parallel with Icknield Way.

A pilot engine (a 'mike' in GNR argot) was despatched from Hitchin and would spend the day in Letchworth. It shunted the wagons for the goods station on the Icknield Way side of the line and then took the wagons for customers on the industrial railway across the main line. In the goods yard wagons would be unloaded and loaded in the goods shed for customers to collect or for the railway company to deliver to their premises and for them to dispatch their products to their customers. In GNR days this would be by horse and cart. Later on, right into the 1960s, the cart was pulled by a three-wheeled 'Scammell Mechanical Horse'. Wagons of coal would be shunted into the coal siding for the coal merchants to unload. The remaining wagons were for consignees on the industrial railway on the Works Road side of the line. The mike would take these into the railway and shunt them into customers' premises, removing the loaded outgoing wagons and taking them into the goods yard to be formed up ready for the trip train to collect them and take them to Ferme Park.

Letchworth rapidly became the most important location on the line between Hitchin and Cambridge, with a substantial freight business. The passenger railway was important too. The present station was planned to have four platforms, with the two outer ones providing passing loops that allowed trains that stopped at Letchworth to be overtaken by trains that didn't. Neville's Bridge has three arches, the two outer ones being intended to carry the passing loops. These were never installed, and, in the 1970s, when the line was electrified, they were too low to allow electric trains to pass underneath. In the noughties passenger numbers had increased to the point where it became necessary to lengthen the platforms to accommodate 12 car trains, which finally blocked the outer arches. The four platforms were intended to be numbered 1, 2, 3 and 4. This would have meant that the two platforms in the middle (the ones we use today) would have been platforms 2 and 3. Many of us will remember that, until the mid-1970s, Letchworth station did not have platform numbers. Platform numbers (as platforms 1 and 2) only appeared when, following electrification, the prospect of Letchworth having four platforms had disappeared. Before that the two platforms had arrows pointing 'To London' and 'To Cambridge'. It is also interesting to note that the 1922 edition of *Bradshaw's*

[railway] *Guide* lists only seven trains each way to and from Cambridge, with a few others to and from Royston and Baldock each day. The journey between King's Cross and Letchworth took somewhere between an hour-and-half and two hours, usually requiring a change at Hitchin. Now there are, depending on the time of day, between three and six per hour with the fastest taking less than half-an-hour. Things have improved.

There is no doubt that the availability of high-quality rail services, particularly freight services, made the Garden City an attractive place for businesses in its first 20 years. As with so much, though, the First World War wrought great changes through technological development. Just as the Second World War brought us jet engines, electronic computers, penicillin and more, WW1 brought us aeroplanes, lorries, and tanks, alongside many other technologies. So far as the railways are concerned, the need to have a light, powerful engine to power aircraft and road vehicles had a major impact. The internal combustion engine spelt the end of the horse and cart and with it the need to get the railway as close to the customer as possible, and this meant that railways were no longer competitive with the new motor-powered vehicles in the transport of small consignments. The death knell of branch lines and the wagon-load service was sounded, although it took decades of slow decline before they finally died. In the 1920s a lorry could carry about the same load as the typical four-wheeled wagons that were universal at the time.

Over more than a century the railway has provided an essential service to the Garden City, but in this time its role has changed completely. From a largely freight railway providing for the industry of the town, it is now a commuter railway carrying thousands of people at high speed to and from their work. It is still as vital to the town as it ever was but in a different way.