

# Planting New Towns in Europe in the Interwar Years



# Planting New Towns in Europe in the Interwar Years:

*Experiments and Dreams  
for Future Societies*

Edited by

Helen Meller and Heleni Porfyriou

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***To Koos Bosma***



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## EDITORS' PREFACE

This book is the outcome of discussions between the two editors that have been taking place over a number of years on the subject of new towns. Initially discussing new towns in Italy and England, whose differences raised many questions, we began to formulate the idea of looking at the subject on a European scale. At the centre of our interest were matters of design and social purpose and the influence of the vision of a man-made environment for raising future generations.

This encouraged us to run a panel at the Lisbon Conference of the European Association of Urban Historians in 2014 where we found strong interest in our theme of new towns in the interwar period. Five of the papers in this volume were developed from early drafts presented at Lisbon. The others were submitted as abstracts but could not be included in the conference programme because of the limitations of space.

Almost a year after the Lisbon Conference, where he gave his paper, Koos Bosma died. It is with deep regret and sadness that we record it here. We have long admired his work and had the privilege of knowing him personally for a number of years. For this reason we wanted to dedicate the volume to him

We would like to thank Professor Martijn van Beek of the Department of Architectural History of the University of Amsterdam, who found the text Koos had prepared for this volume and, especially, a friend and colleague of Koos, Dr Imke van Hellemondts who worked on making it ready for publication. Familiar with Professor Bosma's work, she also selected some illustrations, sending them in very good time for publication. We are most grateful for this essential help and it is a pleasure and a tribute to be able to publish Professor Bosma's last paper.

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# INTRODUCTION

## HELEN MELLER AND HELENI PORFYRIOU

Since the Industrial Revolution, new towns had developed around mining operations, in regions where there were natural resources now in demand: coal, iron and other metal ores; they had been built alongside the growth of the railway network across Europe, especially at important junctures; they were created in the second half of the nineteenth century when the scale of manufacturing escalated, requiring more space; and in increasing numbers, they were built to meet new demands for leisure and health, from spa towns to seaside resorts. The marketing functions of towns long predated the Industrial Revolution but, as population growth spread across the continent from west to east, north and south, an increase in marketing activities expanded older towns so that they became virtually new.

However, in the interwar period, there were probably more new towns built than in any other previous period of history. This volume is devoted to exploring that across a number of countries in Europe, including 'new' countries created by the Peace Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and one example from a country in the Middle East, Israel, a country not actually created until after the Second World War, but whose early European settlers had determined, in the decades before, to create new towns. The crucial factor stimulating the growth of new towns in the interwar period was politics. The Great War had impressed on governments their reliance, as never before, on the people, to sustain military action and to manufacture a war machine. The war had brought to the surface the social discontents of labour, over the past century, overwhelmingly landless labour at the mercy of "capitalist exploitation".

The Russian Revolution had brought the message home that enough was enough. It had also created a challenge for all governments to prove that they could create better conditions for people in their countries. The extension of universal voting rights had created mass electorates. To win power, they needed positive social action. Better conditions meant improvements in every day life for the majority and housing and social facilities were central to that. The international trade union movement had been campaigning for better housing for at least half a century. In the wake

of the revolutions that swept through the cities of Central Europe immediately after the war, the message was brought home, loud and clear. It was in a diminished Vienna, losing population as it lost its old status as the Imperial capital of the now defunct Hapsburg Empire, that the most sustained effort was made to influence politics through housebuilding for the workers.

‘Red’ Vienna (since the capital was a socialist enclave) and its extraordinary achievement of building workers housing blocks in the 1920s, on a mighty scale, locating them to secure electoral rewards, was very much a product of the political context in the first interwar decade. What was at stake there and everywhere in Europe, was a huge question mark about how the future would now take shape. Into the established pattern of demand for economic growth and mass urbanisation as people continued to leave rural areas for the city in the hope of work, new political forces were ready to break from the past. The Russians had already done it. By the end of the 1920s, they were determined to create a new socialist society as fast as possible, demonstrating what they could achieve with huge economic shifts and the creation of new towns. The authoritarian regimes in Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal were also ready to build physically their new societies, each though with their own particular rhetoric to support their ventures.

But politics is just the context, not the focus of the collection of papers in this book. The questions the authors have raised in all the different political contexts of their chosen ‘new towns’, are really concerned with ideas about the future of cities. Just as the Industrial Revolution had, more than a century earlier, marked a watershed separating the future from the past, so, in Europe, mass urbanisation bringing the majority of people from the countryside to the city, had brought a transformation in social and cultural factors on an unprecedented scale. Of course mass urbanisation was not new. It had been reached first in Britain in the 1850s. Yet the implication of the change of mainly rural countries to a higher level of urbanisation reached a climax across the European continent after the experience of ‘total war’ during 1914-18. The questions thus addressed in the book relate both to the prospects of building a new environment and to creating new societies.

Town extensions of older major cities in the half century before the war, had caused much discussion about the relationship of the old urban environment and the new, the need to learn about appropriate scales for further development using the knowledge of the past as a guide. The debates around this had helped to accelerate a national town planning movement in Germany, with the competition for building ‘der Grosse

Berlin' in 1910. Berlin had experienced the fastest capital city growth before 1914. Yet the critical questions raised by the competition were social and cultural as much as matters of design. In a 'new' country, Czechoslovakia for example, the modernists and radicals were ready to question all social institutions and basic assumptions about cities, even the very basic view that the fundamental unit of society and thus the city, was the family. New town planning in the interwar period was, however, influenced by the international exchange of ideas with disagreements amongst architects and governments on which to accept and which to discard.

The intention of this book is to explore some examples of what was achieved in the building of European new towns through new relations between governments and planner-architects. Now governments had become far more interested in responding both to the demands of economic development and facilitating social change. Yet if governments provided the framework, it was the privilege of the planner-architects to actually imagine the future, giving form to their ideas. The papers do not thus focus on the system of government: communist, fascist or democratic, but on what actually got built, by whom and why. It is hoped to tease out connections between urban form and social aspirations; or the moral basis of social planning and how it was interpreted. Did the new towns of the interwar years actually create a planned society where visions met realities, aided by the design of new urban forms?

These are big questions and can only be worked through on a chapter by chapter basis, which may throw up some suggestions for answers when set side by side. Mark Clapson's chapter on the second Garden City in Britain provides the context for the first analysis. The British government's incompetence after the First World War in putting into production its election pledge to 'Build Homes for Heroes' was the stimulus for the next private venture of the Garden City Company to build a second city (Letchworth having been the first, begun in 1904). The elderly idealist and inspiration of the Garden City idea, Ebenezer Howard, had responded to this political failure by taking his fate into both hands and making a gamble. He bid for some land for a second Garden City in 1919 when he did not have the money to pay for it. This was forthcoming from private philanthropy, fortunately for him, but Welwyn Garden City when it was built, was very different from Letchworth.

This reveals that, for all its moral purpose to bring city and country together to encourage the peaceful evolution of social development, the strength of the Garden City concept, even in the hands of those responsible for the pioneering model, was capable of different interpretations. In fact

the Garden City model was the modernist idea that swept the board from France to even war-torn Russia in the first years after the war, but what was built was rarely modelled on the British example. Clapson's discussion of Welwyn Garden City also provides an insight into what was happening in the country that gave birth to this idea for the future. There were no more private Garden Cities after this. The idea of the Garden City, for all its attractiveness and all its ease in communicating an image of a modern built environment, did not keep its position at the forefront as the model for new towns in the 1920s. It proved to be both too expensive and based on a social ideal that, after all, did not have universal appeal though the power of the idea lived on. It was constantly reinterpreted in form and design, most often stripped of its moral purpose and many of those elements that were supposed to create a just society.

The next two chapters have a different focus. They are concerned with 'future' people and how their demands could be met within a modern environment. The first by Koos Bosma, has as its political context, Holland, a country that has been at the forefront of town planning for at least four hundred years. The environmental parameters of the Low Countries have always demanded man-made efforts at regulation, especially the overwhelming need to control water levels. The strength of natural forces was a primary concern and the process of new settlements had to be moulded within really long-term programmes of land reclamation and civil engineering. When the Wieringermeerpolder, (drained between 1924 and 1933), [part of the very long term Zuiderzeeproject (1918-75)] became available for development, it was a man-made, virgin, flat territory. Bosma discusses how this extreme example can help to construct the kind of questions that need to be asked about all ideas on modern cities and citizens and how early twentieth century new towns, models and built examples, were explorations in coming up with some answers.

The second chapter takes up these issues in a totally different context: that of Czechoslovakia and especially, the urgent need for development around the capital city of Prague. The Czechs had embraced their freedom from Hapsburg rule with great zest and big programmes of economic development. Prague itself however, was a medieval city, a jewel of the past that 'modernists' could love and admire, but which inspired them to think even more radically about what they could achieve in their new building that could be measured against this early civic achievement. In touch with the current political *zeitgeist*, they wanted to create experiments, not funded privately by industrialists such as the Bat'a factory settlement in Zlín, near Brno, (that had attracted the attention of

modernists including Le Corbusier), but funded by the public sector with public support.

They were committed to an ideal of new society where there was social justice and social equality. Their spokesperson was Karel Teige whose publications were devoted to interpreting these ideals in built form. Teige had also gained international credentials, being made Secretary of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in 1930 after the Czech group of modernists had been formed in 1928. They played a leading role in early discussions of how architecture should create a modern future. Teige's influential manifesto, *Minimal Dwelling*, outlined daring ideas about how architecture could help bring a new social democracy into being. Alena Kubova's chapter gives an overview and insight into the vision and the social challenges these architects embraced. In the early 1930s, they were actually given public commissions for work, a rare thing for architects with ultra radical ideas.

The next five papers (on Russia, Poland, Finland and Palestine [Israel]) are purposefully chosen as coming from outside the core of countries central to the modernist town planning debate. Developments of new towns in these areas were deeply influenced by the ideas on cities and their futures that were widely current, but they were also constrained by other factors. There was a complex interplay between their pasts and presents, between the realities of territorial, urban, sociological and architectural contexts. The architects working in these countries were connected to what was going on elsewhere, attending conferences internationally. Sometimes, for example in Russia and Israel, foreign architects were engaged from elsewhere, especially from Germany, to work on new towns. Yet all these countries had distinctive visions for their futures that emerged from their past histories as well as the present and future challenges they faced.

Most startling were the efforts being made in Russia to reshape its society and its economic structure. The speed and urgency with which this was attempted in the early 1930s and the enormous physical difficulties that had to be overcome, shaped the outcomes for many cities that were founded. The shorthand term 'socialist city' does not do justice to the variety of problems, the freedoms (or lack of them) for urban design, the shifting priorities architect-planners faced, even the climate. Ferry Vermeer's chapter brings new insight into these factors in his reassessment of the work of Hannes Meyer, a classic example of the foreign architect planner, seeking work in the most exciting place for those committed to the idea of devoting themselves to building the future.

In Poland, Piotr Marcinak, picks up on the excitement of building cities for the 'new' Poland, now the Second Polish Republic, finally

created after much negotiation in 1922. Poland embarked upon a programme of rapid economic growth and mass urbanisation. New urban development was vital. The Polish government threw itself into a huge range of reforms and promoted investment in industries. There was a pressing need for creating new urban hubs in the Central Industrial Region as well as building a new port city, Gdynia, to deal with overseas trade. This concentrated minds on urban design and what a Polish port should look like, port cities being the frontiers of their national culture. The teams of Polish architects were determined to demonstrate their talents and to build cities that would impress and last over time, though they could not be entirely regardless of economic restraints.

In Finland, ideas of the modern city and the development of a modern society were even more of a luxury for much of the interwar period. The First World War had been followed by a civil war when the politics of the left and right fought bitterly in a context dominated by the closeness of Russia. Two chapters, one by Laura Kolbe on *Pro Helsingfors*, the dream of Eliel Saarinen on the future transformation of Helsinki; and the other by Ulla Salmela, on the work of the architect, Otto-Iivari Meurman describe, in a complementary way, the role played by urban design in planning new towns, in symbolic, ideological and aesthetic terms.

Saarinen's plan for Greater Helsinki was actually a quite close application of Ebenezer Howard's idea of 'Social City'. Considered as an anticipation of the 'organic decentralization' concept (elaborated, later in 1943, by him). It represents a utopian, yet far-sighted, project inspired by his latent nationalism.

The artistic urban design qualities, characterising Finnish town planning work in the 1920s, are discussed in chapter seven and exemplified through the building of the new town of Riihimäki, planned by Meurman, who had worked as an assistant in Saarinen's office. As the author shows, aesthetic urban design became instrumental to the ideological and national unity rhetoric of those years seeking social integration and peace in a post-civil war Finland.

The chapter by Shira Wilkof shows the conjunction of moral purpose of planning for people and building new environments was even more evident in Palestine, in the territory that would become Israel after 1948. In the interwar period, with less pressure of incoming population, urban planners began to think of how to adapt the kinds of work they had been engaged in in Europe to their dreams of a future society, giving rise to an exemplary cross fertilisation output. Nothing in the extraordinary environment of the early twentieth century settlers was normal. The dream of a rural future inevitably gave away to recognition of the need for an



urban one as well. There was a strong desire for the values and social ideals of agrarian society to be sustained regardless in the new urban developments. Some of the new towns clung to their rural hinterlands hoping to achieve this. Yet there was also a strong desire to create an urban culture, as socially sophisticated and architecturally beautiful as existed in the cities from which the people and the architects had come.

These kinds of concerns demonstrate simultaneously, the common thread that runs through all the chapters, of an interest for social factors and urban environment, the well-being of all people in the future and at the same time, the great variety of circumstances that eventually determined what was built. At least questions about the factors that shaped well-being and a moral basis for community life were asked during this interwar period. There was also recognition that there would be deep psychological and social transformations following from the creation of new towns and new ways of living. Beyond the creation of new urban environments, architects, planners and engineers were anxious about the profound need to recalibrate the 'ecological' balance between 'nature' and 'culture', that was gaining momentum as mass urbanisation spread around the world.

Modern architects, engineers and planners had been exposed to more ideas and information about planning whilst at the same time, facing much greater demands on their understanding of society and its possible future development. The papers collected here throw this new expectation of the possibilities of planning (understood as town planning, urban design and housing) and the need to question social norms, into sharp relief. The questions raised in this critical moment for the growth of cities and mass urbanisation focused on the relationship between people and their social and urban habitat, while envisioning a 'brave new world'. It is obviously easier to address new city building and social reforms in ideological terms or dismiss planning interventions as politically biased. This is what we tried to avoid, because in a period of dreaming about future societies, while politics is the most obvious ingredient, history and cultural factors were also important in shaping ideas of the future. We believe that there is still much to be learned from experiments in the interwar years on planting new towns.



## CHAPTER ONE

# FROM GARDEN CITY TO NEW TOWN: SOCIAL CHANGE, POLITICS AND TOWN PLANNERS AT WELWYN, 1920-1948

MARK CLAPSON

### **Introduction\***

With the exception of Letchworth, few garden cities have received as much academic attention as Welwyn. Begun in 1920, some seventeen years after Letchworth was initiated, Welwyn was the second of Ebenezer Howard's planned new communities. The development of Welwyn Garden City (WGC) between the wars is a familiar story, dominated by architectural and planning history.<sup>1</sup> Its early growth, moreover, has traditionally been closely associated with the writings and actions of its leaders, producing a narrative that glossed over some problems in its formative decades, and presented a mostly rosy picture of social life there.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly the achievements at WGC were drawn upon by its advocates to justify both its transition to a new town after the Second World War, and to validate a wider programme of post-war new towns.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter adopts a different perspective, focusing on some of the social and political problems in WGC that were conveniently ignored or downplayed by the 'fathers' of the city prior to its designation as a new town in 1948.<sup>4</sup> Interwar troubles at Welwyn were rarely acknowledged in the boosterish literature of the Company between the wars, and given only cursory mentions in the subsequent writings of Osborn and other proponents of the garden city movement. Welwyn Garden City Company Limited (WGC Ltd) did not treat its citizens equally, and conflicts within the Board of the Company exposed ongoing tensions within the elite of the new city. A further difficulty was the image problem suffered by Welwyn between the wars. Like Letchworth, Welwyn earned a national reputation as a home of cranks and faddists. More seriously, by 1939 Welwyn was a

divided city, characterised by a class-based spatial segregation compounded by the influx of industrial workers during the 1930s. Its much-vaunted community life, ostensibly evident in a thriving culture of voluntarism and associative activities, reflected social differences that were typical of the petty snobberies of any wealthy small town in southern England. There were other failures in the realisation of Howard's dream, too. Despite the attraction of some significant industries to the new city, the goal of self-containment was never fully achieved. These problems were conveniently played down by those who called for Welwyn Garden City to become a new town in 1948. Focusing on these difficulties further demonstrates how Welwyn provided an historic dress rehearsal for some of the shortcomings of the post-war new towns programme in the United Kingdom.

### **The beginnings of Welwyn Garden City**

The catalyst for Welwyn Garden City was the First World War. Leading 'new townsmen', notably Ebenezer Howard, Frederic Osborn, Charles Benjamin Purdom and Richard Reiss, lobbied for a programme of urban dispersal to new towns to ease the imminent housing shortage and to reconstruct the overcrowded and polluted industrial centres inherited from the nineteenth century. Osborn wrote *New Towns after the War*, a book that he would update in World War Two, while Purdom endorsed decentralisation as a solution to urban problems. In his 1925 book *The Building of Satellite Towns* he termed Welwyn the 'first satellite town'. This book would also be republished as a consequence of the Second World War.<sup>5</sup>

In 1919 Howard independently purchased an initial area of 2,300 acres (931 hectares) of land in Hertfordshire from Lord Desborough and the Marquis of Salisbury, without consulting either Osborn or Purdom.<sup>6</sup> The following year the parent company, Second Garden City Limited, was formed, and soon renamed Welwyn Garden City Limited.<sup>7</sup> The entire estate was the freehold property of the Company.<sup>8</sup> The executive of this capitalist enterprise included pioneers at Letchworth, namely Osborn, who became Secretary of WGC Ltd until 1936, and his early ally Purdom, financial director of WGC Ltd until 1928.<sup>9</sup> Another key figure was Reiss, Chairman of the Garden City and Town Planning Association (GCTPA) from 1918-28, and a leading writer on town planning. He became Vice Chairman of the Company. Finally, Theodore Gervase Chambers, a surveyor and businessman, became Chairman of WGC Ltd from 1920. He also served on the Departmental Committee on Garden Cities and Satellite Towns - the Marley Committee - established in 1932.<sup>10</sup>

The goals of WGC Ltd were summarised in its *Prospectus of an Investment in a New Town in Hertfordshire*, issued during the early 1920s to prospective investors. Welwyn would provide exemplary town planning, good housing, educational opportunities, indoor and outdoor leisure facilities, better health, and the preservation of natural beauty. Economically, industrial expansion and agriculture also featured prominently in the appeal to investors. The ‘sound business lines’ of the enterprise were emphasised.<sup>11</sup> Among the first group of potential investors to be approached by the Board were ‘old Balliol men’, as three members of the Board had been educated at the Oxford College before the First World War. The letter to the old boys of Balliol is significant. Despite its ostensibly elitist overtones, it emphasised the forthcoming inclusivity of the garden city project at Welwyn, from the early construction work for demobilised soldiers, to bridging the divide between capital and labour over time.<sup>12</sup>

The general ideals for Welwyn have often been summarised in this famous statement:

A town designed for healthy living and industry of a size that makes possible a full measure of social life but not larger, surrounded by a rural belt; the whole of the land being in public ownership, or held in trust for the community.<sup>13</sup>

The early construction work at Welwyn included some cottages at Handside Lane and adjacent streets designed by the architect Courtenay Crickmer in the Letchworth tradition of domestic architecture.<sup>14</sup> Histories of Welwyn then point to the *Plan for Welwyn Garden City* by the architect-planner Louis de Soissons (Fig. 1).<sup>15</sup> In notes entitled *The Meaning of the Plan*, Osborn described Soissons as ‘one of the swashbucklers of live architectural movement of the moment’ (sic).<sup>16</sup> Commissioned soon after Welwyn was begun, the Soissons plan synthesised neo-Georgian housing with an environmental composition that embraced the ideals of the garden city movement. Osborn argued that Chambers was a key advocate of Soissons, as both had ‘no particular reverence for the Letchworth tradition’.<sup>17</sup>

The Plan was praised by Osborn, Purdom and others – Nikolaus Pevsner for example – as a neo-Georgian masterpiece, an elegant composition of boulevards, parkways, culs-de-sac and greenery.<sup>18</sup> No high buildings were allowed; generous planting of trees and shrubs was to line the walkways and roads; housing densities were not to exceed 12 houses to the acre (0.45 hectare) placed within a composition of shorter and longer through roads and culs-de-sac. By 1925 a target population of 50,000 was agreed among



Present-day Welwyn Garden City was also based on the *Plan for Welwyn New Town* drawn up by Soissons in 1949, which aimed for a target population of 36,000.<sup>20</sup> The second Soissons plan was, however, a product of the greatly changed circumstances brought about by the war of 1939-45 and the drive for decentralisation in which Osborn was such a key figure. Osborn was also instrumental in the formation of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning in 1943, which became the main lobby for town and country planning and the new towns programme. He served on the New Towns Committee from 1945-46, established by the Minister of Town and Country Planning, Lewis Silkin. The deliberations of the Committee, chaired by Lord Reith, resulted in the New Towns Act of 1946.<sup>21</sup> Yet Purdom did not contribute to the New Towns Committee. He was Banquo's ghost to Chambers, Osborn and Reiss who all participated in its deliberations.<sup>22</sup> Events during the 1920s explain why, and present us with a new understanding of the role of Osborn at Welwyn.

### **Osborn and local political tensions**

Osborn (Fig. 2) had been a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) since 1908, and was a member of the Labour Party and the gradualist Fabian Society when he lived in Letchworth.<sup>23</sup> He took his politics to Welwyn (Fig. 3), and during the early 1920s he established the local branch of the Labour Party at Welwyn so that the party could put forward candidates in the Rural District Council and Parish Council elections. He drafted the rules and regulations for the newly established party, whose objects were to 'unite the forces of Labour within the constituency' and to secure Labour representation in Parliament and local politics.<sup>24</sup>

The political problem for Osborn was obvious. As an executive member of both WGC Ltd and the local Labour Party he had a foot in two camps, straddling the divide between capital and labour. The Welwyn Labour Party (WLP) was comprised of middle-class activists and skilled trade unionists, many of whom viewed WGC Ltd with suspicion. Tensions erupted in 1923 when a member of the Executive Committee of WLP formed the Welwyn Citizen's League to represent people in Welwyn in dialogue with WGC Ltd. The proposer was a J. Shilton, who was given short shrift by Osborn. In a letter to Shilton in March 1923, Osborn argued that such an organisation would stand little chance of permanent success if it went into politics and ran candidates for local bodies. Worse, he feared it might become 'a convenient label for an unacknowledged Liberal-Tory coalition against Labour, like the average Ratepayer's Association. And by

that it would cease to function as a watchdog over the Company.’ His view was that dealings with the Company were best articulated through the Labour Party.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 2 Bronze head of Osborn (with kind permission of the Sir Frederic Osborn Academy, photograph by author, 2015)

The affair rumbled on during 1923 with Shilton lamenting an ‘undercurrent of suspicion’ in the WLP and tendering his resignation from its executive committee. The accusations against Osborn and the Company were that they were too closely associated; that Osborn selected candidates to primarily suit the Company’s interest; that the Company was too dominant in the social and political life of Welwyn, because it financed the local newspaper and held a near-monopoly over retail and entertainments facilities; that the Company was a private capitalist enterprise which the whole community was over-dependent upon, whilst it was subject to no democratic control; and that the Company was the actual employer, either directly or through subsidiary or allied undertakings, of ‘a larger body of citizens’. Of the eleven members of the WLP Executive, moreover, only five were entirely unconnected with the Company. Shilton accused Osborn of ‘strong bias’ in favour of WGC Ltd, and he further accused him of



favouring middle-class candidates over representatives of trades unions in the local elections of 1923.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 3 Home of Sir Frederic Osborn, Guessens Road, WGC: the blue plaque reads: 'Sir Frederic Osborn, Garden City. Pioneer and leading proponent of the New Towns Programme, lived here, 1925-1978' (photograph by author, 2015)

Osborn attempted to reconcile the division between members of the WLP and their suspicions of WGC Ltd by emphasising shared values and objectives between Labour and the Garden City Movement. He stressed their non-violent gradualism yet revolutionary potential to change the character of industrial society, claiming that 'The Garden City idea is in itself one of the biggest elements in the reconstruction of industrial society on better lines' he argued that both the Labour and the Garden City movements had a shared remedy to the ills of urban-industrial cities in planned new towns.<sup>27</sup>

Osborn was fearful that oppositional groups to both WGC Ltd and the WLP might become enemies to the garden city and Labour causes as he interpreted and synthesised them. He also personified the failure of the garden city to bridge the division between capital and organised labour. As

an employee of WGC Ltd, he was held in suspicion by more militant members of the Welwyn Labour Party. As a socialist, however, FJO was an occasional thorn in the side of those who adhered to a more capitalistic vision of the enterprise, as events in 1928 demonstrated.

### **‘A certain disharmony’: the Purdom Crisis**

The ‘Purdom Crisis’ of 1928 throws light onto the sometimes hostile machinations of Osborn and his colleagues in Welwyn Garden City Limited.<sup>28</sup> Osborn appears to have been one of the initiators of a campaign to remove Purdom from his executive responsibilities, particularly as finance manager of Welwyn Stores, and was certainly the author of the case made against Purdom that highlighted his tendency towards inadequate consultation and an allegedly less than scrupulous attitude towards accounting.<sup>29</sup> These details were given to an enquiry by Sir Harry Peat, a chartered accountant, on behalf of Osborn and other leading signatories to a petition to relieve Purdom of his duties. The enquiry into Purdom was to focus on nothing less than ‘character and personality as well as organisation and business methods’.<sup>30</sup> In addition to Osborn, who was by then Administrative Officer and Industrial Manager, those who challenged Purdom included Louis de Soissons; Captain W.E. James, the Engineer to the Company; A.E. Malbon, the Manager of Welwyn Builders Ltd, along with E.G. Parsons, the Farm Manager for the New Town Trust, and A. R. Pelly, the Financial Secretary of the Company and the Staff Manager of Welwyn Garden City Stores.<sup>31</sup> Even Howard, in the final year of his life, pitched in against Purdom, claiming in a letter to the Company that Purdom was ‘entirely unfitted’ for the tasks he performed, and nothing less than ‘a source of very great danger to the interests of the Company, of the Town and of the whole garden city and allied movements’.<sup>32</sup> (Fig. 4) Opposing them were five other members of the Company who dissociated themselves from the enquiry and expressed confidence in Purdom.<sup>33</sup> Those who had called for the enquiry were disappointed that the subsequent recommendations for the reorganisation of the Company did not request Purdom to be dismissed, and called upon Chambers as Chairman of WGC Ltd to sack him: ‘defects in the working of the business are due primarily to Mr. Purdom’s policy, methods and personality’.<sup>34</sup>



Fig. 4 Home of Sir Ebenezer Howard, Guessens Road, WGC: the blue plaque reads 'Sir Ebenezer Howard, O.B.E., Creator of Garden Cities, lived here, 1923-1928 (photograph by author, 2015)

The most powerful ally of Purdom was Chambers, however, who felt that the animus of Osborn towards Purdom was worthy of dismissal. Accusing Osborn of 'attempting to force the Company to dispense with Mr. Purdom's services', he also advised FJO 'to leave the service of the Company forthwith'.<sup>35</sup> This led to a curt correspondence between the two which may have influenced the later sacking of Osborn in 1936. Soon after he had issued it, Chambers felt compelled to 'withdraw his notice of dismissal' of Osborn, 'on the footing that you will be relieved of your duties pending the reorganisation of the administration, but without any prejudice to your personal position in any such reorganisation'. Osborn was to remain on full salary in the meantime.<sup>36</sup> Osborn continued as Secretary of WGC Ltd until 1936, when the Company was restructured and he suffered dismissal. He went to work for Murphy Radio and within a year he became Secretary of the GCTPA. Freed from his obligations at Welwyn he now worked to influence government policy on decentralisation and new towns.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, what of Purdom? He had been one of the ‘new townsmen’, was a long-standing advocate of garden cities, and had written the introduction to the Soissons plan in 1926. Yet his position was given scant expression in contemporary and subsequent accounts of the episode by FJO.<sup>38</sup> Purdom tendered his resignation and nurtured his resentment about what he termed a ‘certain disharmony’ on the Board. He remained in Welwyn, but finally vented in his autobiography *Life over Again*, contextualising the problem as symptomatic of the slow economic growth of Welwyn during the 1920s and the consequent ‘financial insecurity’ of WGC Ltd. This exacerbated ‘personal rancour’ on the Board and the alliances against himself and Chambers.<sup>39</sup> The ultimate cause of this, he suggested, was ‘the attitude of mind to the enterprise caused by the limited dividend on the share capital’, which led to a parallel lack of clarity over ‘profit and loss’. Unlike private companies, WGC Ltd had no profit and loss account, resulting in hesitancy, and in friction between what Purdom viewed as the more communally minded staff in thrall to Osborn and the business types such as Chambers and himself.<sup>40</sup> During his lifetime Purdom was not even allowed the last word in the garden city he had once passionately advocated. Both Osborn and Reiss wrote to the *Welwyn Times* in 1951 rebutting his account.<sup>41</sup> More recently, however, a local history website in Welwyn has recognised the ‘ruthless’ treatment of Purdom by colleagues and friends, and his feeling of being abandoned.<sup>42</sup>

## Image problems

By 1939 Welwyn suffered from an association with cranks and unworldly idealists. To some extent this was derived from the ‘healthy living’ ethos of the garden city movement, but it also owed something to the specific legacy of pacifism in Letchworth. During the First World War, Letchworth had been a base for conscientious objection, an unfashionable cause associated with the pacifist ILP. Not only Osborn, a member of the ILP, but other socialist conscientious objectors had invited opprobrium in the febrile patriotic atmosphere from 1914-18. Herbert Morrison, with whom Osborn became friends, was a leading London Labour politician and conscientious objector who spent time working in a market garden in Welwyn during the First World War.<sup>43</sup> From the North of England, moreover, Muriel Nichol moved to Welwyn in 1922 to become part of the Labour Party there. She was an active member of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, of the ILP, and from 1914 had been a prominent anti-war activist whose father was arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act.<sup>44</sup> Because of an ethos of pacifism, WGC Ltd failed to

grasp the strength of public patriotism, as was evidenced in the early choice of a nominal representative from the field of politics for membership of the Board of Welwyn Garden City Limited. One of their invitations was to Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour leader and pacifist, who had been a conscientious objector during the First World War. He pointed out to the Company that any involvement with him might generate controversy, and he was probably right.<sup>45</sup>

This was also a miscalculation in the predominantly Conservative rural area of Hertfordshire into which WGC was inserted. Tory members of the Rural District Council were hostile towards people from cities flooding into their corner of the Home Counties. The image problems of Welwyn Garden City anticipated many of the difficulties faced by the post-war new towns. Nearby Stevenage in Hertfordshire, the first new town designated under the New Towns Act of 1946, was bitterly attacked as ‘Silkingrad’ by conservatives and other objectors in 1946.<sup>46</sup> Later new towns such as Milton Keynes have also been viewed with suspicion as socialist urban encroachments into the countryside, spawning associated criticisms and negative judgements that continue to dog the new towns today.<sup>47</sup>

Famously, however, Welwyn also attracted criticism from the Left, notably George Orwell who blamed both Letchworth and Welwyn for undermining the popularity of socialism through their association with middle-class cranks. Writing in *The Road to Wigan Pier* during the mid-1930s Orwell was famously rude about Letchworth and the type of socialists it attracted, ‘every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal wearer, sex maniac, escaped Quaker, “Nature Cure” quack, pacifist and feminist in England’.<sup>48</sup> But he also attacked the second garden city, home of the ILP summer schools between the wars, for giving socialism a bad name:

If only the sandals and the pistachio-coloured shirts could be put in a pile and burnt, and every vegetarian, teetotaller, and creeping Jesus sent home to Welwyn Garden City to do his yoga exercise quietly!<sup>49</sup>

Fruit juice, yoga, vegetarian food and moderation in alcoholic consumption are now viewed as essential for healthy living: in this sense the garden cities were trendsetters. But it would be unfair to argue that Orwell was, for example, anti-feminist. He was more concerned about the way in which the association of British socialism with garden cities typified how a range of unpopular and unfashionable causes was tarnishing the attraction of socialism to the beer-drinking and patriotic working classes. The point about ‘escaped Quakers’ is given added fibre by the Shredded Wheat Factory at Welwyn, a Quaker company and a significant employer of local labour from the mid-1920s. Orwell was also

withering about the bland ‘American breakfast cereal’ that Welwyn had introduced to the nation.<sup>50</sup>

As Maurice de Soissons, the son of Louis, was compelled to admit in his insider account of Welwyn: ‘the trouble was that garden cities were associated with the social conscience complex rather than the business-interest complex’.<sup>51</sup> Expressed another way, Welwyn was full of middle-class do-gooders, and this would exacerbate social problems as the planners sought to address the lack of unskilled labour and industrial employment there.

### **The limitations of self-containment**

The first six years of Welwyn saw little in the way of local job creation, and WGC was something of a dormitory as most of those living there, except those in the Company, were employed elsewhere. But from 1926, albeit within a period of small population growth, WGC Ltd began to oversee some significant successes in attracting industries to the designated area. The harbinger of this success was the Shredded Wheat Factory. Yet the Company was increasingly concerned at the shortcomings in the labour supply. During the late 1920s WGC Ltd issued a report on *The Movement of Industry and Labour into Welwyn Garden City*, highlighting the relative absence of unskilled industrial labour in WGC, as most unskilled workers were in construction.<sup>52</sup>

Households earning £5 or less per week (according to the National Archives Currency Converter, this would have been the equivalent of £167 per week in 2005) were the most difficult to attract to Welwyn because they preferred to live near their place of work back in London or in the industrial cities. The problem was that Welwyn was established ‘mainly to provide a real outlet for people living in congested areas as an experiment in the planning of satellite towns’. An ‘especial difficulty’ in obtaining unskilled female labour was also noted, and there was little accommodation suitable for single workers. The report hoped that the situation would ‘probably right itself’ over the coming decade.<sup>53</sup>

The Depression from 1929 into the early 1930s led to a palpable slowdown in growth. From 1934, however, the city expanded more quickly, reaching a population of about 13,500 by the end of the decade.<sup>54</sup> By then, local employment was based on both traditional and new sectors. Small numbers were employed in market gardening and retail, transport, health and social services, while construction and foundry work had provided more opportunities for manual labour. Food manufacturing, including cereals and processed foodstuffs such as chocolate and coffee