

The first Garden City



The annual Michael Rowley lecture this year was given on May 20 in the Meeting House on the subject of Letchworth Garden City by Graham Fisher, the Chief Executive of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation.

The talk started with a brief overview explaining some of the history of Letchworth, its constitution and governance. It covers some 5,500 acres with a population of around 34,000 and as the first garden city it influenced future town planning greatly.

Graham Fisher explained that the present body is a charitable trust with its endowment being the estate itself. The Foundation is Letchworth's largest landlord and has an annual income of some £8 million. So it is very different from the HGS Trust which we know.

Its mission statement says it exists "to create, maintain and promote a vibrant, quality environment in Letchworth Garden City, for all those who live, work and visit the world's first Garden City." We were told it acts as a custodian with stewardship to ensure the maintenance of the residential, industrial, commercial and rural environment.

The speaker explained that this utopian solution to the urban living condition gives rise to some tensions surfacing from the policing of standards with problems arising with, for example, PVC windows or the siting of satellite dishes; problems familiar to Suburb Residents, with negative views sometimes expressed over disciplinary action.

Letchworth was founded in 1903 using ideas from the 1898 book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (republished as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*) by the social reformer Ebenezer Howard. It was part of the great social movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It remains as the only one of what was hoped to be a network of Garden Cities, all created with the communal ownership of land, and accountable to that community, investing its profit for its own benefit. It was seen as an answer to the problems of poor housing, overcrowding and high rents associated with much urban development at the time. It is remarkable that it has survived and thrived; it is unfortunate that over one hundred years later the same problems still bedevil

parts of our own city and the rest of the country.

The town, with its industry and housing kept separate, would be situated within a belt of open countryside – the first 'Green Belt'. The competition for the town design led to the appointment of Richard Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin as the architects. The original Arts and Crafts housing design and border hedges would look familiar to Suburb residents.

The original town has also seen expansion with housing estates being built; two, in 1947 and 1961, being municipal estates built by the LCC with residents coming from London; and two more in the 1970's, although these were for private housing. Graham Fisher told us that 35% of the residential property was for social housing while 40% of residents work in Letchworth. Much of the Foundation's property is commercial, either industrial, office or retail with these sectors contributing 80% of its income.

We were told Letchworth faces the same challenges present in the rest of the country. There is much old property which needs looking after and a programme of retrofitting has started to make its housing stock eco-friendly.

Then there are concerns over increasing inequality and an increasingly elderly population, while there is less participation in civic community life – a common problem as our own RA knows – and a struggle to maintain economic vitality. The decline in the High Street is being met, in part, by converting to residential.

The term 'hollowing out' was used to describe the effect of being squeezed between London and Cambridge on the town's economic vitality. Trying to attract wealth creators into the town has become a priority so as not to rely on a proliferation of ubiquitous low-wage distribution centres.

We learned that the Foundation has thirty governors. Six are elected, ten are nominated by registered clubs, societies and the local county and district councils, and fourteen are appointed by the Board of Trustees, which has a membership of nine and is appointed by the governors. Trustees can serve for a maximum of two terms of three years.

The management of the estate is the responsibility of a leadership team under the chief executive, Graham Fisher, and they ensure the resources

available are used to the benefit of the community.

To that end money is spent on promoting the environment, heritage, culture, leisure, learning, health and wellbeing, leading to the support of a working farm, the town cinema and theatre, a health centre, the Greenway around the town, community transport and much more.

Graham Fisher gave his lecture the sub-title: Sustainability and Community. It is a miracle Letchworth has survived and it is a fine advertisement for the ideals of a civic movement, which some mourn for having disappeared in an age which prizes the self and mammon above community and charity.

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