

The English Garden Cities: A World Heritage Site

**Letchworth Garden City and Welwyn Garden City
Hertfordshire, England**

Draft Statement of Outstanding Universal Value



tcpa

The English Garden Cities-a World Heritage Site

Letchworth Garden City and Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, UK

Foreword to the draft Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) is delighted to initiate and endorse the Inscription of the English Garden Cities as a World Heritage Site. So what does the Grand Canyon or the Great Barrier Reef, both World Heritage Sites (WHS) have in common with two medium sized towns in southern England? Perhaps a more appropriate parallel might be Edinburgh, Saltaire or the City of Bath, again all Inscribed on the WHS list. These are all special places around the world, both natural and created by human-kind that are outstanding in their contribution to life and experience on this planet. It is this recognition that WHS status can bring, to draw the attention of the peoples of the world to remarkable places and among other aspects, thereby help assist in their ongoing management.

The TCPA wishes to initiate this process because the Association was itself created by Ebenezer Howard in 1899 as the first town planning organisation in the world, specifically to campaign for better places in which people could live. It was the TCPA that created the focal point for Howard's supporters who came together to create what became known as the Garden City Movement. And not content with discussing the issues or waiting for 'the powers that be' to take up the idea of a garden city, Howard and his supporters formed a limited company to just do it!

So successful was he in sharing his enthusiasm that friends and supporters chose to invest their own money in the venture. The beauty of the deceptively simple conceit was that not only did the investors received a competitive return on their investment but a continuing dividend was returned to the local communities who had created the uplift in development values themselves. Everyone benefitted.

We are fortunate indeed that Howard made the leap to implement his ideas at both Letchworth and Welwyn. Both towns were established on the same principles and over time have developed in their own way. Neither is better than the other, rather they are two sides of the same coin. Accordingly, they

demonstrate that a garden city can be interpreted in different forms to suit local circumstances. What hasn't changed in the century and more since they were founded is the need for people to have access to decent homes in successful communities and this is true the world over. It is not just in the UK that the principles of garden city planning are now being re-discovered and pursued as part of the drive to more sustainable development.

That is not to say that Howard's ideas are set in aspic; that Inscription means no change. Howard, if he were alive today would see WHS status as a continuation of his attempts to demonstrate how life can be lived in better places for the many not just the few and bring those results to the attention of the world. He would recognise that the garden cities need to adapt to thrive in the 21st century. Everything from climate change, the aim of reducing car use, the need to improve the viability of town centres and the boosting of job opportunities and more would be on his clipboard. He would be publishing books, making plans and building projects as he did a century ago.

Whilst the TCPA is proud to initiate the process of Inscription, the Association recognises that it is for the communities themselves, in both towns, to decide that they want their garden city to be considered as a World Heritage Site. With the honour to stand shoulder to shoulder with Edinburgh or Bath on a global stage comes the responsibility to steward their town to the highest standards. This would include a management plan to demonstrate how the local authorities, competent bodies and residents themselves would care and enhance their towns for the future. It is a daunting responsibility.

But no prize worth winning comes easily. And as the torchbearers of the Garden City Movement in the 21st century the TCPA commends this initiative to all concerned and commits to supporting a bid for the English Garden Cities to become a World Heritage Site.

Kate Henderson, Chief Executive, Town and Country Planning Association.
London, July 2017.

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The English Garden Cities: Letchworth Garden City & Welwyn Garden City

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Brief Synthesis

“Town and country must be married and out of this joyous union will spring new life, new hope, a new civilisation.” Ebenezer Howard.

The English Garden Cities are of Outstanding Universal Value as built exemplars of a vision and drive to improve the living and working conditions of humankind delivered through a unique process of master-planning, community government and re-investment.

In the late C19th, Ebenezer Howard witnessed at first hand the grim working conditions of many people, the cramped and insanitary housing and the lack of spiritual and physical recreation among the urban population in both Britain and the USA. He also saw that the countryside was far from a rural idyll, rather it was the place where many sharecroppers and farm labourers lived a grinding, precarious existence.

In his seminal book *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898) he articulated how a new Garden City could overcome these problems by combining the best of town and country. Then, not satisfied with simply writing about the issues, he sought out philanthropists, professionals and investors who could turn this vision into reality. His solution to the problem of both urban deprivation and rural poverty was to create a new Social City, or constellation of interdependent garden cities in the green fields of Hertfordshire, UK. Howard was no doubt influenced by the routine establishment of new towns and cities on open land in the USA and other parts of the ‘new world’. He also knew of the UK model company villages of New Lanark and Saltaire (both inscribed WHSites) and Port Sunlight, Bournville and Bedford Park; but his was on an altogether larger scale, envisaging a Social City of 250,000 people in a cluster of individual garden cities. Letchworth and Welwyn garden cities are complete towns, located some 20kms apart, consistent with this ethos.

To further his ideas, in 1899 Howard established The Garden Cities Association-later re-named The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) and it was the TCPA that campaigned successfully for the post-war UK government to embark upon a New Towns programme. Over 2 million people now live in the UK new towns, the apogee of which is the highly successful new city of Milton Keynes. Howard’s ideas also sparked designers to attempt their own garden cities and suburbs around the world, although quite properly, these are adapted to the particular circumstances of their situation, from Griffin’s formal plans for the layout of Canberra to more modest schemes at Greenbelt in Maryland; from Cidade Jardim in Brazil to the constellation of *cite jardin* around Paris and Brussels. The design influence also transferred successfully at the small scale, with Stein and Wright the designers of Radburn NJ in 1929 interpreting the cul-de-sac concept used widely at Letchworth and Welwyn to create a layout of single aspect dwellings with car access and open space which has since been replicated in developments around the world. Pinelands near Cape Town is another, where a member of de Soissons architects from Welwyn was despatched to work on the project. The English Garden Cities were trail-blazers. They frequently receive visitors from abroad looking to see at first hand ‘how it was done here first’.

Within each of the housing areas, the designs sought to blur social class. Large houses were developed next to small cottages and houses for rent interspersed with homes for sale. This was a significant departure from the normal urban layout which resulted in segregation by social class. Paths filtered through *culs de sac* to

promote walking and social contact. The English Garden Cities were well ahead of their time in creating what we now call 'mixed communities'. And each town reinforces this coherence through sensitivity to the landscape with roads and development following the lie of the land, weaving standing woods and hedges into new open spaces and gardens and with the surrounding countryside never far from front doorsteps.

Criteria (i) *Represents a masterpiece of human creative genius*

Ebenezer Howard's Utopian solution was founded on sound economics infused with a streak of simple genius. His radical plan was to ensure that the community, who *themselves* created the economic uplift in land and development value through their participation and activity in the Garden City project received a dividend through enhanced community services (in Letchworth this amounts to some £9m pa). This unique approach gives residents a stake in the success of their own communities. This financial model continues to inspire developments around the world.

Criterion (ii) *Exhibits an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture,....town planning or landscape design.*

Letchworth Garden City (founded 1903) and Welwyn Garden City (founded 1920) both established on low grade farmland in Hertfordshire, within an hour's travel north of London are now home to over 75,000 people. They are both unique and exemplary settlements and complement each other in their practical demonstration of what we now call 'sustainable development'. They have become worldwide exemplars that continue to reflect a globally important interchange of human values, comprehensively planned from both their strategic locations on major transport routes through to detailed architectural design of public buildings and domestic dwellings. Howard and his designers sought to offer not only homes to live in but attractive places which would encourage community life, where people could come together to work, rest, pray and play in harmony with their natural surroundings.

Criterion (iv) *An outstanding example of a type of building, architectural...or landscape which illustrates a significant stage in human history.*

The late 19th and early 20th centuries in the then developed world were turning points in human history. Industrialisation was rampant, transportation transformed and a similar scale of change in social conditions, sometimes for the better, sometimes not. Cities were growing exponentially, the most common approach being ribbon development along transport corridors leading to unplanned urban sprawl. And inter-continental travel was becoming possible which allowed for the transfer of ideas and experience around the world.

This was a fertile context for Howard's breadth of thinking and action for a trend breach in urban design. He commissioned some of the leading architect-planners of the day to deliver his vision. Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin won the design competition for Letchworth and designed the garden city in the Arts and Crafts style. Louis de Soissons was commissioned to design Welwyn in 1920 and he chose a Beaux Arts masterplan and a neo-Georgian style for the public buildings and housing.

Each settlement was designed as a whole, from masterplans through to detailing of the individual houses, buildings and public spaces. Beauty was a cornerstone of the design ethos, and an early form of 'design guide' was used to create well-mannered and human scale design. All this, a total contrast to the usual and ubiquitous, piecemeal and unplanned approach to development.

It is the economic model which underpins the development, which was equally revolutionary and is still relevant today. The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation retains this model and manages a considerable property portfolio in the town for the benefit of the people. In Welwyn Garden City, the government nationalised the development company and charged the New Towns Commission with continuing

to build out the garden city as part of its new towns programme. Since then, proceeds from the uplift in development value have been received by HM Treasury, returned in part to the municipality through grant.

Integrity 2016 The English Garden Cities are essentially intact. Naturally, extensions and adaptations have occurred over the years but the strong design, planning and architectural coherence of the original layout of the first phases of both Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City remains. In the industrial areas, very limited change has occurred where factories have been replaced by offices reflecting the shift to a service economy and there are still many of the original units erected on the trading estates-places which Sir Frederick Gibberd memorably described as being suitable for 'small men'.

Changes have been equally slight in the housing areas; indeed, with the large trees maturing it is possible to see the garden cities in a way that Howard and his contemporaries could only have hoped and envisioned as the original plans in the archives attest. It is the impressive boulevard layout, generous landscaping and well-mannered buildings that immediately spring to mind when imagining the English garden cities,.

Authenticity 2016 Whilst the English Garden Cities have moved with the times, the disposition of land uses is intact and the appearance of the town centres and residential areas almost identical as evidenced from the original master plans and detailed drawings. Indeed the maturing of trees and landscaping creates an attractive appearance that the pioneers could only have imagined. Alterations, extensions and new builds follow the same palette of materials as the original respecting the architectural vernacular of the towns. And the ability to walk and cycle round the towns and ready access to the local countryside inherent in the original design continues to be valued by residents.

In addition, there remains a strong guardianship of place among residents of both garden cities, exemplified by the active civic societies and other voluntary groups in both Letchworth and Welwyn GC. Maintaining the pioneering utopian spirit and radical traditions of the original garden citizens and continuing to enrich and enhance the social life of the towns.

Protection and Management Requirements 2016 The UK government protects and enhances the environment through the UK Spatial Planning system under the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework and supporting legislation including the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 for designated individual buildings, monuments and landscapes and the 1979 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act.

The North Hertfordshire District Draft Local Plan (for Letchworth) and the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Draft Local Plan (for Welwyn) both contain core policies which seek to protect and enhance the garden cities within their jurisdiction, together with supplementary planning guidance on what is and what is not acceptable development within various quarters. In addition, both Letchworth and Welwyn Garden cities are surrounded by Green Belt, a very effective planning tool for managing land use. In the case of Letchworth, the Garden City Heritage Foundation still owns the surrounding farmland and currently, a new garden suburb is proposed to the north of the town which will be of high quality design and which will capture the increase in value for the benefit of the local community in line with garden city principles.

Within Letchworth and within the two Conservation Areas in Welwyn Garden City which cover the original Howard masterplan and the post war extension. Conservation Area designation seeks to protect the historic and architectural elements which make both garden cities special. Any new development would have to demonstrate that it protected and enhanced the character of the area.

Central to the maintenance of authenticity are the Schemes of Management operated by the Heritage Foundation in Letchworth and the Estate Management Scheme operated by the Borough Council in Welwyn which are entirely separate and supplementary to the national planning controls and which enable a closer attention to detail over developments. Thus, through a combination of planning, development control and

estate management there exists a shared understanding by residents, developers and landowners that the Garden Cities can only remain special if everyone respects the rules.

The main pressures facing the English Garden Cities are threefold:- the ongoing challenge of small scale changes to character and appearance which if allowed unchecked could have an accumulated detrimental impact on the original design concept; the health and vitality of the town centres in the face of radical change in retail shopping habits; and the need to identify land to accommodate development to meet local needs. Policies and actions are designed to meet these challenges.

Next Steps: A Steering Group will be formed to take forward the bid for Inscription, led by the TCPA and including all the key players. This Group will also be instrumental in developing the World Heritage Site Management Plan which will seek, *inter alia* to address the key tensions between development and conservation to ensure that the English Garden Cities remain leading, living exemplars to the world.

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