

# Probus Walk round Letchworth on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> January 2022



## Places of Interest

1. The Three Horseshoes  
Start and Finish
2. The Settlement
3. Birds Hill
4. The International  
Garden Cities Exhibition
5. The Cloisters
6. Meadow Way
7. The Broadway Cinema
8. Silver Birch Cottages
9. Spirella
10. West Holm

The walk will start and finish at The Three Horseshoes, Norton  
102 Norton Road, Letchworth, Hertfordshire, SG6 1AG Tel: 01462 473 050

## Notes on what we will see

(The old photographs are from the Heritage Foundation's collection and they have kindly agreed to my use of them for these notes but not for any further publication. Other images are from copyright free sources)

### Norton Hall Farm

Warden assisted housing designed by my firm, Pentangle Design Group.

### Common View

One of Letchworth Garden City's earliest streets. 9-23 Common View were built for one of Letchworth's pioneers, Miss Annie Jane Lawrence (The Cloisters), designed by renowned Arts and Crafts architect Courtenay Crickmer, whose work can be seen throughout Letchworth.

A new Eco Home project has been launched at 15 Common View.

### The Settlement ("Skittles Inn")

The Skittles Inn opened in Exhibition Road on March 8th 1907. The road was named 'Nevels Road' a year after. A "pub with no beer"! A centre for dances, lectures and trade union meetings. It closed in 1923 and became the home of the Letchworth Settlement in 1925.

### Birds Hill

The Birds Hill Cottages, known as the "Noah's Ark Houses", were designed by V Dunkerley for the 1905 Cheap Cottages Exhibition. My firm restored them and the project received a Civic Trust Award.



### Ridge Road, Rushby Walk & Rushby Mead

These houses were mostly built to accommodate the workers in Letchworth's factories. Owned by the Howard Cottage Society (now the Howard Cottage Housing Association) and well maintained. One of the benefits of the leasehold basis of the whole of the town has been preventing unsympathetic development and the enforcement of obligations contained within the leases.

We observed an interesting phenomenon when refurbishing the Corporation's housing stock. I devised a questionnaire to find what the tenants were least and most satisfied with. To my surprise, the thing which came out as the most disliked feature of their houses were the window glazing bars. They made the windows difficult to clean and tenants spoke of them making the houses like a prison. At the same time, our private clients and developers were demanding glazing bars in their new houses (when windows were by then all double glazed and the false bars just stuck on). A fascinating social commentary, reminiscent of Charles Pooter in "*The Diary of a Nobody*".

Glazing bars were merely a response to the difficulty in producing glass in large sheets. I have no doubt that the Georgians would not have had them if they had not had to. Interestingly, we found



that the Letchworth windows had rotted from the inside due to condensation laying on the bars and frames and the Arts & Crafts detailing using “honest” square sections rather than the splayed or moulded sections of previous styles.

## Howard Park



Howard Park in 1931

The park and gardens are set between Norton Way South and Rushby Mead. Divided by Hillshott, with the park's more formal gardens and bowling green on one side and the more informal Howard Park with paddling pool and play areas, on the other.

## Garden City Museum - The International Garden Cities Exhibition



The exhibition will be open for us to make a brief visit. Housed in the drawing office of Parker & Unwin the exhibits tell the story of Ebenezer Howard and the first Garden City.

The short walk splits here to go to Spirella, possibly via a cup of coffee or some shopping!.

## The Cloisters

Letchworth's most unusual building. Built for Annie Lawrence, a Quaker, in 1906, designed by William Harrison Cowlshaw. The design reputedly came to Miss Lawrence in a dream and built as a Theosophical Meditation Centre and open-air school dedicated to Psychology. Annie was the elder sister of one of the promoters of the Garden City, Frederick William Pethick-Lawrence (1st Baron Pethick-Lawrence), a Labour politician who campaigned for women's suffrage, and probably influenced her move to Letchworth in 1906. She had been involved in social work in London's slums. She also had built a house for herself 'Cloisters Lodge'.



Postcard of The Cloisters and of a Masque by Dorothea Hunter performed there circa 1914



Dr Mervyn Miller in his book "Letchworth: The First Garden City" describes it:

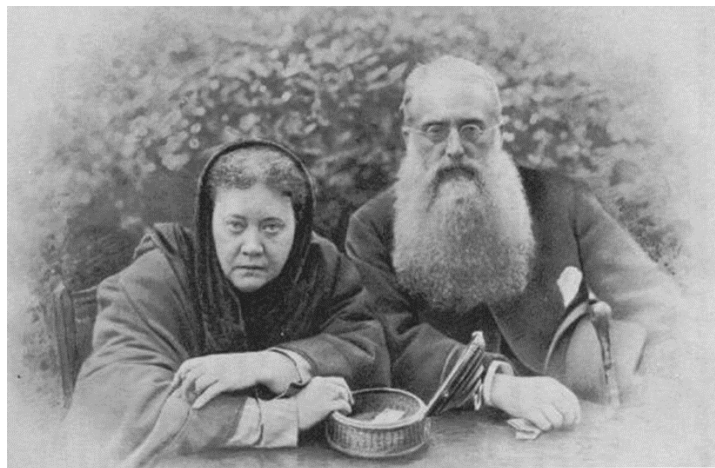
Green veined Swedish marble columns supported the arcade of the Cloister Garth where at night men and women (strictly segregated by the expanse of the central hall) slept on hammocks that lowered from the ceiling on pulleys. A series of 'outdoor fireplaces' and canvas screens were provided in an, unsuccessful, attempt to ward off the winter nighttime chill. In the central hall of the garth there was an Art Nouveau fountain from which water flowed through a series of ceremonial hand washing basins and then on around the Cloisters in open channels. *The outward expression of these functions was remarkable, with myriad symbolic overtones.....*  
*.....Cowlshaw was a gifted sculptor and modelled designs for the rainwater heads - doves represented guilelessness, bats were about to start their dusk patrols, bees built up honeycomb to provide food for the gods, and 'butterflies dancing in the empyrean'.*

Other quotes:

*"At The Cloisters provision is made for all kinds of tastes. You can swing in a hammock under the colonnade from which the building takes its name, or lie on a 'Tocah' on the roof, or sleep on a stretcher, as I did, with all the windows wide open so that you are all but in the open air"* Albert Dawson after a visit to the last Alpha Union Summer School in August 1911

*".... every fruit juice drinker, nudist, sandal wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, nature cure quack, pacifist and feminist in England"* George Orwell in "The Road to Wigan Pier" (1937) on Letchworth, and a further rant *"that dreary tribe of high-minded women and sandal wearers and bearded fruit-juice drinkers who come flocking towards the smell of 'progress' like bluebottles to a dead cat"*. Whilst I am an admirer of the work of George Orwell, he was being disingenuous in "The Road to Wigan Pier" as it makes it read as though he just passed through Letchworth on his way north whereas he lived in Wallington, only a few miles away, for several years.

Theosophy is a religion founded in 1875 in the United States by a Russian immigrant, Helena Blavatsky and two others, and drawing its teachings predominantly from Blavatsky's writings. The basic belief is that there is an ancient and secretive brotherhood of spiritual adepts known as the Masters centred in Tibet who are attempting to revive knowledge of an ancient religion once found around the world and which will come again, bringing South Asian religions to Western countries, eclipsing the existing world religions. All wonderfully bonkers but they were decent caring people who wanted a better life for mankind.



*To the Aryan Theosophical Society, of New York  
 with H. P. B.'s & H. S. O.'s good wishes  
 London, October, 1888.*

A splendid picture of Blavatsky and Olcott, two of the founding members of the Theosophical Society

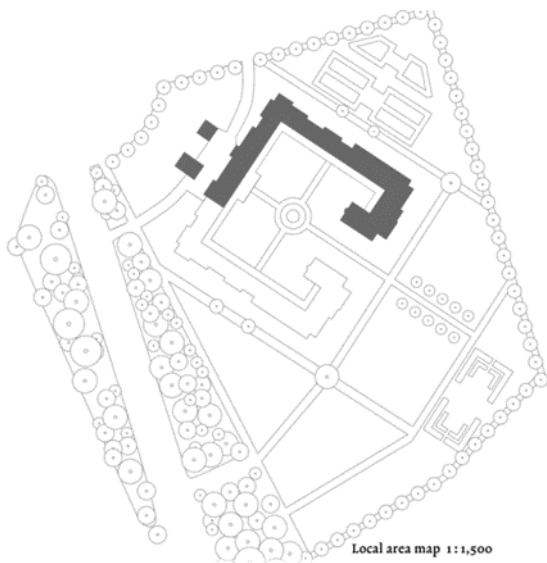


Emily Lutyens (daughter of Robert Bulwer-Lytton, married to Edwin Lutyens) got very involved in Theosophy. She became a surrogate mother to a young Indian boy, Krishnamurti, convinced that he was the Messiah.

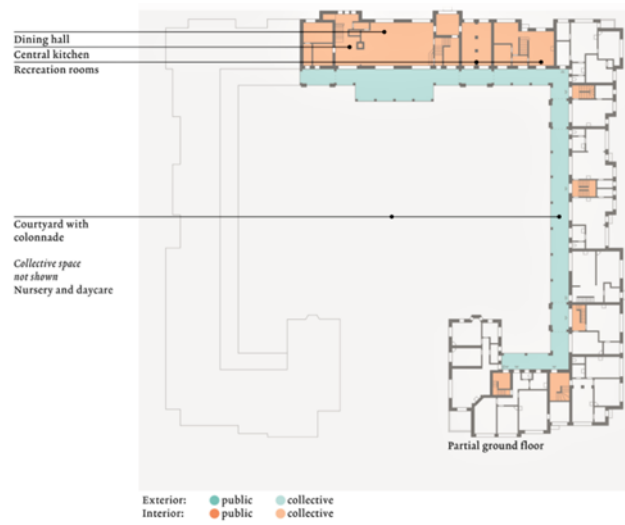
### Sollershott East

East and West Sollershott have some of Letchworth's nicest houses. There were two schemes pioneering communal living, the blocks in Meadow Way that we will be seeing later, and Homesgarth, now known as 'Sollershott Hall'. A further scheme, Guessens Court 1924-5 was built in Welwyn Garden City.

It consists of group of buildings round a central court, designed by Clapham Lander in 1910. It had a total of 48 apartments with shared kitchen, dining hall and other facilities. It was experimental for its time and, although providing easy, comfortable living, did not really work. It did not take long for kitchens to be built into many of the apartments. It was rather middle-class, Ebenezer Howard lived there until 1920 but admitted that the working-class residents preferred the terraced housing provided elsewhere. Sales were poor and consequently only half of the development was built.



Site Plan



Floor Plan

Howard had developed working groups and committees of residents to help manage the property. It was the intention that a cook would be employed by the residents in the central kitchen who would be assisted by groups of housewives on a rota. Allowing interaction, but also reducing the need for servants.

### The Broadway

Was it the world's first roundabout (there were very few cars around then)?

A splendid tree-lined road with many of Letchworth's best houses, on the axis of the town centre and forming a grand approach.

### St. Francis' College

A boarding and day school for girls aged 3–18. The school buildings date from from 1919 to 1938. Built originally for St Christopher's School, it was acquired by the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary in 1933 to found St Francis' College. The sisters withdrew in 1983 and buildings have been developed or improved since then.

### Meadow Way

Perhaps of one of the most successful of the grouped developments in the Garden City using detached and semi-detached cottages with terraces to form a green on either side of Meadow Way. The cottages were designed for single business-women who shared communal dining facilities located in the central block on the north side.

### Kennedy Gardens

This was to be the site for the Municipal Buildings, to sit grandly at the end of Broadway. But, as

with Westcheap, it was not to happen. In the late 1950s Leylandii were planted round its perimeter to vaguely resemble a building (a rather poor idea). It has had a number of landscaping makeovers and is a pleasant and useful open space.



1960 photograph – The John Kennedy Memorial Garden

### The Broadway Cinema

Despite massive efforts we were not able to save the 1906 Palace Cinema, a lovely example of Edwardian Cinema architecture (now the rather horrid shops with flats over) but I agree that, if one of the cinemas had to go, it had to be the Broadway that was saved. A wonderful Art Deco building, a style now fashionable but of which England has relatively little left.

The Broadway Cinema was designed by Letchworth architects Bennett & Bidwell and built by Howard Hurst in red-brick and concrete cast on site. The massive expanse of brickwork, requiring 350,000 bricks, was broken by the patterned concrete blocks framing elegant windows. Bidwell's son, Hugh, went on to become a director of the owning company, Letchworth Cinemas Ltd.

The Cinema opened in 1936 to a packed performance of *'Follow The Fleet'* starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. It and the Palace were converted to show "Cinemascope" films in 1955.

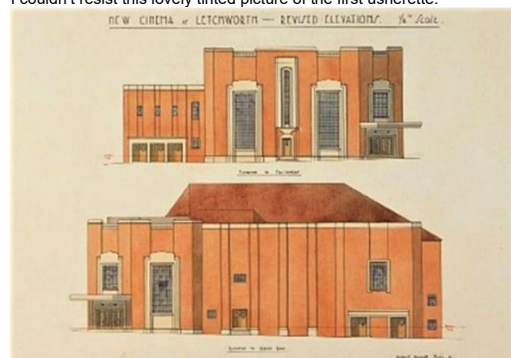
John Benzing wrote in the Cinema Theatre Association's Bulletin in 1989: "*The Broadway often runs at a loss but its owner, Miss Thomas, an active 80 year old, has other profitable interests that allow her to subsidise the cinema which is her first love*". I got to know Miss Thomas quite well, an amazing woman. Her father had either owned or built the cinema (I can't recall which and have not been able to find out). He had been a plumber or heating engineer and had designed the cinema's heating and ventilation which was innovative at the time. She was so proud of him.

It was made into a three-screen cinema in 1996 and then underwent a massive £3.8 million project to transform with a theatre stage added in 2016.



Broadway Cinema's 1st usherette, Violet Ingram, 1936

I couldn't resist this lovely tinted picture of the first usherette.



Bennett & Bidwell's drawing for the cinema



## East Cheap

The master plan had two main shopping streets, Westcheap and Eastcheap, but only Eastcheap was completed. The original buildings are very fine and give the street a pleasant appearance.

## Leys Avenue



The town's other main shopping street. The awful "Garden Square" shopping centre occupies the space behind them. A pleasant paved square has been created and new building has improved the previous dreadful appearance.

Leys Avenue is part of the excellent repaving scheme carried out in Letchworth, putting Hitchin's appalling pavements to shame.

## The Arcade



Photograph from the 1920s

The Arcade dates from 1922 and was extremely elegant in its day. It had become rundown but was given a £500,000 facelift in 2009 and returned to its former glory. It now has a range of independent and specialist retailers.

## Silver Birch Cottages

My first project in Letchworth. These three blocks of cottages were designed by Parker & Unwin and built in 1906. They had been scheduled for demolition to be replaced by a new bus station. Most were unoccupied and all in poor condition. A competition was held for what to do with them, we were fortunately able to win with our idea to keep them but to separate them from fronting onto Station Road by having a new footpath and planted area. Most of the planting retained existing trees and shrubs.



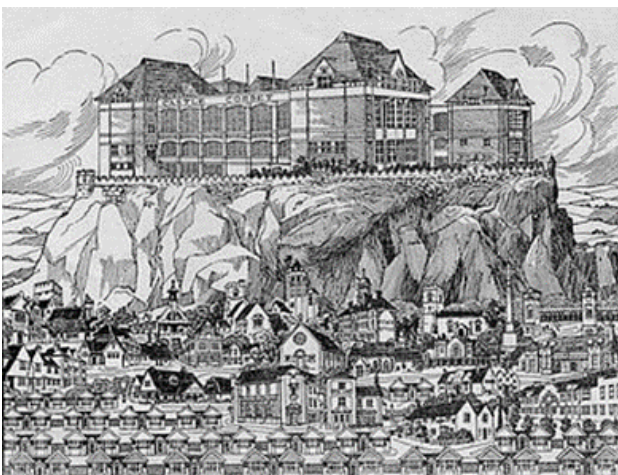
After this project we were consultants to Letchworth Corporation and carried out many projects for them until they morphed into the Heritage Foundation.

### **Spirella ("Castle Corset")**

I remember the first time that I saw it in the 1960s, I thought that it was one of the most amazing buildings that I had ever seen. There is a good website covering the history of the company:

<http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/History.htm>

The Spirella Corset Company was formed in 1904 in America following the invention of the spiral wound corset stay. An early move towards female liberation!



The wonderful "Castle Corset"

They built splendid buildings in Niagara Falls NY with another the other side of the river in Niagara Falls Ontario, Oakland CA, Meadville and Cambridge Springs PA, Berlin, Düsseldorf, Malmo, Copenhagen and ours in Letchworth. Designed by Cecil Hignett in 1912 but the war delayed its completion to 1920.

During the Second World War, ladies famously removed the stays from their corsets and donated them to the war effort. After this release, I don't think that they ever went back in.

My mother-in-law worked in the building and I got the impression that it was a happy place with good staff facilities, like the wonderful ballroom. The building had a number of uses after Spirella closed and was refurbished in 1995-9.

If there is time, we should be able to pop inside the Spirella building to see the display in the foyer.



## Nevels Road & The Quadrant

First called Exhibition Road, renamed 'Nevels Road' in 1908

It is linked to the Common by The Quadrant. Look at number 12, it was built by the builder of Spirella, do you think that its materials look familiar? There is very little brickwork in Letchworth pre-WWII, this is due to Barry Parker's dislike of the buff bricks made by the local clay and red bricks were too expensive to import (despite Hitchin having brickworks making red bricks).



## Norton Common

The area was once open grassland and arable, with marshy areas. Its boundaries were delineated by the Enclosure Act of 1798 which allowed the commoners of Norton to graze cattle on the site. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century grazing had declined at the common and all rights were acquired by one owner who managed the site for game. In 1904 the land was acquired by the First Garden City Ltd. In 1907 Norton Common was recognised in early designs for Letchworth Garden City as "an area of beauty, worthy of preservation" and pathways were cut through the wood so that local people could enjoy it. In 1922, Letchworth Urban District Council took over and worked to retain its natural characteristics. A wonderful open space to have in the centre of a town.

## Westholm

Eastholm and Westholm formed part of the early development of Letchworth. The buildings in Eastholm curve around a green and follow the line of the road with a constant building line. The buildings are also regularly spaced with gaps between. Westholm is more formal in design with three elongated blocks around a tapered green and two smaller blocks set back in each corner.

## Willian Road (originally Norton Road)

140 Willian Road was my saddest involvement in Letchworth. "The Round House" was arguably the most revolutionary entry in the Cheap Cottages competition (number 158, the strange "Captain's Cottage" made using John Brodie's prefabricated reinforced concrete panel system ran it a close second and happily survives), constructed using reinforced concrete posts with concrete panels slid in between them. Circular in shape with a conical roof. It was under threat. I was asked to work (for free!) with the council's conservation officer to get it listed. I got very involved, produced accurate measured drawings, got the Concrete Association involved, got it Listed and produced a scheme which would save it without financial loss to its owners (I recall that we were going to move it to Standalone Farm to leave them with the building plot that they wanted). After all of this, their son turned up one weekend and demolished it with a sledge-hammer.



Its first owner?



During construction

It was entry no.73 in the 1905 Cheap Cottage Exhibition. Designed by Hesketh & Stokes and built by Messrs Cubitt, the manufacturers of Cubitt's Reinforced Concrete. A pioneering design which could have been developed into a useful system of prefabricated construction if made in a more usable shape!

## The Three Horseshoes

Back hopefully in time for lunch!

I hope that this walk has given a feel for what was attempted in the creation of Letchworth Garden City and what it has become.

Ebenezer Howard was a visionary but there were others who had had similar aspirations to build happy communities based on decent social housing. Cadbury at Bournville; Joseph Roundtree at New Earswick; Titus Salt at Saltaire; and Lever at Port Sunlight. But all of these started as schemes to create better housing for their workers, Howard was proposing a greater vision for housing and town planning.

Howard published "*Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*" in 1898 and republished it in 1902 in a slightly revised form as "*Garden Cities of Tomorrow*". It was influential in its time but probably even more so when republished by Faber in 1946 with a foreword by Lewis Mumford, an American historian, sociologist, philosopher of technology and literary critic, particularly noted for his study of cities and urban architecture. Britain needed "Homes fit for Heroes", like those promised by Lloyd George after WW1, and the New Towns Act 1946 sought to do this through the creation of New Towns.

Howard promoted developing on a sound financial basis (something not taken up entirely in the later New Towns which he had inspired). The purchase of the land at agricultural value and then selling it off in long leaseholds paying reviewable ground rents and subject to management conditions has worked well. The leaseholds produced a fund to sustain the future of the community. He saw the value of a "local pound" in that, for example, the wages paid to the builders would allow them to then buy their leaseholds or rent their houses and the money would stay in the town, just circling around. If only Chancellors of the Exchequer could see this – producing things locally is ultimately cheaper than getting them from the other side of the World.

I love this from "*Garden Cities of Tomorrow*" regarding the link between town and country– it could have been written by Greta Thunberg:

*"Assuming each person in the town consumed only one-third of a pint a day, then 30,000 would consume 1,250 gallons a day, and might thus save, taking railway charges at a penny per gallon, upwards of £1,900 per annum in railway rates upon the one item of milk, a saving which must be multiplied by a large figure in order to realize the general saving to be effected by placing consumer and producer in such close association. In other words, the combination of town and country is not only healthful, but economic – a point which every step taken will serve to make yet more clear."*

Letchworth has great housing, an attractive but somewhat lifeless town centre and a well located industrial area on the lee side of the residential areas.

He failed to get his grand Central Park and Crystal Palace of his dream city. Following Letchworth was Welwyn Garden City, a dull and soulless place, and the beautiful but perhaps elitist Hampstead Garden Suburb. But his ideas were influential elsewhere. One of our sons lives in Columbia, Maryland, a city like Letchworth pioneered by one determined man, James (Jim) Rouse. In a way more successful than Letchworth in that its population has grown to over 100,000, often rated the best place to live in the USA and it does have its "Crystal Palace" (its shopping mall – Rouse had made his fortune in building covered malls). Deer roam through his garden, small streams have been cleverly dammed to produce strings of lakes and ponds and, when we were there at Christmas, we saw a Bald Eagle perched on a tree with housing all around. Perfect.

After Barry Parker left Letchworth, one of his projects was Jardim América, established in 1917, a garden city inspired suburb of São Paulo. It has low density, detached family housing occupied by upper middle-class residents. One departure being a lack of communal gardens as no one wanted to maintain them given the historical association between gardening and manual labour in a formerly slave owning society. I have been there and it remains a strange oasis in this hectic, teeming city, but it has influenced a range of other garden suburb designs in other São Paulo neighbourhoods as well as in other Brazilian cities.



Letchworth comes under the Management Scheme of the Heritage Foundation who exercise control through this scheme and the restrictions within the leases. This is their Letchworth Character Brochure: [https://www.letchworth.com/sites/default/files/documents/2017-09/let\\_7392\\_heritage\\_character\\_brochure\\_june2015\\_v8\\_0.pdf](https://www.letchworth.com/sites/default/files/documents/2017-09/let_7392_heritage_character_brochure_june2015_v8_0.pdf) NHDC are the planning authority as work to their Conservation Area Appraisal Statement: [https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/default/files/letchworth\\_conservation\\_area\\_appraisal.pdf](https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/default/files/letchworth_conservation_area_appraisal.pdf)

## The Future

In 2019 the Heritage Foundation held an architectural competition for the design of an expansion of the town to surround the Grange Estate. It attracted 95 entries, the winners being EcoResponsive Environments. Below are some drawings from their winning submission, I am not aware of the current status of the project.



**O-MORROW 2.0**  
GRANGE-IN-THE-HEDGES



THE GREEN HEDGE: LOOKING NORTH ALONG STOTFOLD PROSPECT



PLAYING AND WORKING IN THE COMMUNAL GARDEN