

# THE LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY SOCIETY



**JOURNAL** No. 168, October 2022

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## From the Editor

As you see, *LGCS Journal* has a new format and a new editor, as agreed at our 5th September 2022 AGM. First, though, members owe a sincere debt of gratitude to long-time editor Allan Lupton, who has produced four attractive issues each year for many years, alongside being chairman. Thank you, Allan!

The *Journal* developed from a simple typewritten newsletter as a way of keeping members in touch with Society activities and is still an important 'journal of record', to preserve reports of our talks and publish articles of garden city interest. However, these days most members get Society news by email and to avoid rising printing and postage costs the AGM agreed that an online journal is sensible. (For the very few members who don't receive email, arrangements to deliver a paper copy can be made, and the Secretary will print hard copies for our archive.) In addition, as the editor is combining the task with her role as Secretary, editions will be issued at varying intervals, as and when there is a need. I ask that members offer material for publication: I will be seeking a 'volunteer' at each talk to write it up and would also appreciate any relevant contributions – from a paragraph to several thousand words – about Letchworth, the wider garden city movement, Arts & Crafts, architecture, garden city history, in fact, anything which will interest members. As an example, I intend to start a series of pieces by members about the interesting and significant

homes they live in. And please put me in touch with anyone you know who can write something of value.

### **Forthcoming Events**

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

Monday 14 November 2022: *The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB): its activities and approach to the repair of old buildings, with the speaker's case study of his own property in Saffron Walden* given by Douglas Kent, technical and research director of the SPAB.

Monday 13 February 2023: *Mirror in the Bike Shed*: an illustrated talk about M.H. Baillie Scott's remarkable bicycle 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.)

### **LGCS Council members 2022–25**

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

Chairman: Peter Bathmaker, 17 Sollershott West. 683981. [Peter.bathmaker@gmail.com](mailto:Peter.bathmaker@gmail.com)

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For enquiries about the Society, please contact the appropriate person. Our website is: [www.lgcs.org.uk](http://www.lgcs.org.uk).

### **From the Treasurer**

As agreed at the AGM, the annual subscription is £10 per member. It would greatly help if members would pay this direct to the Society's bank account: HSBC sort code 40-28-14; account number 61047043. As reference give your house number, surname, postcode e.g. 34ParkerSG6 3PX.

Payment may also be made by cheque (payable to Letchworth Garden City Society) or cash, delivered to 34 Sollershott West, LGC, SG6 3PX, or at a Society meeting.

We are very grateful to our previous, long-serving, Treasurer, Ray Scroggins for his work for the Society in many ways over the years.

### **Book Review**

*Bessie Quinn: Survivor Spirit. From Galashiels Mills to Garden Cities—The story of an Irish family in Scotland 1845–1922*

Ursula Howard is known to LGCS members as Ebenezer's great-granddaughter, but in this new book she writes about her grandmother, Bessie, who married into the Howard family and led a remarkable life, before dying prematurely in the post-First World War flu epidemic.

Bessie's working-class parents separately left an impoverished mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland to settle in the Scottish Borders, raising a large family. Bessie and her siblings received an elementary schooling and worked in lowly occupations, but what set Bessie on the road to a more middle-class life was the few years she spent in the Arts & Crafts milieu of Keswick. Here she met (Arthur) Cecil Howard, Ebenezer's only son, whom she married.

Although the final quarter of the biography is of most interest to Letchworth readers – because it covers Bessie's residence in Hampstead Garden Suburb and the Howard family's links to our garden city – it contains much social history which has broader significance. Ursula is to be congratulated on the tenacious research (never straightforward when Irish forebears are involved) which has enabled her to set Bessie's life in context. She has read widely to inform the background of her grandmother's life but also allows herself a degree of speculation and imaginative reconstruction. The family tree is invaluable, illustrations well-chosen, and it is gratifying to have a book with an index and proper references. Altogether, a very readable family history which has wider relevance for students of the garden city movement and shows that an account of the extended Howard family is well worth writing.

Published in 2022 by The Endless Bookcase; £18.99; ISBN 978-1-914151-33-0; also available as an e-book.

Philippa Parker

**Margaret Bidwell (1922–2022)**

At the AGM tributes were paid to founding member and stalwart friend of LGC, Margaret Bidwell. A talk which she gave in 2010 was read by Martin Baker and is printed here as a record of a long life lived in our garden city. (Unavoidably, for technical reasons, the text is in a different font from the rest of the journal.) The photographs below are taken from the order of service for Margaret's funeral, held at All Saints' church, Willian, on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2022.





**Glimpses of my Life in The First Garden City by Margaret Bidwell**  
**for 25 Club on Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2010**

John Stoddard asked me to talk about the early days of the Garden City in comparison with today.

There are people in this audience who have resided here longer than me – but when I arrived in 1946 I did marry into one of the pioneering families and immediately inherited a lot of history.

**The Pioneer Days**

As you are aware Letchworth is the Town built on the book “Garden Cities of Tomorrow” written by Ebenezer Howard, the Social Reformer.

Parker and Unwin, the Buxton architects, won the competition for the Layout of the First Garden City in the World and transferred their main offices to Baldock before the first sod was turned in 1903. Robert Bennett and Wilson Bidwell were part of that team.

Wilson Bidwell, my father in law, lodged at the home of the Baldock Headmaster who, incidentally, was Edna Imber’s maternal grandfather.

Letchworth was a sea of mud but roads emerged, a few shops, the railway station, the early cottage exhibitions etc. etc.

Bennett & Bidwell formed a close working relationship and a few years later set up in Architectural Practice on their own.

Wilson Bidwell designed “The Cottage” 7 Willian Way for his bride in 1908 and it was to be the family home for sixty years.

*“The Cottage” is considered to be one of the finest Arts & Crafts Residences in the Town and was the first house to be built in Willian Way.*

*It cost £750 to build in 1908.*

*It sold for £7500 in about 1967 when Hugh’s widowed mother had to go into care.*

*When it changed hands in 2007 it fetched well over £750,000!*

The Bidwells were never any good at making money!

In those very early days there were definitely eccentrics who wore smocks and sandals, ate nuts and danced in the morning dew, and one wonders if to-day’s permissive society began at The Cloisters, but I think the majority, like the Bidwells, were more conventional.

All sorts were accepted – people were idealistic not materialistic and everyone knew everybody from The Doctor to the Dustman.

There was every type of Religion from Roman Catholic to Chapel with many other creeds in between.



It was planned as a self contained unit. The factories were on the Baldock side so that prevailing winds blew fumes away from the Garden City. It was chiefly working class and menfolk returned from a hard days work to toil on large plots growing all their own vegetables.

They were not tempted to partake of the demon liquor unless prepared to foot it to Norton or Willian.

First Garden City Ltd. were the ground landlords - everything was leasehold and profits ploughed back into the town.

### World War I

Then the hell of World War I interrupted the dream.

From 1914 to 1918 Letchworth sent its menfolk to the trenches and opened its doors to its first refugees, the Belgians, who came to work at Kryn & Lahy on Munitions. To quote my mother in law – “Letchworth was never same again!”

### Between the Wars

After the Armistice everyone picked themselves up and the town continued to develop and flourish guided by, First Garden City Ltd and Letchworth Urban District Council.

Housing, Schooling and Sporting facilities (not forgetting the very modern Open Air Swimming Lido) were of a high standard.

People made their own entertainment and Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Societies, Choirs and Orchestras were aplenty and if you wanted to meet someone of the opposite sex you only had to join one of these groups or come along to The Settlement with its varied programme..

Service organizations like Guides, Scouts, Rotary, St. John & Red Cross etc. were established. In 1934 Round Table began and my husband Hugh was a Founder Member.

The shops were individually owned (probably with the exception of W.H.Smith, Boots-The-Chemists and the fine Co-operative Stores in Eastcheap.). There was friendly rivalry and plenty of choice. Few people ran motor cars, most people walked or cycled, but there were free deliveries by little underpaid errand boys on large bicycles.

Hugh by then was working in Bennett & Bidwells architectural practice. He and his friends worked hard, and played hard. One pastime was going to “The Flicks” at either The Palace or The Broadway Cinema – one queued outside and often joined the film in the middle since performances were continuous. (If you were lucky you could sit through a film twice and even then not know what it was about because there were double sized cuddly seats on the back row).

Everyone, especially the young, kept busy refusing awareness of what was happening in Europe – the sacrifice of World War I could only be justified because we had believed it was “The War to end wars” but most people in this room remember when the lights went out in September 1939 until 1945.

### World War II

During World War II Letchworth opened her doors yet again – this time to evacuees escaping air raids and many others and every factory was on “war work”. I am not sure when the Polish community joined us. My mother in law took in a German Refugee and later had soldiers billeted on her.

The Bennett and Bidwell practice folded during this period but thankfully many buildings survive to their memory including The Arcade, much of Leys Avenue and Eastcheap, the original G.P.O., The Town Hall, The Broadway Cinema, The Friends Meeting House. Also dozens of houses ranging from the Early Cottages to superb Arts and Crafts residences and many schemes for Howard Cottage Society. *(and we have donated all their drawings to The Letchworth Heritage Museum) as well as all my husband's work.*

### Post World War II *My introduction to Letchworth*

Hugh and I were married at All Saints, Willian. in December 1946.

Like hundreds of other newly weds across the land we were affected by the acute housing shortage but my mother in law, by then a widow, welcomed me to the family home “The Cottage”. Willian Way.

Hugh's sister was still living there and she was joined by her Polish Husband whenever he could get leave from the airforce and ere long they had a baby.

My personal first impressions of the Garden City are still crystal clear

I had grown up in a substantial Victorian house with all mod. cons. and small Town garden in the industrial midlands and knew little of Garden Cities (except for Bournville).

I had addressed daily love letters to Hugh at “The Cottage” which I visualized as a small dwelling with roses round the door. I found myself living in this huge five bedroomed house surrounded by a very large garden

It snowed all over that first Christmas of 1946 and into 1947 – a big freeze like we had this year – but then it was tougher

I have never ever been so cold in all my life and had the worlds worst chilblains

There was no such thing as double glazing or central heating. Incredibly this house only had electric lighting – no power. Valor Stoves were placed strategically in various rooms. and I was dispatched with a tin can to different Ironmongers to queue for paraffin when there were rumours of deliveries. Mother trimmed the wicks so professionally that there was never any smell.

On one occasion she and I went to the bottom of the road with buckets to pick up coke that had been shed from a coal merchants lorry as it rounded the corner into the A505.



We kept the living kitchen cosy with the ideal boiler but were only able to light the fire in the sitting room two or three times a week.

Bath nights were in strict rotation.

We were all battle weary and food and fuel rationing was stricter than it had been during the war.

A pound note would buy a weeks basic rations at the grocers for a family of four.

There were Pig Bins at the end of the road where we could deposit all our peelings etc. They were emptied every evening and taken to a local Piggery for swill.

Mother was an amazing housekeeper and homemaker and she could conjure up a tasty hot midday meal out of nothing. She had a timetable and everything ran smoothly and we all did our share.

Monday was washday (all by hand and put through a huge mangle). Mother insisted that it was hung out to freeze even in the worst weather "to lighten and whiten it."

Tuesdays was a big silver, brass and copper event.

The oak floors were all polished on hands and knees the loose rugs lifted weekly and beaten in the garden and so on

A visitation from the sweep and spring cleaning were horror stories.

There were no labour saving devices let alone the pre-war live in maid who would have stoked open fires in all the rooms and there was no longer help in the garden.

All domestic chores, shopping and baking were done by lunchtime.

But it was drilled into us that the devil makes work for idle hands so the remainder of our waking hours were devoted to the likes of gardening, dressmaking, make-do-and-mend, embroidery, knitting, fruit bottling and visiting those less fortunate than ourselves.

We listened to the radio and wind-up gramophone.

Those pioneers were a tough lot I can tell you and I learned the hard way!

But were we downhearted? No! The war was over and the lucky ones were coming home again – nobody had any money but we had a terrific zest for life – or maybe we were just in love.

From the time spring broke forth after the big freeze of '47 I was thrilled with this beautiful place. Every garden was perfectly kept as too were the greenswards – no one ever took a shortcut across but went round the paths.

Hugh surprisingly found himself being approached by his late father's Clients and so he decided to establish his own practice which kept him busy until the end of his days – and I was much involved on the secretarial side.

More housing was a top priority and we were lucky to acquire one of the first 9 building licences allocated in Letchworth for our new home in Willian Way – it was very austerity – size 1200 sq.ft. and cost limited to £1800 including something towards the value of the land - but to us it was grander than Buckingham Palace.

Some prefabs were erected - their predicted life span was 10 years but they survived for 30.

The Grange Estate was developed in the fifties (and still they never envisaged the popularity of the motor car and provided no garages).

Jackmans Estate came in the sixties to accommodate a London overspill. To begin with it was very problematical but thankfully things were gradually smoothed out over the years.

More houses meant more people and more schools and more everything else.

In the fifties The Kincaid Hall here was built followed by St. Paul's Church Halls.

In the sixties there were three new Churches – St. Hugh's, St. Michael's and St. George's

We enjoyed the Benefits of the new National Health Scheme. And the Family Doctor paid house visits when required night and day. – but we avoided being ill on a Thursday which was Dr. Tony Rodger's day off.

For major problems we went to the old Lister Hospital at Hitchin (still war time huts).

Minor ailments were accommodated at The Cottage Hospital with your own G.P. in attendance. Our four year old daughter had her tonsils removed there – but no visitors for children were allowed. She truly believed we had abandoned her.

*(It was built with public funds as a Memorial to the fallen of WWI and became the Hospice in 1989).*

Everyone gasped with wonder over the New Lister Hospital at Stevenage.

We all pursued our various interests. Originally amateur plays and operatics were all held at St. Francis Theatre but now SPADS appeared at their Church Hall and The Players here in The Little Theatre where incidentally the Annual Drama Festival continued until 2004. Letchworth Operatic Society became The Arcadians and rose to the dizzy heights of The Gordon Craig.

We celebrated grand occasions like The Queens Coronation, The Festival of Britain, Town Anniversaries, interspersed with Round Table Annual Fairs and Carnivals etc. There were Town competitions, Best Kept Garden., School events, Ecumenical Church Services etc.



Inter Works Sports events were intensely competitive..Everyone participated - these activities were not laid on for us – we created them.

Up till the sixties all social occasions like Civic Dinners, Ladies Nights etc. took place at Icknield Halls in Eastcheap It was the days of white tie and tails and full ball gowns – a red carpet was laid right across the pavement to protect our dancing slippers – the management was faultless and all under the eye of Ralph Nott.

His brother Edwin Nott was the master baker and he ran the bakery as efficiently as their father had done when he came to the Garden City at the beginning when he personally delivered bread house to house from a basket. It grew into a big Nott Empire but always with the personal touch.

In those days we had two local papers – The Pictorial and The Citizen and every event was covered by reporters and photographers – the ink did not rub off on your hands - and Comet Country was not on the map.

There was full employment and shops and factories flourished.

Simple family holidays by train to the seaside in the UK turned into package holidays by air in Spain - *(but the Bidwells continued caravanning)*

Never had Letchworth had it so good - the national phrase was “I’m all right Jack”.

But we had become too complacent and in 1960 the news broke that a London based property company headed by none other than THE Amy Rose had quietly acquired the majority of First Garden City shares. On Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> December at 7.30 p.m Ernest Gardiner. Michael’s father summoned us all to the SAVE LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY MEETING - half a century ago and I remember it like yesterday. The citizens were roused – those early pioneers had nothing on us. It resulted in Horace Plinston – Clerk to Letchworth UDC commencing work on the Letchworth Garden City Corporation Act which became law in 1962.

*Subsequently The Ernest Gardiner Day Hospital and Plinston Hall were dedicated to these citizens.*

It was “Goodbye” to First Garden City Ltd with its gentlemanly idealistic ways and “Hello” to Letchworth Garden City Corporation with a more realistic and businesslike approach.

A third poll took place to decide whether there should be a public house – this time the answer was “ yes”and in 1962 The Broadway Hotel opened.

Do not imagine that previously Letchworth had been puritanical. Not a bit of it – from the beginning they say there was much alcohol delivered to private houses and gradually establishments like The Hall Hotel, Notts Icknield Halls, etc.were granted licenses.

But sadly it also opened the doors to Wine Bars here there and everywhere and not far distant there was easy access to intoxicating drink at supermarkets 24/7.

In 1964 The Shops and Flats on the Arena were built at the back of the original Town Hall.

In 1967 the Leasehold Reform Act affected the attitude of residents who immediately took up the opportunity to purchase their Freeholds.

An even bigger change took place when Council House tenants took advantage of "The Right to Buy" 1980 Housing Act.

Private dwellings continued to be built on individual plots – the last road to be so developed I think was Bell Acre.

Since then in the seventies Lordship and Manor Park Estates for private ownership have been developed by Wates Ltd.

I personally believe that the biggest change to Letchworth was when the Urban District Council with its personal touch and unpaid councillors was dissolved and it became North Herts District Council in the seventies.

Michael Kelly who was the last Clerk to LUDC became the first Chief Executive of NHDC

Between 1970 and 1980 we were given our first shopping precinct in the town centre.

It had been made very clear to me by my Mother in Law in 1946 that the Bidwells owed their livelihood to the town and therefore I was expected to shop locally . I continued so to do until gradually the family firms were falling away with pressure from supermarkets – we had five of these at one time – Sainsbury came on condition that we changed our one way system for their benefit – this we did and a few years later they moved out to the new Business Park. Eventually Iceland stood alone like an iceberg.

There was the introduction of plastic – heretofore you either paid cash or had a monthly account.

Factories were suffering too with huge redundancies at British Tabulating etc. etc.but it was a national illness.More people went out of the town to find work – no longer was it a cosy family.

But during this difficult time good things did happen. We acquired the Leisure Centre, Standalone Farm. and the Day Hospital.

However it became apparent that The Bill produced by Horace Plinston had some loopholes that needed tightening up. Andrew Egerton Smith retired from The Corporation in December 1994 making way for the Heritage Foundation Act 1995 and the new supremo was Stuart Kenny. Our new Landlords, the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation were far removed from First Garden City Ltd. of pioneering days – this was the new era of balance sheets.



The plusses include the arrival of Morrisons Supermarket giving us a focal point again – Castle Corset (Spirella) had folded in '89 and now provides state of the arts office accommodation - the development of Broadway Gardens with its dominating fountain whilst still retaining Parker and Unwins central axis makes a fine impression - the old Tabs Sports Ground in Whitethorn Lane now hosts excellent sports facilities - The Mrs. Ebenezer Howard Memorial Hall was saved just in time from demolition whilst The Broadway Cinema has had an interior facelift. ( It has shown films continuously since it was designed in the thirties).

Very recently our complacency nearly let us down again when The new Town Council crept up on us but thankfully there are still young citizens with the same old pioneering spirit who are moving things in the right direction.

Now we are in the throes of another huge controversial upheaval changing the face of the town centre. Back in the thirties Wilson Bidwell said there was only one solution for The Wynd and that was to have “No Entry” notices at both ends. Let us hope that this latest experiment turns out to prove him wrong.

Of course things are different from just over a century ago and maybe there is no longer the same community spirit and civic pride – one can go to the town and not meet anyone you know - but we do have the Letchworth Arts and Leisure Group (all run by Volunteers) which is unique

Some of these changes have been knock on effects from outside influences and are not confined to Letchworth .

I also believe that subsequent powers-that-be have each in their turn truly done what they believed to be right at the time – it is so easy to criticise with hindsight.

We are extremely fortunate to have the Foundation to uphold the ideals of those early pioneers.

Large numbers of Overseas students in Town and Country Planning still visit The First Garden City in the World because this is where it all began.

It is up to us individuals to make the best of things and go forward hopefully.

**It is apparent that when I married Hugh Bidwell, I also married a Garden City – and I would not wish to live elsewhere.**

*Margaret Bidwell.*

23.09.13.

