

the english garden cities – a world heritage site?

Graeme Bell on the initiative to secure World Heritage Site status for the two English – and pioneering – Garden Cities



Welwyn Garden City – the Garden City idea still has vital relevance and resonance for today

'This is a process which makes strong men weep.' The lady responsible for the World Heritage Site (WHS) portfolio at English Heritage couldn't have been more helpful, nor more honest, when I spoke to her back in 2014. Prompted by the forthcoming centenary for Welwyn Garden City, I thought the World Heritage Site idea timely. I also knew it would have to be a joint submission for the English Garden Cities – to omit Letchworth Garden City would be to weaken the case; to go for both would, I hoped, strengthen the bid considerably. I was also emboldened by the agreement of the then Chief Executive of the TCPA that the initial submission would have the backing of the Association.

The lady at English Heritage had listened intently to my pitch. Her first response was to tell me that she received requests every week for such and such a place to be put forward for Inscription. She had perfected what we call in the trade 'the few

kind words of regret'. However, she was familiar with Howard and the Garden City movement, knew the TCPA to be a competent body, and so thought that the idea might have legs. It was then that she gave me the health warning.

There were hurdles I would have to clear with herself and her colleagues; hoops I would have to go through before the proposal could be submitted for Ministerial approval, and at that stage it would have to compete for a slot against bids from other places in the UK. Finally, and crucially, it would be for UNESCO, the United Nations agency responsible for designating World Heritage Sites, to decide whether to approve the bid. In that respect, she related that the developed nations had the great majority of designations, and there was a move internationally to give positive discrimination towards those continents and nations where few WHSs existed. The process was so long and uncertain that, in her

words, it made winning the race to host the Olympic Games look easy-peasy. Wise words indeed.

Undaunted, I started to write. And to consult. I realised that not everyone would consider the idea of coachloads of foreign visitors descending on their patch to be a brilliant idea. Some landowners would be dismayed at the prospect of a designation which could constrain their freedom to develop or manage their land as they wished. Local authorities and other stakeholders would have a particular interest in the bid because some would have powers and duties to discharge. It is not a free lunch.

I spoke to colleagues who had travelled this route before. The English Lake District and Liverpool Docks were two such going through different stages of the system. I also researched far and wide on the internet – there is much to bone up on. And I went back to my own bookshelf¹ and college notes about the Garden City story. It paid dividends and re-assured me that indeed it was a story worth telling, and one that easily measured up against other sites already approved both in the UK and abroad. Above all, it has a relevance to today – to the global issue of accommodating sustainable growth and to creating beautiful places to live in, while, as in both Garden Cities, allowing the communities to share the benefits that they themselves have had a stake in creating. And with nearly 150 ‘garden cities’ around the world, one could legitimately point to the international element of the bid. It is a concept that travels successfully. It has a compelling narrative.

Consultations with regional officers at Historic England (now responsible for this activity) then followed over a draft Inscription. There is currently no WHS in the East of England, and this is a proposal of interest to them. They and the new national officer responsible for submissions visited both Garden Cities and were impressed with what they saw. The draft was further honed through contributions from officers at Welwyn Hatfield Council and Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. It was at this point that Historic England said that it was content with the draft Inscription as it read (available at www.wgccentenary.org). It has taken six years to get to ground zero!

So now, with much groundwork in place and in the centenary year of the founding of Welwyn Garden City, we need to test the appetite of all parties for this initiative. Once (and if) the principle is formally agreed by the local authorities and the Heritage Foundation, then a Management Plan will need to be prepared. This, again, is no small task. It describes how the competent authorities (and indeed all stakeholders living in both Garden Cities) will manage their land and activities in line with World Heritage Site principles. We are lucky in that much of the policy work is done and to hand. Both towns have plans, policies and guidelines that can be transposed

into the Management Plan. The current team of volunteers working with local organisations in Welwyn and Letchworth, including academics, stand ready to get writing.

With the pandemic likely to have lasting consequences for patterns of life, work and leisure, a new role for town centres seems essential. What better boost for both Welwyn and Letchworth than to be put more prominently on the international map? Both Garden Cities already attract modest numbers of students, academics and professionals from home and abroad. To be realistic, we are not talking here about the numbers attracted to Stratford-upon-Avon or Bath, but the ability to be able to put up the coveted, universally recognised logo on the brown signs on the A1(M) and to be included on tourist websites and databases will undoubtedly give a welcome boost to the number of visitors who will come to spend money in our shops, cafés and restaurants.

Is there a downside? Many will not be keen to see more traffic in the Garden Cities, but this could be managed. Some will be reluctant to have more people in their town centres, but without extra footfall we may struggle to keep the shops and facilities we currently enjoy. And Inscription will come with strings, requiring all the stakeholders in each Garden City to do their best to uphold the standards required of a World Heritage Site. But surely this is what residents, landowners, developers, local authorities and others would wish to seek to do in any event? Protecting one’s own investment and the local environment is enlightened self-interest, after all. For a few to spoil it for the many would be inconsiderate.

Over a century ago, Ebenezer Howard and his colleagues must have been daunted by their mission. We know there were times when the odds were stacked heavily against them – such as Howard buying land at auction when he didn’t have the money to even pay the deposit! They had setbacks, such as the Spanish flu pandemic just before Welwyn Garden City was commenced and then the Great Depression to follow. Such times must have made strong men weep. By comparison, our task is complex but not insurmountable. We owe it to our founders to secure that crowning glory to all those people whose efforts have been made down the years in creating the Garden Cities we now enjoy. It is within our grasp and we should dedicate ourselves to the task.

● **Graeme Bell OBE** is a Vice-President of the TCPA and a Trustee of the Welwyn Garden City Centenary Foundation. The views expressed are personal.

Note

- 1 M Miller: *English Garden Cities: An Introduction*. English Heritage, 2010. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/english-garden-cities-introduction/english-garden-cities/>