

Complete Communities or Dormitory Towns?

Case Studies in Interwar Housing at Welwyn Garden City, Becontree and St. Helier

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Abstract

Housing has always been a paramount issue; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century attempts were made to revolutionise the problem of poor quality houses and the accompanying poor quality of life. This was set against the backdrop of the industrial expansion of the urban metropolis; with possible solutions moving towards decentralisation of the most overpopulated areas. Arguably the most significant steps to remedy the housing issue were made in the interwar period with the development of the second Garden City at Welwyn and the London County Council out of county estates.

This thesis focuses on the development of community at the three developments chosen as case studies: Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire and the Becontree Estate in Essex and the St. Helier Estate in Surrey. Key points of analysis were identified and investigated using a range of sources in order to come to a just conclusion. It was found that community values developed substantially over the early stages of growth, not without some examples of friction between existing and new residents. The development of public facilities such as churches, schools, public houses, community centres aided the progression of core community values through all three case studies. The development of these community hubs supported the progression of civic cohesion and pride, thus making the residents feel comfortable in their new surroundings and part of something bigger than themselves.

These interwar developments paved the way for the post war New Towns and also international attempts at modernised towns and Garden Cities, with the latter making a twentieth century resurgence. Yet despite their profound legacy, it was found that dormitory town status was inevitable. Lack of employment for all drove residents to the cities, in the circumstances of all three case studies: London.

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List of Abbreviations

E.C.C.	Essex County Council
E.E.C	Essex Education Committee
G.L.R.O.	Greater London Record Office
H.C.	House of Commons
L.B.B.D.	London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
L.B.M.	London Borough of Merton
L.B.S.	London Borough of Sutton
L.C.C.	London County Council
L.G.C.	Letchworth Garden City
L.M.A.	London Metropolitan Archives
L.M.S.	London, Midland and Scottish Railway
L.N.E.R.	The London and North Eastern Railway
S.C.C.	Surrey County Council
U.D.	Urban District
U.D.C.	Urban District Council
W.G.C	Welwyn Garden City

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Introduction

A reform in housing was the goal of many in the inter-war period; sympathetic campaigners eager to repay the service of returning war heroes, politicians wishing to avert a large scale social upheaval and revolutionary idealists challenging the current situation. Andrzej Olechnowicz categorises these groups as reactionaries, reformers and ruralists, yet the divisions are not as easily defined.¹ All factions wanted to alleviate the housing problem which was re-exposed by crippling ill health preventing a significant number of men reaching the front, but had vastly different reasons for doing so. The impetus was undeniable from the 23rd November 1918 onward, when David Lloyd George, a premier at the peak of his powers declared that the nation's task was to 'make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in' to an audience of thousands in Wolverhampton.² Within days the speech was prominently published in its entirety in the national press, and the paraphrased 'Homes fit for Heroes' mantra swept the hearts and minds of the sympathetic British populace. Many felt indebted to the thousands whose self-sacrifice resulted in the greater good of their country. Yet, in a time of large scale demobilisation, it was thought ill-fitting for the hero to return to his outdated, sub-standard home. Lloyd George, a skilled and calculated orator, likened this return to that of Rome, where returning legionnaires were gifted a parcel of land to call their own, the key to prosperity and a good standard of living.³ Indeed, it can be said that little had changed; a good standard of living was determined by the ideas of place, and place-making.

Defining and Measuring Community

The word community, and the ideas that accompany it, is used throughout this study. It is therefore imperative it is defined as soon as possible. The dictionary definition of the term is

¹ Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing in England Between the Wars: The Becontree Estate* (Oxford, 1997), p.1.

² 'Mr Lloyd George on his Task', *The Times*, Monday 25th November 1918, p.13.

³ *The Times*, 25th November 1918, p.13.

accepted as a group of people who either live in the same area, share a particular characteristic, or both. In terms of this study the term ‘community’, and indeed the analysis of its development and completeness, is loosely used in this way. It is evident when writing about the ‘Becontree community’, as an example, that these people are living in the same place – a large social housing development in Essex. What is most interesting given the nature of this study is how the community began cohering, and the external catalysts that helped this cohesion during the formative years of the three case studies.

The success of community is hard to gauge for the outsider looking in, thus it is vital to immerse oneself in primary material – diaries, memoirs, reminiscences, oral histories – to fully comprehend. It is hoped that the accomplishment of community values is to be measured predominantly on resident’s stories, for it is they who give the most honest account of life in the interwar developments. Factors to be measured against include resident participation, happiness as well as inclusivity, belonging and cohesion. The prime case of the final factors would be those who self-identify as someone from St. Helier, for example, rather than someone from Lewisham living in St. Helier.

Structure and Aims

As part of the analysis into this period of housing reform in Britain, three case studies have been identified as important progressions in terms of legislation, planning and design. Naturally, one must assess the pre-1919 housing situation to fully comprehend the changes made during the eleven years of inter-war development and regeneration. This will come in the form of a brief chapter analysing the gradual progression in the period, stemming from the work of the late Victorian philanthropists such as Charles Booth, through the foundations of Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City Movement and the first incarnation of their principles at

Letchworth, ending with analysis of the pre-war work of the L.C.C. who were instrumental in the naissance of the inter-war cottage estates – the archetypal ‘Homes fit for Heroes’.

This chapter will be followed by three case studies, chronologically assessed and analysed starting with Welwyn Garden City (W.G.C.) continuing with the Becontree Estate and ending at the St. Helier Estate. In research, three distinct themes have emerged regarding the development of community in biographies, primary and secondary sources; employment, education and transportation. Without these three key amenities, it can be said that a development, thus the community that would be established there would be incomplete, and must be analysed in order to conclude upon the successfulness of inter-war development. W.G.C. was the second, and perhaps last, true Garden City built in the twentieth century, building upon the successfully implemented ideologies found at nearby L.G.C. Of the three case studies, it is the development here which is the best known, perhaps due to the constant recycling of the term ‘Garden City’ in common parlance. Yet, it was often looked to as the benchmark for housing advancement, with its generous use of open spaces promoting the health and wellbeing of its’ population, developing on Howard’s ideas of ‘town-country’, the perfect amalgamation of city and countryside living. On the surface, life seemed very inviting at W.G.C., with affordable homes available for those earning reasonable wages, quick connection to the capital, and businesses attracted as a result. Community life and the resident’s sense of place and civic pride were bolstered by the establishment of a wide variety of societies and clubs, ranging from football and hockey to amateur dramatics.

A clear trajectory can be followed to the development of the Becontree Estate, the largest municipal housing estate in the world at the time of its’ construction. The architect to the L.C.C., George Topham Forrest had picked up on the successes of the Garden City principles, implementing some in the planning of what was to be the largest housing project of his career. Open spaces were something that were also utilised at Becontree, evident in the

architects' plans of the site, with large tracts of farmland being transformed into open spaces for the enjoyment of residents. Indeed, many early tenants saw Becontree as the countryside, despite the close proximity to the inner city areas they had relocated from. In contrast to W.G.C., Becontree was one of the first council housing schemes built using government funding under the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919, the direct result of the Homes fit for Heroes campaign. Thus the budget would have been limited in comparison to the Garden Cities, which were publically funded by the selling of shares to investors. The challenge for the L.C.C.'s planners was to create a development that was both befitting of future tenants and financially viable, even more so after the overspending of Minister for Health, Christopher Addison, who significantly depleted the available budget in a short time. Despite numerous issues in the earliest stages of development, especially the disputes between the L.C.C. and E.C.C. as to who would provide for the residents, Becontree was, and still is, one of the most significant inter-war schemes.

The final case study and further manifestation of the Homes fit for Heroes legacy is the St. Helier Estate, Surrey, a smaller scale cottage estate in a similar style as Becontree. It was also planned by Forrest, the architect responsible for Becontree, as evidenced in the similarities between the two. Yet, a succession of Housing and Town Planning legislation was passed between the construction of both, and the L.C.C. had learnt a great deal in the same time period. Thus, it could be said that St. Helier was the most highly developed inter-war building scheme as it had built upon the foundations of both Becontree and Welwyn before it. Yet, in contrast to Becontree, both the Homes fit for Heroes campaign and the Garden Cities influences were far more apparent; with specific mentioning of open spaces in official literature rather than subtly in plans, and the construction of Haig Homes specifically designated for disabled ex-soldiers and their families.

This study intends to investigate the growth and completeness of community in these three developments, both naturally and through provisions set out by the planners. In this case, community refers to the social organisation and interaction between people and their environment. This will be contrasted against the notion of a dormitory town, a settlement where the majority of residents commute to a larger town or city for work, where a community would struggle to establish.

Historiography

Much has been written about the development of housing in the twentieth century with Garden Cities and the post-war Abercrombie Plan and subsequent New Town boom being prevalent subjects among writers.⁴ While secondary analysis is difficult to identify, a wealth of material was written contemporaneously with the interwar housing regeneration. However, in most cases, the writer highlights the shortcomings of previous legislation in order to contrast them with the more up to date Housing and Town Planning Act (1919). One such writer, C.M Lloyd, is adamant that the housing problem had been evident for merely two generations, and is quick to identify the deficiencies in pre-1919 legislation. The Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890), promised a great deal, but ultimately come up short with authorities being reluctant to use powers bestowed upon them. Lloyd continues, concluding that the Act of 1909 fell below the public expectation in the town and the country, with the war period signalling a period of abrupt cessation.⁵ Indeed, the chroniclers of the L.C.C. are

⁴ Publications include, in no order of precedence: Mervyn Miller, *English Garden Cities: An Introduction* (Swindon, 2010); Maurice de Soissons, *Welwyn Garden City: A Town Designed For Healthy Living* (Cambridge, 1988); Meryl Aldridge, *British New Towns: A Programme Without a Policy* (London, 1978); Anthony Alexander, *Britain's New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities* (London and New York, 2009); Ken Young and Patricia L. Garside, *Metropolitan London: Politics and Urban Change, 1837 – 1981* (London, 1982); David Thomas, *London's Green Belt* (London, 1970).

⁵ C.M. Lloyd, *Housing (Fabian Tract No.193)* (Westminster, London, 1920), p.1.

no different, highlighting the faults of their predecessors, the M.B.W., who left much unfinished in the transitional period between the two distinct London governing bodies.⁶

The key source with regards to the Garden Cities movement is the book that gave it life, Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. In it Howard examines, in depth, the benefits and problems of living in urban and rural settings, and proposed a welcome alternative to the housing issue, blending the best of both – the 'Town-Country'. The Garden Cities have never lost the appeal originally attached to them during the first half of the twentieth century, with garden city ideologies as popular as ever. As such, the topic continually regenerates itself in historiography. Many writers examine the importance of the Garden Cities retrospectively, focusing on their legacies as much as their successes and shortcomings. Stanley Buder, analyses the international legacies of the Garden Cities, concluding that developments on the continent followed the successful British model, of which Garden Cities were the early driving force.⁷

In contrast, less has been written in response to the L.C.C.'s inter-war developments, which is both irregular and surprising given the significance to the period. The topic of L.C.C. town planning, community building and dispersion policy, however, is discussed at length in the Andrew Saint edited collection *Politics and the People of London: The London County Council 1889-1965*, published in 1989. The collection is arguably the finest written about L.C.C. as it analyses the impact of policy on the people, as well as its frequent shortcomings and poor decision making. This is in stark contrast to the official L.C.C. publications, and those written by former members, which focus mainly on the political side of the council, and ignore deficiencies in favour overzealous claims.

⁶ L.C.C., *London Housing* (Westminster, London, 1937), p.4.

⁷ Stanley Buder, *Visionaries & Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community* (Oxford, 1990), pp.200-201.

The two L.C.C. case studies two contemporary surveys, two near-contemporary interpretations and reminiscence collections published in the late twentieth century. Becontree receives the majority of the attention, albeit ‘a few pages each in Burnett, Jackson and Swenarton’.⁸ Nonetheless, there are four books analysing Becontree in some detail. The first, *Becontree and Dagenham: the Story of the Growth of a Housing Estate* written by Terence Young in 1934 deals with the growth of the still fledgling estate, detailing the steady transition of the estate and its environs from Essex farmland to ‘London in the country’. Young gives the first insight into estate life, yet admits that his study is in essence flawed from the outset as much changed on the estate between the start of his survey in 1931 to the publication of his work in 1934.⁹ Young sets out strong foundations which are then built upon by Peter Wilmott in his aptly titled *The Evolution of a Community*. Wilmott’s work also takes the form of a survey, but being written forty years after the estates conception, holds clear advantages over that of Young. The relative stability of residents allowed Wilmott to fully address questions of community development, something that would have been a fruitless exercise for Young. Wilmott acknowledges the advantages of time, allowing him to converse with the first generation of residents who had lived on the estate since birth.¹⁰ This would have allowed him to gain opinions of the estate from the people that arguably knew it the best, unshaped by experiences of living elsewhere. The work of Young and Wilmott is, incredibly useful to this study; invaluable when coupled with the oral history recordings of residents, due to the restrictive nature of printed material.

Of the two secondary resources covering the Becontree Estate, *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars* is the most detailed in its analysis. Olechnowicz uses both the

⁸ Robert Home, ‘A Township Complete in Itself’: *A Planning History of the Becontree / Dagenham Estate* (L.B.B.D Libraries Department, 1997), p.9.

⁹ Terence Young, *Becontree and Dagenham: The Story of the Growth of a Housing Estate* (The Pilgrim Trust, London, 1934), p.96.

¹⁰ Peter Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community: A Study of the Dagenham Estate after Forty Years* (London, 1963), p.ix.

aforementioned surveys as reference points as well as a wide variety of primary and archival sources. *Working-Class Housing* was published in 1997, the same year as the work of Robert Home, making these sources the most up to date, and also affording thirty and sixty years of progress on the work of Wilmott and Young respectively. Olechnowicz seeks to examine why the estate was a social failure, highlighting the joint jurisdictions and Ministry of Health errors as early problems, and concluding that residents sought to improve their class by moving to mixed class out of county estates resulting in confused class identities.¹¹

Home lectured on town planning in the School of Surveying at the University of East London. When he moved to its' Barking campus, to the south east of the estate, an interest in the area developed. Home takes up on the phrase 'a township more or less complete in itself', made popular by the L.C.C., as the focal point of his analysis. Home too makes frequent reference to his predecessors, attempting to pick up where Wilmott left off thirty years previously with hindsight of the 'new planning history approach', in a similar manner to his contemporary, Olechnowicz.¹² Home analyses the importance of the 'Homes fit for Heroes', with remark to the seldom mentioned argument that the campaign came about as a cure for the spread of Bolshevism, which was a legitimate threat in Britain post-1917. Home's chief argument is that Becontree was a large scale social experiment with an overarching paternalistic feel to it, and a practical lesson in how not to relocate large numbers of people. Interestingly, Home concludes that Becontree can be justified in the claim of being the first 'new town' in England, a title perhaps more accurately bestowed on Letchworth.¹³

Although Home is critical of other writers and their lack of interest in the inter-war L.C.C. estates, their work provides wider historical debate to engage with. As a result, this thesis, despite its analysis of community, has the ability to use and engage with debate surrounding

¹¹ Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing*, pp.218-237.

¹² Home, 'A Township Complete in Itself', p.9.

¹³ Home, 'A Township Complete in Itself', p.47.

politics, architecture, town planning and urban design. Mark Swenarton is responsible for some of the most rigorous research on the 'Homes fit for Heroes' campaign in his 1981 work of the same name. Indeed, a reviewer of Swenarton notes that the homes in question are relegated to a footnote to the Garden Cities in the realm of architectural history, into which the writer seemingly identifies, yet is heralded in social history as incredibly significant; one in twenty families live on such a housing development.¹⁴ The same can be said of John Burnett, who deliberately set out to construct a social study into housing. Although his work covers a large time frame, 1815-1970, Burnett devotes a sizeable chapter to the study of inter-war housing developments. Burnett argues that the conclusion of the First World War raised great questions of universal suffrage and the reform of education among other themes, yet David Lloyd George and the coalition ultimately channelled the majority of their efforts into a rejuvenated housing policy.¹⁵ Perhaps of greatest use to this study, however, is Burnett's secondary analysis of tenants' views published as a part of the *Enquiry Into People's Homes* just before the outbreak of the Second World War. The work of Alan Jackson, the last writer Home is disapproving of, is of much use to this study. Jackson himself was part of the suburban expansion in London, but argued against the notion of 'soulless suburbs' in his research. Jackson is unassuming; even dismissive of his own work, concluding 'perhaps it breaks some new ground'.¹⁶ Yet, of all the aforementioned writers, Jackson focuses the most on the L.C.C.'s cottage estates. Although Jackson heads a section on the Becontree as 'a town without work or transport', he argues that it had no community problems, mainly due to the fact the majority of residents were working-class, and originated from similar areas.¹⁷

¹⁴ Peter Campbell, 'A Better Life', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (2nd April 1981), pp.10-11.

¹⁵ John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970* (London, 1980), p.215.

¹⁶ Alan A. Jackson, *Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport, 1900 – 39* (Chatham, Kent, 1973), p.15-16.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Semi-Detached London*, p.291, p.297.

The importance of historians to the wider housing debate, however, is something that cannot be overlooked. Mark Clapson argues that social historians play a pivotal role in debates surrounding community, corroborating the earlier research of Jackson. Clapson also concludes that migrations to new towns and settlements are mainly working-class ones, with challenges to social equilibrium the highest during the 1980s and 1990s; disproving that the friction between the working-class migrants and original residents in the 1930s, was far from the worst seen during the twentieth century.¹⁸

Such is the intricate nature of a community, it is not something that can be easily understood by an outsider looking in, but is something best appreciated by an insider looking around. Thus, it is important for the scholar of social history to immerse themselves in a wide range of primary, and indeed secondary, sources. Yet, the gap in historiography is noticeable for any researcher of the period, with an apparent jump from the Garden Cities to the post-war in written material. It is hoped that this dissertation will help to fill the gap, with in depth analysis of the interwar housing developments and the communities that grew there.

¹⁸ Mark Clapson, *Invincible green suburbs, brave new towns* (Manchester, 1998), pp.196-199.

Chapter 1

London Living Conditions Pre-1919

Living conditions in London, like the vast majority of British cities, before the outbreak of the First World War were poor for the working-classes. Conditions had been recognised as such since the Victorian period, but the coming of ‘the war to end all wars’ served as a catalyst for the emergence of housing as a highly political issue and the subsequent attempts to remedy the problem. Indeed, housing had come under close scrutiny in late Victorian period; a royal commission was established to investigate housing in 1884, with the Housing of the Working Classes Act being passed a year later, with a revision in 1890. The Acts resulted in the construction of the Boundary Estate (1895-1900), heralded as the first council estate in the world, which provided for 5,380 working-class people, albeit after displacing 5,719 original residents.¹ Despite the partial success in London, C.M Lloyd argued that the Acts had limited impact due to low interest from other local authorities, as did the later Housing and Town Planning Act (1909), falling short of public expectations in both urban and rural districts.² The early nineteenth century tenement blocks, had in half a century plummeted well below accepted standards of housing, resulting in the abject squalor of the capital. Yet, the complications did not stem from the older nature of the buildings; intrinsically, the tenement blocks were still structurally sound and would have made for amicable living conditions if they were inhabited as they were designed to be. Yet, with the steadily rising population, combined with the lack of space in the central areas of London resulted in severe crowding.

A study on behalf of the Department of the Environment of the period 1861-1961 sheds light on how occupancy rates are measured, and what the accepted definition of ‘overcrowded’ is.

¹ ‘Boundary-Street Scheme’, *The Times*, Monday 5th February 1900, p.11

² Lloyd, *Housing (Fabian Tract No.193)*, p.1.

Although housing standards fluctuated in the period, any room that housed more than two people was designated as overcrowded.³ By this reasoning, the majority of those who moved to the interwar estates were living in dangerously overcrowded accommodation. Tina Belton, later of the Roehampton Estate (1920-27), had eight members of her family living in three small rooms in Paddington; an average of 2.6 persons per room.⁴ Dorothy Barton remembered her Deptford childhood before a move to Charlton, ‘the houses were very tiny and close together like a little village, we had two rooms in my uncle’s and aunt’s house ... they had two daughters ... and at one time we had great aunt Harriet there ... I don’t know where we all slept but we managed.’⁵

The London County Council

The rapidly developing legislation meant the L.C.C. were charged by the government with the task of alleviating the problem they moderately referred to as ‘the housing question’.⁶ The L.C.C. was founded in January 1889, and took control of London’s governance in March, effectively replacing the older, less democratic, Metropolitan Board of Works which had served as London’s administration since its inception in 1855.⁷ The whole of the County of London, established by the passage of County Councils Act (1888), and its ever growing population, were the responsibility of the council; housing and town planning legislation in the inter-war period extending its remit beyond the borders of the county. Indeed, the L.C.C. is anomalous among the county councils of the period, being the only one to hold primary planning authority in its administrative area; the L.C.C had held such powers since the Housing Act of 1909, whereas others were somewhat powerless until the Local Government

³ W.V Hole and M.T Poutney, *Trends in population, housing and occupancy rates 1861-1961*, (published on behalf of the Department of the Environment, London, 1971), p.1, p.5.

⁴ Antonia Rubinstein, *Just like the Country*, (London, 1991), p.11.

⁵ Rubinstein, *Just like the Country*, p.11.

⁶ Montagu H. Cox (Clerk of the Council), ‘Preface’ in L.C.C, *Housing: with particular reference to Post-War Housing Schemes*, (Westminster, London, 1928), p.3.

⁷ A. Emil Davies, *The London County Council, 1889-1937: A Historical Sketch* (The Fabian Society, London, January 1937), p.3.

Act, passed twenty years later.⁸ Contrary to the exclusive nomination of members by its predecessor, the L.C.C. triennially elected the 124 councillors, which in turn elected aldermen to serve a six year term. Vladimir Steffel praised the L.C.C. for its organisation and strong leadership in its formative years, akin to a scaled down version of parliament.⁹ Politically, members were split between the Municipal Reform Party and the Progressive Party, with the Labour Party steadily growing in power after the First World War, a fair representation of the national shift in politics.¹⁰ It was these men and women who were charged with the organisation of almost every aspect of London; the fire department, the care of the mentally ill, the management of open spaces and bridges across the Thames, and perhaps most importantly, the provision of housing for the working-classes.¹¹

London's slums: overcrowding and disease

Such was the housing situation, L.C.C. writers were compelled to analyse the origins of the word slum, settling on the German *schlamm*, usually translated as 'mud' or 'mire'.¹² The work of Harold Dyos regarding Victorian slums, however, shows it had been in common use in the English language since the early nineteenth century; slang for a room where 'low goings-on occurred', later becoming synonymous with 'rookery'.¹³ The L.C.C. were swift to denounce any potential claims that the capital was the only place stricken by slum areas, 'every city has its own peculiar slum problems depending on its social and industrial evolution, and London is no exception to the rule'.¹⁴ Perhaps most alarmingly was the discussion of the fate of those people who were unfortunate enough to dwell in the areas

⁸ David Thomas, *London's Green Belt* (London, 1970), p.51.

⁹ R. Vladimir Steffel, 'The Slum Question: The London County Council and Decent Dwellings for the Working Classes, 1880-1914', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 5, (Winter, 1973), pp.314-325.

¹⁰ London based political organisations aligned to the Conservative and Liberal Parties respectively.

¹¹ 'The London County Council: What it Is', *LSE Selected Pamphlets* (1895), p.2.

¹² L.C.C., *London Housing*, (Westminster, London, 1937), p.13.

¹³ Harold Dyos, 'The Slums of Victorian London', in David Cannadine and David Reeder (eds.), *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban History by H.J. Dyos* (Cambridge, 1982) pp.129-153.

¹⁴ L.C.C., *London Housing*, (1937), p.13.

designated as 'slums'. Comparisons with the spread of the plagues of the early modern period were made when examining the spread of disease in contemporary London. Of seemingly special mention for the L.C.C. chroniclers was pulmonary tuberculosis, which was rampant during the first half of the twentieth century.

In oral histories, many future tenants of the inter-war cottage estates share terrible recollections of disease afflicting someone close to them, reiterating the L.C.C.'s rhetoric. Tina Belton, of Roehampton, recalled the main reason for her family's move from Paddington, 'we had to find accommodation because of my father's health; he had tuberculosis'.¹⁵ Vera Andrews recalled the health benefits of a move away from the crowded streets of London, 'mother had bronchitis and had been advised to move from North London to Downham because of the air, which at the time was considered to be good.'¹⁶ Crippling disease was by far the worst part of everyday life for the people of London, yet other less deadly pests plagued them regularly. George Herbert recollected, in his self-published memoir, the infestation of bugs in his family's overcrowded Whitechapel home that had to be removed from the double beds on a regular basis and his frequent battles with fleas and lice in his hair.¹⁷

The L.C.C.'s early response

It is clear to see that in this period the connection between the spread of disease and deficient living conditions was not only made, but also widely understood. Yet, it must be examined as to why it took the widespread destruction and high death tolls of the First World War to bring the plight of these 'slum' inhabitants to the public consciousness. It must, however be stressed that by the end of the war the housing issue was nothing new or out of the ordinary;

¹⁵ Rubinstein, *Just like the Country*, p.11.

¹⁶ Rubinstein, *Just like the Country*, p.11.

¹⁷ George Herbert, *A Very Lucky Life*, (Independently published, 1988), p.2.

as an example, the L.C.C.'s predecessors had embarked on 22 schemes between 1856 and 1889, resulting in the demolition of 7,200 insanitary homes.¹⁸ Literature contemporary to the L.C.C.'s inter-war building developments highlight the Boer War (October 1899 – May 1902) as a precedent in terms of a catalyst for change. The anonymous pamphlet *Becontree: A Short Descriptive Sketch* published in late 1922 outlines the problem and potential remedies as such:

‘After the Boer War was over, many and urgent problems were perplexing men’s minds; and not the least urgent of these was the housing problem in all our big towns and cities. The cry ‘back to the land’ had failed, and people still flocked into already sadly overcrowded areas. Public reformers of all kinds – religious, social and political – here met on a common platform, discussing what could be done.’¹⁹

As early as 1901, a letter to the editor of *The Times* lavished praise on the planners of the L.C.C. in regards to a new development in Bethnal Green, which came at a cost of £1,500,000. The writer comes to the conclusion that the new housing was without a doubt a ‘most important and necessary undertaking’.²⁰ Contrary to widespread belief, there is to an extent evidence that steps were being taken in order to alleviate the poor living conditions and subsequent ill health it caused long before 1914. Housing was a key area of debate for the government which led to the passage of a series of bills.

¹⁸ Allen Daley and B. Benjamin, ‘London as a Case Study’, *Population Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (March, 1964), pp. 249-262

¹⁹ *Becontree – a Short Descriptive Sketch* (1922), p.3 (Becontree Estate Topic Box 2 of 2, LBBDD Archives).

²⁰ ‘The Dwellings of the Working Classes’, *The Times*, Monday 25th February 1901, p.11.

Early twentieth century government legislation

Successive legislation culminating in the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1909 exponentially increased the powers of the fledgling L.C.C. in terms of compulsory purchasing for the regeneration and redevelopment of the County of London.²¹ Martin Stilwell explores the efforts of the L.C.C. between its foundation in 1889 and the outbreak of war in 1914 as part of his investigation into working-class housing. He argues that the predominant aims of the L.C.C. in this period were to vastly improve the living conditions of the working-classes, whilst keeping their rent steady, low and affordable. As an example, a two roomed tenement accommodation with all available and up to date modern conveniences could be rented for as little as five shillings weekly.²² Yet, Stilwell concludes that these initial attempts to alleviate the appalling living standards in London were somewhat unsuccessful. This, he argues, is mainly due to the small amount of people that these housing developments helped. A total of forty two housing developments were constructed in this earliest period of the twentieth century, housing a total of 94,000 people. On the surface 94,000 people being removed from impoverished, overcrowded and unsanitary areas and being transplanted into modern houses and flats seems like a remarkable achievement. Yet, this total must be weighed up against the percentage of people who were still living in wretched conditions. The population of London at the time was around the 4.5 million mark, of which a quarter had been deemed to make up the 'needy' working-classes. With only 8.35% of these 'needy' working-class people re-homed in forty two developments, Stilwell concludes that these building schemes were unsuccessful.²³ Indeed, J.A Yelling's examination of the earliest period of the L.C.C. returns a similar conclusion. Although Yelling focuses on slum clearances rather than the provision of new homes, he concludes L.C.C.'s endeavours were

²¹ Martin Stilwell, 'Housing the workers: early London County Council housing 1889-1914, *The Local Historian*, Vol. 41, No. 4, (November, 2011), pp.308-320.

²² Stilwell, 'Housing the workers', pp.310-311.

²³ Stilwell, 'Housing the workers', pp.310-311.

limited, somewhat confined to two short-lived surges of activity; 1889-1892 and 1898-1900, two distinct periods of Liberal aligned majority.²⁴

Although it can be seen that the endeavours of the L.C.C. in this early period did not completely alleviate the extensive housing and sanitation problems, it is unjust to conclude that they were unsuccessful. Practical implications – economic, logistic, geographical and spatial – would have meant that a scheme that might possibly re-house a ‘needy’ working-class population of approximately 1,125,000 Londoners was virtually impossible. Yet, these developments can be seen as immeasurable steps in the right direction for the L.C.C. and their town planners, which were prematurely halted due to the outbreak of the First World War. This untimely halt was, however, to be expected; after all a war time government’s budget has more pressing issues at hand.

Homes fit for Heroes: David Lloyd George politicises housing once more

Nevertheless, when armistice was declared in 1918, the peacetime economy steadily re-emerged. Housing, again, came to the fore of public consciousness, with many willing to point out the flaws in the British housing system and how the issues could be remedied, in the hope that the nation would be rid of its ‘C3’ classification as soon as possible.²⁵ Once the post war settlements had been agreed on, it can be argued that the government would be able to turn its full attention to the issues it had somewhat neglected during the four years of conflict. John Burnett argues that the end of the First World War could well have paved the way for a diverse range of changes; expectation had been raised in regards to the emancipation of women, reforms in education or a growth of national insurance. Burnett concludes, however, that the government ‘bent’ itself to prioritise its greatest efforts in town planning and housing

²⁴ J.A Yelling, ‘L.C.C. Slum Clearance Policies’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 7, No. 3, (1982) pp.292-303.

²⁵ The term ‘C3’ came to prominence in everyday parlance during this period to describe the men that were almost of no use to the Armed Forces; this was usually due to poor health, seen as a direct result of his home. It originally came from a War Office manual *Registration and Recruiting* (1916).

reform.²⁶ Housing – its deficiencies, its reform and its regeneration – would promptly become a major political issue.

However, it may not have been predicted just how far up the political hierarchy the issue of housing reform would reach. If unsuccessful it may have stayed at a local level, with urban district councils or perhaps county councils petitioned by its inhabitants. If moderately successful perhaps it may have been taken to the House of Commons by the local Member of Parliament, possibly even be raised in a house debate. Unbeknown to many, however, the calls for housing reform were to come directly from the Prime Minister himself, David Lloyd George; in itself a testament to its paramount importance for the working-class population and to a further extent, the whole nation.

The highly politicised crusade for housing reform was soon to be given a name – ‘Homes fit for Heroes’. It came from a passionate and heartfelt speech delivered by Lloyd George in the predominantly working-class Wolverhampton on 23 November 1918. Earlier in the day Lloyd George had been awarded the Freedom of Wolverhampton, and he seemed to use his newly found rapport with the people of the borough to push his ideas of housing reform. As he stood in front of the two thousand strong crowd that had gathered to hear him speak he resolutely asked them ‘what is our task?’ He continued, answering his own rhetoric emphatically ‘to make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in!’ *The Times* correspondent present on the day recorded the rapturous applause from the masses the greeted Lloyd George’s articulate delivery.²⁷ William McElwee highlights Lloyd George’s tireless use of metaphor as a strategy of his public engagement, especially his conclusion that ‘inhuman conditions and wretchedness must surrender like the German fleet’.²⁸ The speech was transcribed and widely disseminated throughout the media during the following week, thus

²⁶ John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1970*, (Newton Abbot, Devon, 1978), p.215.

²⁷ ‘Mr Lloyd George on his task’, *The Times*, Monday 25th November 1918, p.13.

²⁸ William McElwee, *Britain’s Locust Years: 1918-1940* (London, 1962), pp.49-50.

attesting to its importance. Another journalist with *The Times* came to the conclusion that the main point to be taken from the Prime Minister's speech was that the congested and outdated housing was no place for the men that had served the country with distinction during the First World War, and arguably won it for Britain.²⁹ It must be emphasised that while it was important to commemorate and venerate the hundreds of thousands of men that had made the ultimate sacrifice 'for King and Country', it would not have been fair to forget those who were eager to join the fight, but were turned away as a result of their incapacitating poor health.

The significance of Lloyd George's timing cannot be neglected. His speech came twelve short days after the armistice was agreed. It seemed as though Lloyd George was enthusiastic to make up for any lost time, reforming housing before it was too late; after all if the heroes he personified were sent back to squalid accommodation, their chances of rehabilitation would have been very slim.

General Election, 1918

However, his Wolverhampton speech was an integral part of the campaign for re-election in the so-called coupon election of December 1918. Before this, the government had stagnated for eight years due to the First World War. Although contemporaries called this period 'the most momentous in our political history', it can be said that the upcoming election was a chance to start afresh.³⁰ Questions arise as to whether Lloyd George was politicising the regeneration of housing for just reasons, or purely to garner more votes the following month. It would have been imperative for him to be seen as reaching out to the people of Britain on a personal level, and striking a chord with as many of those who were also pushing for housing

²⁹ 'Prime Minister on the issues, a fit country for heroes', *The Times*, Monday 25th November 1918, p.9.

³⁰ 'The Political Year', *The Times*, Wednesday 1st January 1919, p.3.

reform as possible. In theory, a well-orchestrated election campaign, combined with a self-styled cult of personality would be key to success.

Fortunately for Lloyd George, he was perceived to have had both in abundance, and had steadily built power throughout the wartime years. Indeed, many highlight the years immediately after the war as the zenith of his political career.³¹ The General Election of 1918 was an extremely successful one for the Coalition government returned with a majority of 262 seats, winning 484 seats from a possible total of 708.³² It is worth noting that two thirds of the Borough of Wolverhampton constituencies returned Coalition MPs, while the third returned one of the twenty six non-Coalition Liberals.³³ David Lloyd George was comfortably re-elected to the House of Commons as the member for Carnarvon Borough, achieving victory in a ‘freak contest’ with an estimated 10,000 votes to spare.³⁴ It was almost as though the electorate were issuing Lloyd George with, to an extent, a personal endorsement as gratitude for being the man that successfully led the country through one of the most turbulent times in recent history.³⁵ Kenneth O. Morgan reiterates this claim, concluding that Lloyd George was at the forefront of public consciousness, widely appreciated as he was, in their eyes, the man that had won the war.³⁶ The Prime Minister’s power was at its apex, yet there was seemingly still room for it to further expand.

Housing as a perennial royal issue

Eventually, the housing issue gained so much momentum that King George V was eager to pass his judgement on the matter. *The Times* reported that the royal interest in the housing problem was emphasised with a speech at Buckingham Palace, in front of a crowd of two

³¹ Chris Wrigley, *Lloyd George* (Oxford, 1992), p.94.

³² ‘General Election 1918 – Chart of the Polls’, *The Times*, Tuesday 31st December 1918, p.3.

³³ *The Times*, 31st December 1918, p.3.

³⁴ *The Times*, Wednesday 1st January 1919, p.3.

³⁵ Wrigley, *Lloyd George*, p.94.

³⁶ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Lloyd George* (London, 1974), pp.130-131.

hundred people, in April 1919.³⁷ In his speech the King came to the same conclusion that many contemporary commentators did, ‘the housing problem is not a new problem, it is an old problem that has been aggravated by the last five years of war, and which the forced neglect of those five grim years has rendered so acute as to constitute a grave danger if it is not promptly and energetically attacked’.³⁸ His emotive language is testament to the extent of the problem which was as yet to be tackled; he moves from a reminiscence of war to using the phrase ‘energetically attacked’, perhaps giving the impression that the housing deficiency is as much of an enemy as the defeated Germany, and should be treated as such. As he continues, it becomes evident that housing was a perennial royal concern during the first quarter of the twentieth century. He paraphrases the words of his ‘dear father’, Edward VII, on the matter some twenty years previous; ‘there is no question at present of greater social importance than the housing of the working-classes’.³⁹ His fond recollection of his father’s words begs the question – if the housing issue was of such great importance in c.1899, as reinforced by contemporary accounts, why did it take twenty years and a devastating global conflict to highlight the fact of the matter?⁴⁰

Although the housing problem had been evident for a long time, the powerfully emotive nature of repaying heroes of the First World War was arguably the strongest supported campaign for its regeneration. It is clear that in the early interwar period ‘Homes fit for Heroes’ was the main driving force behind government funded regeneration, and paramount in the shaping of housing policy. In his study of housing between 1880 and 1914, Vladimir Steffel concluded that to be successful, especially in the later period, legislation passed must be compulsory rather than permissive.⁴¹ This was effectively manifested in the passage of the

³⁷ ‘Homes for the People, the King on True Housing’, *The Times*, Saturday 12th April 1919, p.12.

³⁸ *The Times*, 12th April 1919, p.12.

³⁹ *The Times*, 12th April 1919, p.12.

⁴⁰ See Introduction, footnotes 6 and 7.

⁴¹ Vladimir Steffel, ‘The Slum Question’, p.315.

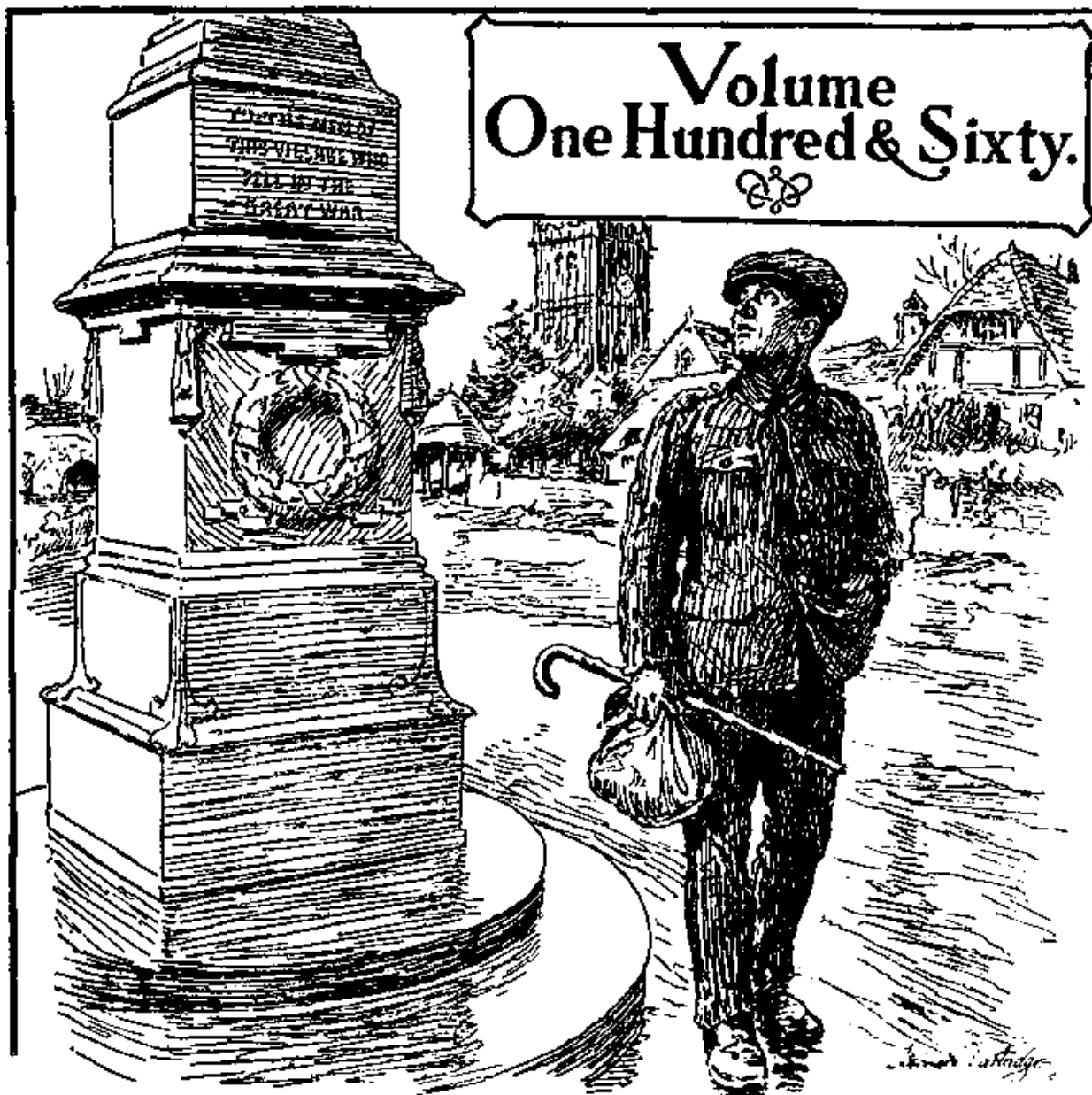
Addison Act, which charged, as well as legally bound, the L.C.C. to reform London's housing. In turn, the L.C.C. enacted compulsory purchase orders on land identified for their landmark cottage estates. Yet, private enterprise was also pivotal in shaping the way Britain addressed housing. Steffel discusses the changing attitudes of the wealthier classes, who realised that the late Victorian philanthropy was an 'inadequate solution for the housing problem'.⁴² The most prominent private enterprise of the period was that of the Welwyn Garden City Company, continuing the principles of Ebenezer Howard and the first Garden City of Letchworth in Hertfordshire.

⁴² Steffel, 'The Slum Question', p.315.



Figure 1: David Lloyd George

Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/34/LloydGeorge.jpg>



The dead remembered—the living forgotten.

Figure 2: 'The dead remembered - the living forgotten', Punch illustration showing the plight of returning soldiers (1921)

Source: Punch, Wednesday 5th January 1921, p.1

Chapter 2

‘A town designed for healthy living and industry’: Welwyn Garden City

Welwyn Garden City (W.G.C.), the second development to bear the ‘Garden City’ name, holds an important place in the regeneration of housing after the First World War. Welwyn, like Letchworth before it in 1903, were built on the ideologies of Ebenezer Howard as outlined in his seminal work, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898). Howard had a visualisation of social reform. As such, Howard sought to find an alternative way of town planning, which would stop the deplorable idea that ‘people should stream into the already over-crowded cities’.¹ In his work, Howard also showed how an all-important balance could be found between urban and rural living, with a residential area with a civic hub would be supported by industrial areas on the settlement’s hinterlands.²

The Garden City idea, arguably radical for its time, proved popular with the empathetic late Victorian and early Edwardian public and the publication, and indeed the principles it contained, sold well. As David Schuyler argues, it gave ‘an alternative to the present, an idyllic place that stood in stark juxtaposition to living and working conditions in London’.³ The inevitable profit for the publishers provoked a substantial reprint and rebrand of Howard’s original material in 1902 resulting in the more familiar title of *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. David Thomas explains many principles were in fact brought in from other schemes, but it is clear to see Howard was using them to perfect his ideas.⁴ Indeed, Howard, never claimed his plans were unique, even the phrase ‘Garden Cities’ was not an original concept.⁵

¹ Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (F.J. Osborn ed.) (London, 1965), p.42.

² Sarah Rutherford, *Garden Cities and Suburbs* (New York, 2014), p.5.

³ David Schuyler, ‘Introduction’ in Kermit C. Parsons & David Schuyler (eds.), *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard* (Baltimore, Maryland, 2002), pp.1-13.

⁴ Thomas, *London’s Green Belt*, p.44.

⁵ William Ashworth, *The Genesis of Modern British Town Planning: A Study in Economic and Social History of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1954), p.141 cited in Thomas, *London’s Green Belt*, p.44.

Yet, Thomas has identified Howard's work as important not for its originality, but for its comprehensive and highly achievable model for an efficient city development; as such, he can be seen as synthesising the work of successful planners, and filtering out their deficiencies to produce a perfect, albeit theoretical, model.⁶

For the purposes of this study W.G.C. and the Garden Cities ideologies will be used as the point of comparison. The development was arguably at the forefront of town planning at the beginning of the interwar period, and had learned from the development of the first Garden City at Letchworth (L.G.C.). Indeed, both W.G.C. and the L.C.C. estates came as a result of campaigning. Frederic Osborn, a man much in the same mould as Howard, lobbied the government for the creation of the second Garden City, and, at the other end of the spectrum, David Lloyd George was a personal champion of the 'Homes fit for Heroes' campaign. There were various links between the L.C.C. and the key figures in the Garden Cities movement. Howard himself had worked for a while as a shorthand reporter covering the meetings of the council, and several prominent L.C.C. members also belonged to the Garden City Association. T.H.W. Idris, a member from St. Pancras, moved a portion of his mineral water business from Camden Town to L.G.C., such was his faith in urban dispersal and the movement.⁷ Furthermore, W.G.C., as aforementioned is the most prevalent in historiography as it is frequently viewed as the pinnacle of town planning in the period. Thus it can serve as an effective point of comparison for the two contemporary L.C.C. estates that in contrast receive much less attention in academic study.

⁶ Thomas, *London's Green Belt*, p.44.

⁷ Andrew Saint, 'Spread the People: The L.C.C.'s Dispersal Policy, 1889-1965', in Andrew Saint (ed.), *Politics and the People of London: The London County Council 1889-1965* (London and Ronceverte, 1989) pp.215-237.

Howard's influences: Lever and Cadbury

Among Howard's most distinguished contemporaries were William Lever, who pushed for a better standard of accommodation, for his soap factory employees at Port Sunlight as early as 1888, and renowned confectioner George Cadbury who worked on the design for the model village at Bournville in the early 1890s. Both would have fallen under Howard's definition of 'town-country', a successful mix of urban and rural living. Guy R. Williams traces the origins of the open, green spaces to the middle of the nineteenth century, identifying the St. Margaret's area of Twickenham as the first 'garden suburb', with its 'well-treed residential area, laid out in an admirable way, with curved roads and three carefully maintained pleasure grounds'.⁸ Williams almost seemed to demand recognition for the area, which had already reached a state of maturity by the time the ideas of praise-laden Letchworth and Welwyn were conceived. However, it is of note that garden suburbs are not Garden Cities. The former are merely well planned, open layout suburbs of existing urban areas, in this case Twickenham, with no degree of separation. A survey conducted by the Advertising Service Guild in 1943, however, goes back to the creation of New Lanark in 1800. It was the first development of its kind to attempt to provide healthy, open surroundings.⁹ Thus, the Garden City ideal had deep-rooted precedents.

Yet, it was the developments of Bournville and Port Sunlight that were to play a large role in the formative years of the Garden City Association. Souvenir tickets were sold to attendees of a prestigious, London-based meeting in 1902 at a price a shilling each, and were designed to depict scenes from both developments; such was the reverence of them by the Association's earliest leaders.¹⁰ It may have been Cadbury's development that most appealed to Howard

⁸ See F.J Osborn, 'Preface' in Howard, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (Osborn ed.), pp.9-28; see also Guy R. Williams, *London in the Country: The Growth of Suburbia* (London, 1975), p.159.

⁹ The Advertising Service Guild, *An Inquiry into People's Homes* (Plaistow, London, 1943), p.27.

¹⁰ 'Garden City Association – Important Meet', *The Times*, Saturday 31st May 1902, p.10.

and the Association, as it was budgeted for effectively, in stark contrast to Port Sunlight, which the architect Arthur M. Edwards regarded as an example of wealthy, over exuberant, paternalism.¹¹ Indeed, it was Cadbury and his confectionary company that played host to three hundred delegates of a Garden City Association conference in late 1901; showcasing the model village to potential investors. As such, Cadbury spoke to the convened delegation of the importance of a harmony between business and the economy of the village, providing income for the investment in more Garden Cities for the people by the trustees. Cadbury predicted that said income would reach £1m a year within the next one hundred and fifty years, of which one-thirtieth should be invested in industry powered by electricity, as not to blemish the natural splendour with large chimneys and pollutant bi-products.¹² It was at this conference that the practicalities of building a Garden City were discussed at length. The engineer, architect and co-writer of the influential *The Art of Building a Home* (1901), Raymond Unwin fielded questions of a more practical nature, as reported in *The Times*:

‘Mr Raymond Unwin dealt with the question of the building of houses in the Garden City. He said the houses must be designed so as to give light, air, and a cheerful outlook. The first required that every house must turn its face to the sun. No house could therefore face northward. The second required that on two sides of each house there should be open-air spaces large enough to be always fresh and sweet; and the third required that these spaces should offer something more for outlook than the dismal monotony of a narrow street’.¹³

¹¹ Arthur M. Edwards, *The design of suburbia: a critical study in environmental history* (London, 1981), p.82.

¹² ‘The Housing Question’, *The Times*, Monday 23rd September 1901, p.9.

¹³ ‘The Housing Question’, *The Times*, p.9.

The growth of the Garden Cities Association

The movement gained some sustained momentum, with people willing to invest rising and membership swiftly expanding on a yearly basis. The Association's fourth annual report reported the growth in membership figures from a lowly 13 in 1899, 325 in 1900, 530 in 1901 through to an astounding 1,800 in 1902.¹⁴ Such was the popularity of the movement, towns that saw themselves as in line with the Garden City ideal were eager to identify themselves as such. Most notable was the Merseyside coastal resort of Southport in 1903. The town was due to host an annual meeting of the prestigious British Association for the Advancement of Science, with Howard booked as a keynote speaker, and officials seemed eager to make use of the somewhat coincidental layout of Southport compared with the idealised Garden City. One such official boasted of the rich woodlands, sylvan belts and wide boulevards and of the higher class amenities including parks, botanical gardens and galleries; concluding the 'beauty of Southport ... cannot be surpassed and will serve as an object lesson to the City Garden Association [*sic.*]'.¹⁵ Thus impetus and public support were fully in place for the development of the first true Garden City, all that was lacking in this period was financial backing for the project.

Developing the Garden Cities

By the time of this conference, however, the Garden City Pioneer Company had already acquired 4,000 acres of land on which to construct their venture, reported as nearest the town of Hitchin, Hertfordshire. The land was 34 miles north of London, with its nearest transport link to the capital at Hitchin Junction, a 42 minute train journey from Kings Cross.¹⁶ The development was known as Letchworth Garden City. Yet, much had changed in terms of

¹⁴ 'Garden City Association, Fourth Annual Report', *The Times*, Tuesday 16th December 1902, p.5.

¹⁵ 'The Garden City', *The Times*, Wednesday 2nd September 1903, p.5.

¹⁶ 'News in Brief: Clyde Shipbuilding, a New Channel Steamer, the Ladies Automobile Club, the Garden City, etc.', *The Times*, Saturday 29th August 1903, p.4.

technology in the twenty year gap between the two Garden Cities. When Howard was first writing in 1898, people may have been deterred by a commute to work, yet with technological advancement it was to become a lot more tolerable. The motor car was in its infancy and the overbearing dust and smoke had disappeared on the City and South London Railway eight years earlier, replaced with a cleaner fuel: electricity.¹⁷ Although Howard saw electricity as the power source for all the machinery in his new town, he may not have predicted how transportation improvements would bring the residents closer to the capital; the urban sprawl he so wished to avoid.

Technological advancements were not the only factor different over the twenty year gap between the two Garden Cities. In 1949 the architect Stanley Gale commented on the development of the Garden City ideologies over time, mirroring the advancement of housing practices between the completion of L.G.C and the establishment of W.G.C.:

‘Although the commencement of building this town was as recent as 1920, the changes of requirements of living during the past 20 years have been substantial. In the light of experience and the changing requirements for certain particular purposes, it has been necessary to keep the plan flexible, so that each further advance in knowledge can be reflected in the development.’¹⁸

However, the Garden Cities were not explicitly designed to be isolated per se. There were to be an interconnected network, radiating from a central point, thus explaining the selection of the site near Welwyn, just over 11 miles from L.G.C. Somewhat buoyed by the initial successes Charles B. Purdom proposed the ambitious construction of a further twenty-one Garden City developments within a thirty mile radius of central London, an attempted

¹⁷ The City and South London Railway was noted as London’s first underground electric railway, it arguably set in motion the electrification of the railways in the century. See Edwards, *The design of suburbia*, p.83.

¹⁸ Stanley Gale, *Modern Housing Estates* (London, 1949), p.198.

manifestation of Howard's vision.¹⁹ This optimum distance would have allowed them to be distinct 'civic units', thus avoiding the predicted outward growth of London's sprawling metropolis.²⁰ Purdom agreed with Howard's belief that if the developments were closer to London they would be engulfed by its expansion, resulting in the destruction of the agricultural lands. If this were to happen, the damage would be irreparable 'no amount of town-planning, or arterial road construction, or preservation of open spaces will effectively mitigate that evil fate'.²¹ Purdom commented on the interest of the media, and their ability to sensationalise, 'if the reader of the newspapers were capable of believing what he read in them he would think that the whole of England was in the process of being covered in Garden Cities'.²²

Financing Welwyn

National newspapers were indeed drawn in to the narrative of the movement, especially in the build up to the announcement of Welwyn Garden City Limited's prospectus in early 1920. *The Times* was one of the most vocal news outlets voicing their support for W.G.C., publishing regular articles and open letters from executives. The company's prospectus in full was published in May 1920. Evidently, column space in such a prestigious newspaper would not have come cheaply, but the company must have hoped to make a substantial return on their initial expenditure. The prospectus announced the desired capital to be raised by the issuing of shares; £250,000, which was subsequently divided into individual shares priced at £1 each, upon which a 7% per annum rate of interest was affixed.²³ With the average labourer earning twenty-six shillings and eleven pence (just under £1 7s) and a skilled bricklayer earning forty shillings and seven pence (£2 7s) weekly in June 1920, it is highly improbable

¹⁹ Thomas, *London's Green Belt*, p.52.

²⁰ C.B Purdom 'An Introductory Chapter', C.B Purdom (ed.), *Town theory in practice* (London, 1921), pp.9-46.

²¹ Purdom, 'An Introductory Chapter' in Purdom (ed.), *Town theory in practice*, p.32.

²² Purdom, 'An Introductory Chapter', *Town theory in practice*, p.33.

²³ 'Welwyn Garden City, Limited: Prospectus', *The Times*, Monday 10th May 1920, p.18.

that the working-class family could afford to invest.²⁴ Thus, shares were almost exclusively the realm of the wealthy, who had the disposable income available to invest in the company.

International interest

Such was the early success of W.G.C., recommendations started to appear concerning the towns of the Western Front, which still bore the deep wounds of conflict. Theodore Chambers, Chairman of Welwyn Garden City Limited, urged Howard's design principles to be used in the reconstruction of towns in mainland Europe. As such, he hoped that this would 'make the shell-scarred battlefields of France and Belgium places of beauty and healthfulness'.²⁵ It was international endorsement such as this that would allow the movement the opportunity to expand its successful principles beyond the borders of Hertfordshire. A year later in 1922, whilst the development at Welwyn was making steady progress, a delegation made up of thirty-six different nations convened at Olympia for a Garden Cities conference hosted in conjunction with the Ideal Home Exhibition. Among those represented were India, Australia and Canada, the newly declared Irish Free State, the South American trio of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and the rapidly developing Asian nations; Japan and China.²⁶ The following day, *The Times* reported that the ubiquitous Chambers took to the podium once more to urge the delegates to form an comparable Garden City movement in every country; charged with building an individualised Garden City that reflected the 'national tastes and economic needs'.²⁷ If contemporaries were still ill informed enough to doubt the influence of the movement, the fact that, aside from Africa, a representative from every inhabited continent was eager to hear Howard speak and to see Welwyn, and indeed Letchworth before it, for themselves would have served as a much needed edification.

²⁴ 'Average Weekly Wages', H.C. Debate, Thursday 30th July 1925, vol. 187, cols. 671-673.

²⁵ 'Battlefield Garden Cities, Plans for Devastated Areas', *The Times*, Wednesday 23rd March 1921, p.8.

²⁶ 'World Housing Ideals, Olympia Conference', *The Times*, Wednesday 15th March 1922, p.9, see also the establishment of 'associations for the advocacy' of Howard's ideas in most of Europe and areas of the United States in Edwards, *The Design of Suburbia*, p.83.

²⁷ 'Garden Cities Everywhere', *The Times*, Thursday 16th March 1922, p.8.

Attracting residents

As is expected with a private enterprise, as soon as the homes neared completion, they were put on the market; the quicker they sold, the earlier the company could pay dividends to Welwyn's investors. As such, it would have been hoped that the potential profits would have inspired more people to invest in the company, or perhaps the same investors taking interest in any subsequent developments. This would have been a lesson learned from the First Garden City Company, which for a long time stalled in the reimbursement of its shareholders. In a review of Purdom's *The Building of Satellite Towns* the reason behind the delayed dividends was given as such, 'the revenue account was made to bear expenditure incurred for the development of the estate which should have been charged to capital account'.²⁸ Regardless, the same approach to reimbursement, and subsequent problems, could not happen at Welwyn. In the early 1920s, advertisements appeared in national newspapers on an almost weekly basis, promoting the modern facilities and the affordable, cooperative terms of purchase. One such listing breaks down the payment for a three bedroom, two sitting roomed property valued at £795; an upfront, cash down payment of £295 was expected, followed by an agreed upon annual rate, in this example £43 and 15s.²⁹ It can be assumed that such schemes could be negotiated for the lowest priced property; a two bedroom, one sitting room home priced at £625, to the largest and costliest, an opulent residence with six bedrooms and three sitting rooms priced at £1,500.³⁰

These properties and their pricing figures can be seen as a reflection on the type of people that were sought after by the company to form the new community at Welwyn. The houses which were at the lower end of the scale would have no doubt attracted the higher stratum of

²⁸ J.E.A., 'Review of *The Building of Satellite Towns* by C.B. Purdom', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. 88, No. 4 (July, 1925), pp. 620-622.

²⁹ 'Building Land and Sites, Country and Seaside: Welwyn Garden City, Herts.', *The Times*, Thursday 7th December 1922, p.23.

³⁰ 'Building Land and Sites: Welwyn Garden City, Herts', *The Times*, p.23; 'Country and Seaside (cont.): Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire', *The Times*, Friday 8th June 1922, p.23.

the working-classes, those with a steady, adequately paying profession. The somewhat lavish properties at the very highest range of the spectrum would have no doubt been designed to attend the needs of the upper echelons of society. As such, Welwyn would not become a one class community, in stark contrast to the frequently demonised slums and rookeries the early twentieth century developments intended to tackle. Yet, the stark contrast in culture which would have moved to the area – the worker and perhaps his employer – may have resulted in friction between the new residents.

The wider effect of the Garden City

The Garden City movement was not only instrumental in the regeneration of the British housing model. During a meeting of the Geographical Society surrounding the subject of ‘Railway Geography’, the assistant general manager of the newly formed L.N.E.R. spoke highly of the Garden City movement, and the positive effect the development was having on the railways.³¹ Such was this positive effect, the L.N.E.R. took the initiative, and indeed the chance to increase profits, by opening Welwyn Garden City Station in 1926, the areas’ second mainline station, to deal with the influx of new residents. Previously, Welwyn was served by a small, temporary halt on a branch line running onwards towards Luton and Dunstable; arguably vastly insufficient to meet the needs of such a development, and the community slowly establishing there.³² Despite its northerly position, this desire for expansion and substantial redevelopment of the original station was set in motion by the earliest developments of the Garden City to the south.³³ Both stations provided the residents

³¹ ‘Railways and Development of Cities’, *The Times*, Saturday 5th January 1924, p.12.

³² ‘Value of Garden Cities, Mr. Chamberlain at Welwyn’, *The Times*, Wednesday 6th October 1926, p.14.

³³ The original G.N.R. built station was renamed ‘Welwyn North’ in 1926 upon the opening of ‘Welwyn Garden City’ see ‘City News in Brief’, *The Times*, Wednesday 25th January 1922, p.15.

swift and straightforward access to London, and, indeed *vice versa* in the somewhat common event of site visits to Welwyn by national and international delegations.³⁴

Attracting businesses and employment for residents

Howard hoped that the Garden Cities, the epitome of ‘Town-Country’, would allow ‘working people to live in the country and yet be engaged in pursuits other than agricultural’.³⁵ However, this statement did not mean Howard shunned agriculture in its entirety, instead he recognised its economic importance; the producer being in such close proximity to the consumer was advantageous, saving money on high transportation rates.³⁶ Industry was still a priority, consequently, areas of land in the ‘outer ring’ of the town would be set aside for the attraction of businesses.³⁷ The first substantial business arrived in Welwyn in 1924, with the United States based Shredded Wheat Company selecting the town for their major European factory. The ubiquitous Theodore Chambers, chairman of Welwyn Garden City Limited, declared that it was not the proximity to London or abundant wheat fields in Hertfordshire that attracted the company but the ‘plan and purpose’ of Welwyn. The company and its executives, according to Chambers, spent vast sums on worker welfare, and were impressed by the development of working-class housing in the area. Yet, it must be said Chambers’ half-truths are somewhat unsubstantiated; despite the successes of the Garden Cities, and the widespread praise they received, any onlooker with a sense of prosperous business practice would have seen the primary reason as the proximity to raw materials and to the capital. Also opening in 1924 was the factory of the Battersea-based Archibald D. Dawnay & Sons, which provided metalwork for factories, hangars and other steel framed buildings; no doubt also

³⁴ As an example of site visitation at Welwyn see ‘World Housing Ideals’, *The Times*, 15th March 1922, p.9.

³⁵ Howard, *Garden Cities*, p.45.

³⁶ Howard, *Garden Cities*, p.61.

³⁷ Howard, *Garden Cities*, p.55.

attracted by the proximity to London.³⁸ The arrival of industry sparked a renewed vigour for working -class houses to be built by the local council, indicating that the influx of employees at Shredded Wheat and other factories were not intended to be housed in the Garden City itself.³⁹ The factory opened to positive acclaim, two years after the first proposals, despite some considerable scrutiny. Lord Salisbury, who opened the factory in March 1926, praised the Garden Cities movement for giving the company the opportunity to build the site, rather than the employment opportunities for the new residents. Indeed, there was further mention of the accommodation provided, proving Chambers was correct in predicting that the workers would not live in Welwyn itself.⁴⁰ The reasoning for this statement lacks clarity; it can be said that the workers would have been on a respectable wage, high enough to comfortably acquire one of the lowest priced properties in Welwyn.

Buoyed by the first major business to choose the site, the directors of the company sought to attract more. A further large scale production was successfully attracted to Welwyn in the late 1920s, providing more jobs for the people of the town. A site near the station was selected for the construction of the Welwyn Cinema Studios by the British Instructional Films company. No effort was spared by the company, calling on the experience of their American and German counterparts and planning one of the most up to date facilities in the country, including a pool for water scenes and movable features to allow for inside and outside scenes to be shot.⁴¹ For Welwyn, the timing could not have been better; the late 1920s were one of the most important transitional periods in the development of film, with the introduction of the first 'talkies' effectively signalling the end of the golden era of the silent movie. The studio's first production was the aptly named *Celestial City*, which premiered after the brokering of a deal with the company that resulted in them taking on a relatively unknown,

³⁸ 'Welwyn Garden City, Magnitude of the Undertaking', *The Times*, Saturday 28th June 1924, p.21.

³⁹ 'Magnitude of the Undertaking', *The Times*, 28th June 1924, p.21.

⁴⁰ 'British Shredded Wheat Factory', *The Times*, Saturday 13th March 1926, p.9.

⁴¹ 'Welwyn Cinema Studios, British Instructional Films to Build', *The Times*, Friday 13th January 1928, p.10.

yet soon to be prominent, director named Alfred Hitchcock.⁴² Although the Welwyn Cinema Studios may have lacked the glamour of nearby Elstree, the fact that one of Britain's newest towns was to be chosen as the site of a leading British studio in such a period can be seen as testament to the development itself. The arrival of the film industry may, like Shredded Wheat and Dawney & Sons, be a result of the proximity to London, but for the people of the town, they would have provided a competitive and somewhat lucrative job market.

Not enough jobs for all

Despite the job opportunities in Welwyn, workers continued to flock southward to the capital for employment; a 1929 estimate suggests around half of the population did so.⁴³ After all, there would never be enough jobs to support every worker in the new development; the job market would soon be saturated by applicants for solitary positions. Many sought to explain the allure of the city, arguably no one more effectively than an unknown writer using the *nom de plume* of 'New Townsman', they conclude that the social attraction of the Garden City is too much to resist, yet cannot maintain themselves unless the industries are present.⁴⁴ From this, the stagnating cycle of housing, which Welwyn attempted to face up to, remains a constant; the workers commute, resulting in new factories, which in turn attract locals that need housing, usually in sub-standard accommodation.⁴⁵ Yet Welwyn was effective in tackling the stigma outlined by 'Townsman' of businesses in small towns. Before Welwyn, industry was attracted to 'these great towns', the traditional centres of industry; London, Birmingham, Manchester. A manufacturer would not choose to relocate to the countryside, 'even if such a town could provide the space, power and other facilities required'.⁴⁶ Yet, with

⁴² 'The Film World, British Films for Russia', *The Times*, Wednesday 10th October 1928, p.14.

⁴³ Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing*, p.221.

⁴⁴ New Townsman, *New Towns after the War: an Argument for Garden Cities* (London, 1918), p.25.

⁴⁵ Townsman, *New Towns after the War*, p.25.

⁴⁶ Townsman, *New Towns after the War*, pp.26-27.

Howard's notion of 'town-country', the best alternative was to be found; an unquestionable success for W.G.C.

Education in W.G.C.

Education was experimental and revolutionary at W.G.C., both in the way schools were constructed and how the children were to be taught. One such elementary school, opened in 1923, had a playground surrounded by woodland, and the ability to convert 'at will into an open-air school'. It was argued that this would stimulate children's growth; contrasting with the traditional view that 'to look out of a window is a waste of time'.⁴⁷ Schooling in the development was a joint venture between a W.G.C. Education Committee, who had unsuccessfully attempted to raise money to pay for schools alone, and the H.C.C., who wanted the best education for the children of the town. This partnership was one of the first between the H.C.C. and the W.G.C. Company, the former previously apprehensive of dealing with the latter.⁴⁸ Like most of the town, the schools were designed to a high standard by architect Louis de Soissons. The first, at Applecroft Road, was built in two phases, beginning in 1922 and opening in 1926.⁴⁹ Despite Applecroft Road's relative low cost of £9,000 and the much praised 'open-air' Handside School, schooling was flawed at W.G.C. The schools were not built quickly enough to meet demand meaning classroom space was at a premium; resulting in many children learning in a nearby farmhouse, which would have undoubtedly not afforded them a stimulating learning environment. There was also very little provision for secondary education at W.G.C., with the first high school built in 1928, before which children were forced to travel around Hertfordshire to schools in Hatfield, St. Albans and Hitchin.⁵⁰ Despite the lack of provision, children seemed to enjoy their new schools, perhaps

⁴⁷ 'On Being Kept In', *The Times*, Wednesday 9th May 1923, p.13.

⁴⁸ Roger Filler, *The History of Welwyn Garden City*, (Chichester, 1986), p.95.

⁴⁹ Filler, *The History of Welwyn Garden City*, p.95.

⁵⁰ Filler, *The History of Welwyn Garden City*, p.98.

best exemplified in this poem: 'I went to school in London, I did not like it there, Handside Schools much nicer, out in the open air'.⁵¹

Forging a community

There was much done to encourage cohesion among the fledgling community at Welwyn, which appeared to have success in the first decade of the town's existence. An advertisement dated 1929 portrayed Welwyn as a 'new and progressive town' complete with 'good schools; golf, tennis and other sports facilities; churches and an excellent shopping centre'.⁵² Among the leading sports clubs were a football team founded in 1921 that regularly competed with local clubs and also in the Football Association's prestigious Amateur Cup tournament, as well as a hockey team competing in various regional leagues.⁵³ Attending fixtures of sporting institutions representing the town would have no doubt been a catalyst for both community cohesion and civic pride amongst the residents. A 1,200 seat, state of the art, theatre was designed by de Soissons for use by the residents of the town, who had developed an interest in drama and the arts, most notably the foundation of a dedicated theatre group which was victorious in a New York amateur dramatics contest.⁵⁴ A drama festival was established as a consequence, and would have been hoped to add another successful facet to the town's public activities. In theory, sports teams, clubs, and activities should have forged one community, but in practice the results were much different.

Conclusions

Despite the efforts of the planners to encourage community cohesion, later debates surrounding the creation of the New Towns Bill in 1946 reveal a significantly different

⁵¹ Filler, *The History of Welwyn Garden City*, p.94.

⁵² 'Welwyn Garden City, this New and Progressive Town', *The Times*, Thursday 17th January 1929, p.23.

⁵³ 'Association Football, Amateur Results', *The Times*, Monday 24th 1927, p.6; 'To-Days Hockey Matches', *The Times*, Saturday 12th November, 1927, p.6.

⁵⁴ 'Welwyn Garden City Theatre Society's Success', *The Times*, Monday 27th June 1927, p.12; 'The New Welwyn Theatre', *The Times*, Wednesday 25th January 1928, p.12.

outcome. Lewis Silkin, the Minister for Town and Country Planning (1945-1950), reflected on the intended outcomes for the new towns in comparison to the divisions at Welwyn as such, 'I do not want to repeat the experience of Welwyn Garden City, where the town is divided into two by the railway, the workers on one side, and the middle class on the other and 'never the twain do meet', except at the railway station'.⁵⁵ Evidently, Welwyn had not lived up to Silkin's expectation, as in the subsequent breath he charged the New Town builders to be 'daring and courageous in their efforts to discover the best way of living'.⁵⁶ Granted, this statement was made twenty five years after W.G.C.'s naissance, and amidst the destruction left in the wake of the Second World War, and even with the ever evolving ideals surely this damning statement is testament to its shortcomings.

Nonetheless Howard never outwardly claimed that *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* was a flawless blueprint for a perfect development. Instead he uses the book to describe a thought experiment, albeit a large, socio-economic one.⁵⁷ Indeed, W.G.C. was largely developed after his death, and much of it was never realised in the way he would have hoped.⁵⁸ Yet, his most timely vision for the 'Town-Country' was delivered at both Letchworth and Welwyn: 'bright homes and gardens, no smoke, no slums', an undeniable improvement upon the poor living conditions of densely populated, pre-war cities.⁵⁹ Although following the same trajectory as Letchworth, and Port Sunlight and Bournville before it, Welwyn established itself as a model town, with a worldwide legacy. Garden City influences were found in North America, Australia, and perhaps most importantly for this study, London.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ 'New Towns Bill', H.C. Debate, Wednesday 8th May 1946, vol. 422, cols. 1072-1184.

⁵⁶ 'New Towns Bill', vol. 422, col. 1090.

⁵⁷ Howard, *Garden Cities*, pp.104-106.

⁵⁸ Stephen Ward, 'The Howard Legacy' in Parsons & Schuyler, *From Garden City to Green City*, pp.222-245.

⁵⁹ 'The Three Magnets' diagram in Howard, *Garden Cities*, p.46.

⁶⁰ See Christine Garnaut, 'Towards metropolitan organisation: town planning and the Garden City idea' in Stephen Hamnett and Robert Freestone (eds.), *The Australian Metropolis: A Planning History* (London and New York, 2000), pp.46-64; Kermit C. Parson, 'British and American Community Design: Clarence Stein's Manhattan Transfer, 1924-1974', in Parsons & Schuyler (eds.), *From Garden City to Green City*, pp.131-159.

The L.C.C. was aware of and comfortable recycling, many of Howard's principles in their cottage estates. The White Hart Lane estate, in northeast London took inspiration from the movement, but interestingly chose Hampstead Garden Suburb as its inspiration, rather than the more obvious example of the first garden city at Letchworth.⁶¹ Although Howard must have been pleased to see his ideologies adopted by another organisation, he was very protective of the garden cities terminology. The estate was starting to be referred to, albeit incorrectly, as a garden city. Robert Thorne argues that Howard attempted to purify the terminology by disassociating it with a development that was too close to the urban metropolis.⁶² The next wave of L.C.C. cottage estates built after the First World War, however, were to be further from the capital, to use Howard's own words planned in 'open country with a view to attracting industries from over-crowded cities, and of providing homes for the people near to the scene of their daily work'.⁶³

⁶¹ Robert Thorne, 'The White Hart Lane Estate: An L.C.C. Venture in Suburban Development', *The London Journal*, (Volume 12, Issue 1), pp.80-88.

⁶² Thorne, 'The White Hart Lane Estate', *The London Journal*, p.86.

⁶³ Thorne, 'The White Hart Lane Estate', *The London Journal*, p.86.

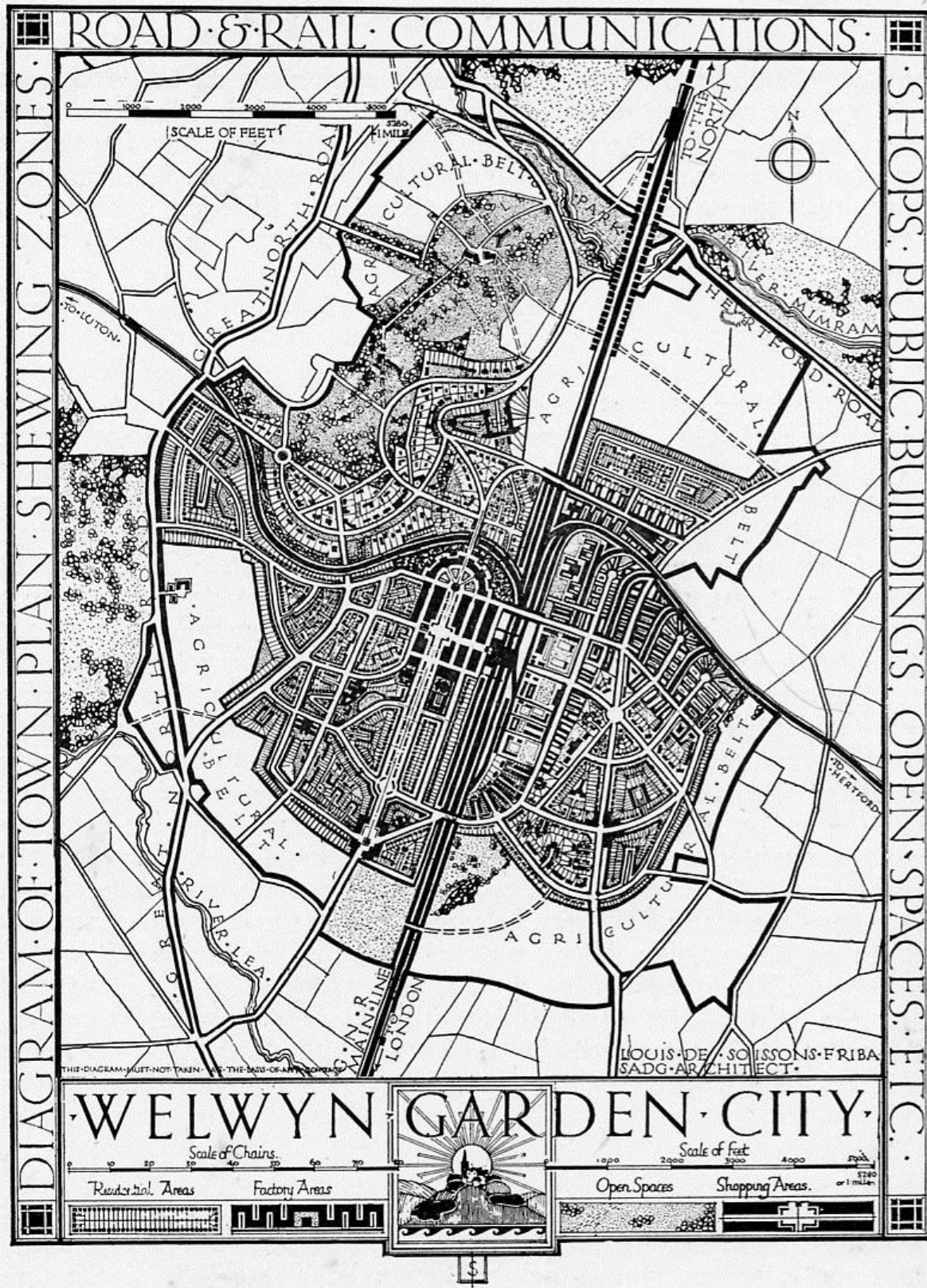


Figure 3: Maurice de Soisson's plan of Welwyn Garden City (1926)

Source: <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/map-of-welwyn-garden-city-hertfordshire-england-1926-from-news-photo/463975993>

Chapter 3

‘The largest municipal housing estate in the world’: The Becontree Estate

‘Becontree is the largest municipal housing estate in the world’ proudly declared the L.C.C.’s *Becontree Tenants’ Handbook* of 1933, ‘its area is approximately 2,770 acres, or more than four times the area of the square mile of the City of London; residential accommodation for about 25,000 families of the working-class has been erected, and its population is nearly 120,000, which is more than that of Bournemouth or Preston, and nearly as great as that of the City of Westminster’.⁶⁴ The facts, presented in an almost propaganda-like fashion by the L.C.C., are clear to see. The Becontree Estate was a monumental undertaking, nothing of its size or magnitude had been witnessed before its construction in terms of population and area.

The Becontree/Dagenham distinction

The sprawling estate is located mainly in the town of Dagenham with smaller sections in Barking and Ilford, parts of the post-1965 London Boroughs of Barking & Dagenham and Redbridge respectively. It is at this point that a distinction must be made; Dagenham is the town, while Becontree was the name chosen for the estate, a measure to prevent infighting between officials.⁶⁵ In earlier literature the two names became almost synonymous, with the somewhat erroneous term ‘Dagenham Estate’ coming into use; Peter Willmott’s influential work from 1963 is referred to on its binding and title page as ‘a study of Dagenham after Forty Years’, yet he was clearly referring to the forty year evolution of the Becontree Estate.

⁶⁴ *Becontree Tenant’s Handbook* (1933), p.1.

⁶⁵ Quite unsurprisingly given the magnitude of the project, seemingly every local entity wanted it to be named after their town. It would have no doubt been recognised the national significance of the development; the press coverage would have been a factor in itself. Most of the land was around Dagenham, so it was they who arguably had the most legitimate claim. Becontree was chosen as a welcome alternative, to reflect the history of the archaic Becontree Hundred. In a strange but simplified argument by the L.C.C, Becontree appeared in the Domesday Book, Dagenham did not. *Report by the Clerk of the Council (James Bird) to Housing Committee*, 20th October 1920, LCC/HSG/GEN/1/2 (GLRO), cited in Robert Home, *‘A Township Complete in Itself’: A Planning History of the Becontree/Dagenham Estate* (London, 1997), p.10.

For the sake of continuity ‘Becontree’ will be used in reference to the estate throughout this study, not including citation of original material. Nevertheless, the division in naming is an interesting one; a map published as part of *The Victoria County History* in 1964 shows the southern section of Dagenham, with Becontree highlighted as an almost separate entity.⁶⁶ While Becontree has been absorbed into Greater London, an expansive urban mass, its status was not always as such. Before the L.C.C.’s planners and architects arrived in the 1920s the land was agrarian, with small pockets of land divided as market gardens and the larger tracts owned by farmers. Of the three settlements the estate encroached upon, the most developed was arguably Ilford, which had been its own borough for some time; Barking was traditionally a fishing port in the previous century, while Dagenham and neighbouring Becontree Heath and Chadwell Heath were sparsely populated Essex villages. The area’s subsequent population boom in the twentieth century can be seen as a direct result of the construction of the estate and later attraction of businesses. As an illustration of the growth, the 1931 Census records an increase of 16,882 occupied dwellings (a rise of 902.5% from 1921) in the Dagenham Urban District area.⁶⁷ The sudden and substantial growth of the area, coupled with the steady population growth in later years can be seen as one of the main causes of the incorporation of the area of the Dagenham U.D. and Borough into the jurisdiction of the Greater London Authority in April 1965.⁶⁸

One of the common misconceptions of Becontree, to be corrected with some haste, is that the estate was a direct result of the arrival of Ford Motor Company at a site on the River Thames, perhaps comparable to Cadbury workers at Bournville, Birmingham. This is simply not true, work started on the plant in 1931; an entire decade after the first row of cottages welcomed their tenants. Becontree was not built to house the working population of the Detroit based

⁶⁶ See figure 5.

⁶⁷ *Census of England & Wales 1931, County of Essex (Part 1)*, (H.M. Stationary, London, 1932), p.xvi.

⁶⁸ *Dagenham Urban District and Borough, 1926-1965*, p.3.

company's European bastion; in fact some workers that accompanied the move south from Trafford Park were denied a house on the new estate because they were not existing tenants of the L.C.C. and were forced to find accommodation elsewhere. Yet it is worth noting that this stance was later relaxed by the time of Young's survey and those Ford workers in question that did not have the L.C.C. 'residence qualifications' were gradually allowed to take up tenancy at Becontree.⁶⁹

Becontree as a result of the Addison Act

Work on the estate started in 1920, in accordance with the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919. Dagenham based historian John Gerard O'Leary identifies one particular clause in the act – Section 41 – as the foundation of Becontree, as well as its contemporaries.⁷⁰ It gave the L.C.C the impetus it needed to begin the monumental out of county building schemes:

‘The London County Council shall be the local authority for the county, to the exclusion of any other authority, so far as regards the provision of any houses outside the administrative county of London.’⁷¹

From this single clause effectively grew the largest municipal housing estate the world has ever seen, the L.C.C.'s flagship, as well as the smaller sister estates at Bellingham, Castelnau, Downham, Roehampton, St. Helier, Watling and Wormholt; all of which were completed in the interwar period.⁷² Although housing legislation was arguably the fastest developing legislation in the period, the Act of 1919 allowed the L.C.C. the momentum it needed to build out of the County of London, establishing a much welcome legal precedent. The development of the out of county estates was a result of years of encouraged dispersal by the L.C.C. While the dwindling population of London occurred somewhat naturally over time, it was hastened

⁶⁹ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.128.

⁷⁰ J.G O'Leary, *The Book of Dagenham*, 3rd Edition (Colchester, 1964), p.40.

⁷¹ *Housing & Town Planning, &c. Act 1919*, Part I (Housing of the Working Classes).

⁷² 'Cottage Estates' in L.C.C., *Housing, 1928-30* (Westminster, London, 1931), pp.8-35.

by the driving forces behind L.C.C. development. During the interwar period this was a curious phenomenon. As Andrew Saint discusses in his work on dispersal, the Labour led L.C.C. of the period were effectively pushing working-class voters, likely to be their main supportive demographic, to the hinterlands of their administrative county of London, and beyond, into Essex and Surrey.⁷³

Becontree can be seen as a masterpiece of civil engineering, it arguably set a precedent for the post Second World War New Towns. Indeed, as Willmott succinctly explains, Becontree dwarfs the majority of New Towns.⁷⁴ Yet, one must ask how far the development lived up to the expectations of the ‘Homes fit for Heroes’ movement at the end of the First World War? There is very little written on Becontree, despite its paramount socio-historical importance.

The first tenants

The new tenants who moved to the vast Becontree Estate brought their community values with them from where they grew up; in most cases this was London’s East End. Many felt that they had simply moved into the Essex countryside, while other families, intimidated by their new surroundings, felt that they had emigrated to the other side of the world. Even as late as 2013, Rose Smith clearly remembered her mother’s lamentations, stating that her move from Bethnal Green to Becontree in 1928 felt more akin to a move to Australia.⁷⁵ Terence Young, the estate’s first surveyor and chronicler, later paraphrased by historian Guy Williams, describes the first residents as ‘pioneers, colonists in an area which had no urban facilities’.⁷⁶ The portrayal of the earliest tenants as colonists is a thought provoking one, evoking images which are comparable to the initial, ill fated, attempts to establish settlements in the New World. Evidently, the Becontree pioneers did not have to confront a situation of

⁷³ Saint, ‘Spread the People’, in Saint (ed.), *Politics and the People of London*, p.215.

⁷⁴ Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community*, p.4.

⁷⁵ Oral History recording of an interview with Rose Smith by Sorcha Ni Fhoghluda, Thursday 20th June 2013 LBBB Archives reference: BD5/39.

⁷⁶ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.45; see also Guy R. Williams, *London in the Country*, p.75.

similar austerity, but they would have surely had to prevail over serious hardships, with a dearth of employment, education and transportation among the principal deficiencies.

In the late 1940s, Stanley Gale surveyed the estate as a case study into what he calls ‘modern estates’, to distinguish from the pre-First World War endeavours. He records that by 1949, ‘27 churches, 30 schools, 400 shops, 14 doctor’s houses, 3 clinics, 7 institutes, 2 cinemas, 9 licensed premises, a hospital, and 6 other public buildings have been erected’.⁷⁷ Yet, this was fourteen years after the estate was completed, and twenty-eight since the first house welcomed its’ original tenant, such development did not occur organically, it had to be fought for by the ‘pioneers’. An interesting anecdote appears in Young’s *Becontree and Dagenham*. It concerns the Robin Hood, a small public house no larger than a farmhouse that stood in the southwest corner of the estate on the intersection of Longbridge Road and Becontree Avenue, two of the development’s main thoroughfares. Young recalls a fairly widespread anecdote of the landlord and his other work commitments:

‘The licensee of the “Robin Hood” worked also as a ploughman in the nearby fields. A customer would enter the bar, and finding it empty, would shout across the fields for the landlord. After a time he would arrive, and wiping his hands free from soil would draw a pint of beer, have a talk about the weather and then depart again to the fields’.⁷⁸

It is clear to see that areas of Dagenham, even in 1934, a year from the official opening ceremony of the Becontree Estate, were still very much agrarian communities. It is not entirely surprising how disoriented the ‘pioneers’ were when the first arrived at Becontree; detached from the city and somewhat implanted into a place with completely different

⁷⁷ Gale, *Modern Housing Estates*, p.217.

⁷⁸ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.44.

customs and way of life, albeit separated by just ten miles from where the majority originated, and a number still called home.

Community

Compared to the close-knit communities of inner London, where everyone knew and to a degree trusted everyone else, galvanised further by places of worship and community centres, Becontree offered very little. It was rare for the new tenant to feel at home, and L.C.C. cottage estates were no different. Arthur Edwards describes the somewhat unwelcoming atmosphere that emanated from developments of the period, which were devoid of neighbourliness, and most residents kept themselves to themselves.⁷⁹ The new residents were also faced with a degree of hostility from the people of the old Dagenham Village, which was effectively engulfed by the new development, stripped of its individuality. Yet, tension between neighbouring groups was nothing new; Keith Snell argues that ‘local xenophobia’ had deep roots, stretching back to days of parish rivalry and evolving further between rural and urban communities in the industrial age.⁸⁰ Young validates Snell’s argument; the villagers were a mix of agricultural and industrial people, whereas the estate residents were an unknown, distant, entity.⁸¹ Betty Wright, raised in the village, remembered a loose, highly prejudicial, social hierarchy upheld by her mother. She described her mother’s attitude as ‘snooty’; banning her daughter from stepping foot on the estate, nor mixing with its residents, despite the close proximity to the family home.⁸² Indeed, it can be said that this divide reinforces the authoritarian and somewhat paternalistic attitudes of the architects and planners. As such, they had a fixed definition of community, with a much stronger focus on nuclear families than before. Indeed, it may be argued that by ‘decanting’ residents to new

⁷⁹ Edwards, *The design of suburbia*, p.111.

⁸⁰ K.D.M. Snell, ‘The culture of Local Xenophobia’, *Social History*, Vol. 28, No.1 (Jan. 2003), pp.1-30.

⁸¹ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.42

⁸² Oral History recording of an interview with Betty Wright by Sorcha Ni Fhoghluda, Wednesday 10 July 2013 LBBB Archives reference: BD5/40.

estates rather than improving their existing conditions would have effectively displaced problematically close working-class communities.

The first real attempt at creating a tighter knit Becontree community came in 1928, with roots in the East End. Muriel Lester, and her sister Doris, founded Kingsley Hall in Bow and quickly established itself as a cornerstone of community life. A c.1946 publication from Kingsley Hall declared that Becontree had suffered as it was merely a social experiment in housing, with little provision made for the human aspect, 'the only places of entertainment are the cinemas, the public houses and a nearby greyhound race track'.⁸³ Yet, with pressure from the Becontree tenants it would change entirely. Many petitioned Lester to bring her work to Dagenham, either a Kingsley Hall or centre with a similar outlook on community involvement. Evidence conflicts, some believe the sisters took it upon themselves to visit, while Young is adamant that they merely sent workers to investigate.⁸⁴ Whichever the case may be, Kingsley Hall was established in Dagenham on land rented for a nominal fee.⁸⁵ Kingsley Hall started as a group of tents, but soon developed into a permanent community hub for the people of Becontree. It promoted the ideals of the Christian faith, and in 1931 was to cement itself in history upon the visit of Mahatma Gandhi during the 'Round Table Conference'. He elected to stay in Bow with his friend Lester, rather than the accommodation he was offered.⁸⁶ He made the trip to Becontree's Kingsley Hall, and despite Monday being his day of silent contemplation, those who he met with were enamoured by his presence. Thus, Kingsley Hall can be identified as one of the most important early establishments on the development as it gave the people what it so craved; a taste of 'home' and the sense of

⁸³ *Kingsley Hall Dagenham: an Adventure in Christian Service*, c.1946, p.1.

⁸⁴ 'Love Surrounded Me Here', *The (Dagenham) Post*, Wednesday 13th September 2000, p.67; *Kingsley Hall Dagenham: an Adventure in Christian Service*, c.1946, pp.1-2; Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.52.

⁸⁵ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.52.

⁸⁶ 'Plans to Welcome Mr. Gandhi', *The Times*, Thursday 10th September 1931, p.11.

community. Yet, it must be said that this was not the only deficiency that needed to be tackled.

Education

In addition to the all-important notion of community were the three, heavily interrelated problems of education, employment and transport. All three posed serious and distinct dilemmas for those charged with the estate's development. Schools at the time were small, built to educate children of the agrarian communities, a modest school population of 1,600 in 1921, and thus were unprepared for the sudden and overwhelming influx of families.⁸⁷ Higher achievers would have continued their education at long-established secondary schools in Romford, the nearest large town.⁸⁸ The Essex Education Committee (E.E.C.), whose remit included the fledgling Becontree, was alerted to dangerously oversubscribed schools in Chadwell Heath as early as March, 1922.⁸⁹ Being the first area of the estate to be settled (five months earlier in November, 1921), it begs the question as to why the L.C.C. had not alerted their Essex counterparts of the impending situation before building work commenced. It seems that the L.C.C. was attempting to secede from their duty to resolve the issue due to their negative attitudes towards budgeting and spending; O'Leary even going as far as to conclude that 'the L.C.C. were a great hindrance in the matter of school sites and their cost'.⁹⁰ It was evident that one council or the other should take the lead on the issue, and then work collectively to resolve it as soon as possible. However, by the time the E.E.C. and the L.C.C. ultimately came together to outline provisions for new schools over a year later, the demand had far exceeded any initial expectation.

The first schools

⁸⁷ E.E.C, *Education in Essex 1928-35: Report of the Essex Education Committee for the seven years ended 31st March, 1935* (Chelmsford, October 1935), p.28.

⁸⁸ Michael E. Sadler, *Report on Secondary and Higher Education in Essex* (Chelmsford, 1906), pp.380-381.

⁸⁹ John Gerard O'Leary, *The Book of Dagenham, a History*, Third Edition (Colchester, 1964), p.42.

⁹⁰ O'Leary, *The Book of Dagenham*, p.42.

The first school was opened in 1923, at Green Lane, seemingly as close as possible to the first section of the estate, indicating that the land had already been set aside for the purpose, but the L.C.C had no intention of following through. Infants were welcomed to the school a year later, with a second school added in 1925, and three more being opened in 1926.⁹¹ Although this can be seen as a positive, the rate of movement to the area was fast becoming greater than the rate school places were becoming available. Young records that between April 1923 and March 1927, a further 28,234 people moved to Becontree bringing the total population to 40,071.⁹² These people lived in 9,058 houses, and by the E.E.C. estimation of 1.5 children of school age per family, this meant that approximately 13,500 children needed a school place.⁹³ Yet, only five new schools had been constructed, which can be seen as substantial blemish on the record of the L.C.C.; who were more enthusiastic about the building of houses than provisions made for their long standing ratepayers. However, the L.C.C. minutes for January 1928 reveal that the council were adamant that ‘schools are being provided almost concurrently with the erection of houses’.⁹⁴ The much larger population meant that the education problem was magnified far beyond those encountered in W.G.C. By 1931, the E.E.C. had planned for 22,270 children to be educated in thirty-two schools, proving that the aforementioned estimation of 1.5 places per household was severely miscalculated.⁹⁵ In this period of incredibly poor foresight, a new school was constructed at a cost of £9,897 in the 1932/3 financial year only to be substantially enlarged at a staggering expenditure of £6,026 in 1934/5.⁹⁶ It is, of course, worth noting that it was predominantly children of working-class origins that suffered. Hardy Amies, whose father was a ‘person of some importance in the neighbourhood’ working as an L.C.C. resident agent, had no such

⁹¹ O’Leary, *The Book of Dagenham*, p.42.

⁹² See Table 1, Census returns for Dagenham (including Becontree).

⁹³ See Table 2, Young’s Growth Chart of the Becontree Estate.

⁹⁴ *L.C.C. Minutes*, 31st January 1928, p.95 cited in Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars: The Becontree Estate* (Oxford, 1997), p.89.

⁹⁵ Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars*, p.89.

⁹⁶ Elementary Education, Dagenham Rush Green Junior in E.E.C, *Education in Essex 1928-35*, pp.119-120.

trouble acquiring a place at the prestigious Brentwood School, a fair reflection of his upbringing.⁹⁷ By 1935, when the vast majority of tenants were settled, Dagenham as a whole came under close scrutiny from Essex education, with reforms being considered to reorganise the precariously oversubscribed schools.⁹⁸ This reorganisation would have resulted in restructuring the system, and perhaps redistributing children to balance the school population.

Although education was a pressing issue, it seemingly took until the estate's completion to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Even then, it was not something that was of great interest to the L.C.C., it was left to their counterparts in Chelmsford. If the Essex County Council (E.C.C.) had not taken responsibility for Becontree's children, how long would they have had to wait for even a rudimentary level of education? Education however did not stand alone at the forefront of the area's deficiencies.

Opportunities of employment

It would be unjust to assume that local jobs would have been better than any that could have been acquired by commuting, nonetheless new tenants would have, almost without doubt, hoped for a variety of skilled and unskilled employment opportunities to rival that of their former home. Early 1920s editions of the *Herts and Essex Trades' Directory* omit any entries for 'Becontree' or 'Dagenham', thus one must return to the pre-war editions of *Kelly's Directory* which reveals an assortment of publicans, grocers, bakers, butchers, farmers, gardeners, smiths and wheelwrights.⁹⁹ It can be assumed from early reminiscences of a rural community that these professions remained through to the building of Becontree and greeted its newest tenants. Yet they offered little in the way of employment for those newcomers. Farming and market gardening may not have suited men that had been raised in an urban

⁹⁷ Hardy Amies, *Still Here: an autobiography* (London, 1984), pp.5-7.

⁹⁸ E.E.C, *Education in Essex 1928-35*, pp.148-155.

⁹⁹ *Kelly's Directory of Essex*, (Holborn, London, 1914), pp.195-197.

environment and perhaps saw the countryside only on the popular hop picking excursions.¹⁰⁰ This traditional connection between communities in London and their rural counterparts can be traced back to the 1860s, when it was said that urban workers could ‘earn enough in a fortnight’s outdoor labour ... to pay the year’s bill for shoes or the arrears in rent’.¹⁰¹ The longevity of the practice allowed the tradition to carry on well into the twentieth century. Despite experience in a rural setting, it cannot be said that a mastery of the basics of agriculture would come naturally for a cottage estate resident; it would take time and with the hastening speed of development, the probability of acquiring a profitable section of land would be becoming very slim.

Many early residents kept their jobs in the East End and commuted to and from work on a daily basis. Others, like Rose Smith’s father, were not as lucky. When recollecting her earliest memories of Becontree, she discussed her father’s plight. For six arduous years he was forced to walk from his home to Barking to sign on daily. When he eventually found employment, it was as a road sweeper, an unskilled task that would enable him to better support his family.¹⁰² Yet, perhaps most degrading about Mr Smith’s story is that he had served with distinction during the First World War, being awarded the Military Medal in 1917.¹⁰³ Lloyd George had promised that there would be ‘homes fit for heroes to live in’ in 1919, the L.C.C. had arguably built them at Becontree, yet it is evident that these men did not receive many opportunities to live a life befitting a hero.

Unlike the dire situation in the education sector, the scarcity of paid employment was not to be blamed entirely on the L.C.C., in fact they could be seen as trying to alleviate the problem by employing men to work on the building sites as well as setting aside land in order to

¹⁰⁰ Rose Smith Oral History Interview, BD5/39

¹⁰¹ ‘A Great Monarch.’, *The Times*, Saturday 16th September 1865, p.9

¹⁰² Rose Smith Oral History Interview, BD5/39

¹⁰³ The Military Medal (MM) was awarded between 1914 and 1993 to any British or Commonwealth soldier who held a rank below commission for ‘Bravery in the Field’.

attract large scale industry.¹⁰⁴ This move echoes that of W.G.C., whereby the attraction of industry to land was prioritised among the planners. Young discusses the relative ease for women to get jobs, highlighting the Sterling Works as one of the largest employers of unskilled labourers in the early period; although it must be noted that female jobs may have been erroneously classified as ‘unskilled’ in order to keep women’s wages below that of their male counterparts.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, the factory, perhaps best known for its manufacture of small arms, had enlarged from four to eighteen acres during 1922 and 1925, providing opportunity of employment for some of the very earliest tenants.¹⁰⁶ Women were also extensively hired by British Ropes Ltd. when they arrived near Dagenham Dock in 1927.¹⁰⁷ However, the male population suffered through the lack of opportunity; skilled men were likely to be employed as builders, tilers and plumbers on the estate, while unskilled men found it difficult to make ends meet.

The economic turning point: Ford Motor Company, 1931

The biggest turning point in the early economic history of the estate was the arrival of the Ford Motor Company in 1931. It was Ford, argues Saint, which rescued Becontree from being a total disaster. Without its arrival, Becontree would have still been a ‘travesty of expectations, a vast dormitory town’ with nothing to really offer to its residents besides ‘little pockets of employment’.¹⁰⁸ Ford had owned the site on the River Thames as early as 1922, while they were still operating out of Trafford Park, Manchester.¹⁰⁹ Construction eventually began at Dagenham on 16th May 1929, with the soil cutting ceremony conducted by Edsel Ford; piles were driven into the marsh to stabilise it, and four large buildings were soon

¹⁰⁴ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.60.

¹⁰⁵ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.60.

¹⁰⁶ Peter Laidler and David Howroyd, *The Guns of Dagenham: Lanchester, Patchett, Sterling*, (Cobourg, Ontario, Canada, 1995), p.1.

¹⁰⁷ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.60.

¹⁰⁸ Saint, ‘Spread the People’ in Saint (ed.), *Politics and the People of London*, p.224.

¹⁰⁹ Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge 1915-1933* (New York, 1957), p.366.

erected.¹¹⁰ Dagenham was intended to be the epicentre of the Ford empire in Europe, handling all manufacture, sales and servicing.¹¹¹ It can be said that if building commenced immediately, and to the same pace, Dagenham's workforce would have grown steadily alongside the expansion of Becontree; perhaps becoming fully operational in 1924, when the population numbered around 15,000 people.¹¹² A conservative estimate from *The Times* that same year puts the number of jobs to be available at the plant at 10,000, easily making it the principal employer in the area.¹¹³ Ford themselves placed a large advert in the same newspaper six years later, when the site was half completed, declaring that they would 'require the services of 20,000 British workmen' to 'convert growing quantities of British materials into precision parts for dependable Ford cars'.¹¹⁴

The motor industry became an integral part of life, so much so that 'Ford' and 'Dagenham' had become somewhat synonymous by the late 1930s; yet in 1963 Peter Willmott insisted that contrary to popular belief the industry did not shape the development of Becontree and vice versa.¹¹⁵ Ford provided employment for some of Becontree's population, albeit a lot later, the vast majority still worked in London, commuting on public transport. Thus, one must analyse the state of transport on the estate; was it overlooked in accordance with the L.C.C.'s contemporary attitudes towards building rather than town planning, or was there a well-planned and fully developed infrastructure in place?

Transport issues and infrastructure

Becontree's first bus route, linking the northernmost section of the estate with the 'outside world' as Young puts it, came in December 1922, thirteen months after the completion of the

¹¹⁰ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, p.543.

¹¹¹ Huw Beynon, *Working for Ford* (London, 1973), p.43.

¹¹² Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.48.

¹¹³ 'Ford Thames-Side Factory, Big Dagenham Scheme', *The Times*, Friday 11th July 1924, p.11.

¹¹⁴ *The Times*, Monday 10th February 1930, p.9.

¹¹⁵ Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community*, p.17.

first cottages. It may well have been heralded as the watershed moment for the estate's fledgling infrastructure, but the route only reached Ilford, the only destination linked by tarmacked roads.¹¹⁶ The absence of completed roads was also the bane of both the removal firms and the earliest tenants. A resident of the L.C.C.'s Castelnau estate remembered having to carry all their furniture along the space where roads should have been to their new home, as the removal van could not navigate the mud and was forced to park on the nearest stretch of pavement.¹¹⁷ With the sheer number of houses being built in this period it can be assumed that this was not a standalone occurrence, and was probably widely seen on all of the L.C.C.'s developments, Becontree included.

The railways, on the other hand, were the single most important aspect of the Becontree Estate, for construction, employment and to an extent, pleasure. The estate had links to the routes of L.N.E.R. and L.M.S. routes, from Chadwell Heath in the north and Dagenham and Dagenham Dock in the south, respectively. On weekdays, the railways were the lifeline of the commuter; London Liverpool Street was only a thirty minute journey away.¹¹⁸ Come the weekend the railway was transformed into a gateway to leisure; tenants could visit their family who remained in the capital, or perhaps even visit one of the popular seaside resorts. Betty Wright remembered the excitement of a family holiday to Southend in the summer, albeit a rarity dependent on disposable income.¹¹⁹ Adverts for 'holiday outings' were commonplace in the local newspapers, especially around Easter; an L.N.E.R. advert from 1923 promised regular service to East Anglia and Norfolk from Liverpool Street, easily accessible from Chadwell Heath.¹²⁰ The construction of the L.M.S. stations at Becontree and Heathway, and the later expansion and electrification of the District Railway from Barking

¹¹⁶ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.44-45.

¹¹⁷ Rubinstein, *Just Like the Country*, p.27.

¹¹⁸ Gale, *Modern Housing Estates*, p.218.

¹¹⁹ Oral History interview with Betty Wright, LBBB Archives reference: BD5/40.

¹²⁰ *Becontree Guardian and Chadwell Heath News*, Friday 4th May 1923, p.4.

through these stations was a testament to the importance of the railways to the population of estate. Young's survey alluded to the importance of the railways to the still youthful Becontree, yet he bemoans and criticises the lack of other public transport that would provide a link to these transport hubs. In the period of his initial study (approximately 1934) he noted that there was still no bus route that linked the L.N.E.R. station at Chadwell Heath to anywhere else on the estate, highlighting the lack of foresight on the part of those responsible.¹²¹ The same could be said of the L.M.S. station at Dagenham Dock; although it only ran one train per hour compared with the three an hour offered at Chadwell Heath during the peak times, commuters using the station would have been faced with an exhausting twenty minute walk over arduous terrain.¹²² A *Punch* cartoon by prominent illustrator Frank Reynolds from 1921 offers a whimsical yet rather satirical view on the problems that were encountered on the new estates. It depicts a smartly dressed man, striding into the distance after a bus he will likely never catch. The tag line below reads 'we used to have to cycle to the station; but now we have the bus', an effective summation of the somewhat dire transport situation.¹²³

Later growth of Becontree

It can be seen that, despite the time invested by the L.C.C., the Becontree Estate was fundamentally flawed in the earliest years of its existence. Although the cottages themselves were built to a high standard, an improvement on pre-war designs, poor communication between different parties involved resulted in the impression that little thought was afforded to the people who were to become tenants. New houses were isolated, usually in a sea of mud and construction materials, with poor infrastructure and a severe lack of transportation.

¹²¹ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.44.

¹²² Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.44-45.

¹²³ 'Our Suburb', *Punch, or The London Charivari*, Volume CLXI, November 30th 1921, p.433 published in Alan A. Jackson, *Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport, 1900-1939* (London, 1973), plate 3, between p.64-65.

Although spaces for businesses were included in the plans for Becontree, there was little done to attract new employers, in stark contrast to W.G.C. before it. Many were still forced to find work further afield, with the majority returning to the relative comfort of London. The younger generation also suffered, being severely hindered by the lack of schooling in the area; some were deprived of grammar school scholarships as there was no provision to build a local institution, while most were deprived of education in its most rudimentary form. Although the L.C.C. was eager to reallocate the workload to other organisations, the E.E.C. for education as an example, the blame can be effectively laid upon them. Their architects' endeavours were admirable in the designing of the homes which were indeed fit for heroes, yet those charged with the task of town planning and the provision of services came up short, failing somewhat miserably in their attempts.

It is, however, worth revisiting the 1949 survey conducted by Stanley Gale.¹²⁴ By this time Becontree had grown into a town almost in its own right. The L.C.C. may have built the amenities, but the community grew on its own accord; organically and over a longer time period than initially expected. By the time of Willmott's work fourteen years later, the area had developed so much that he comes to the conclusion that it is, in part, the East End reborn, yet he highlights a continued dearth of facilities.¹²⁵ A very telling quote from a local resident, referred to only as 'Mr. Brooks' reveals what long term residents felt of Becontree:¹²⁶

'I know Dagenham seems monotonous to people from outside, but when you've been living here for a while, the roads develop their own personalities – there are landmarks you get to recognise in different turnings. Anyway, it's not the outside of the houses that matter, it's what's inside them. I've got a number of good

¹²⁴ See 'Chapter 1', footnote 3.

¹²⁵ Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community*, p.109, p.110.

¹²⁶ Although those surveyed and later published in the work were not saying anything provocative or risqué, Willmott conceals their identities, which is unsurprising in ethnography of the period. See Willmott, p.iv.

friends here. Lots of the people round here know me. I get on extremely well with the shopkeepers in the district. My roots are here now and I'm very happy indeed.¹²⁷

By 1963, two years prior to the areas inclusion as a London borough under the G.L.C. and forty-two years since the first tenant arrived, the area had seemed to settle. Although it took a lot longer than initially anticipated, Becontree was finally as complete as a suburban dormitory town could be – a housing development as well as, arguably most importantly, a fully functioning community.

¹²⁷ Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community*, p.110.

Table 1:

Census returns for Dagenham, 1911 - 1931

Sources:

Census of England & Wales 1921, County of Essex (H.M. Stationary Office, London, 1923), p.10; *Census of England & Wales 1931, County of Essex (Part I)* (H.M. Stationary Office, London, 1932), p.2, p.14, p.22; *Census of England & Wales 1931, County of Essex (Part II)* (H.M. Stationary Office, London, 1936), p.9

Population

1911	1921			1931		
Persons	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
7,907	9,127	4,521	4,606	89,362	44,870	44,492

Growth (Increase or Decrease)

1911-1921	1921-1931			
Percent	Amount	Percent		
		Total	By Births and Deaths	By Migration
15.4	80,235	879.1	88.3	790.8

Table 2:

**The three main periods of growth at Becontree, as identified by surveyor
Terence Young: 1921 to 1924, 1924 to 1929 and 1930 to 1932**

Source: Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.38, p.48, p.65.

Dates	People			Houses	
	At beginning of year	At end of year	Addition during year	Increase during year	Total no. of houses
1/4/1921 – 31/3/1922	0	2,086	2,086	465	465
1/4/1922 – 31/3/1923	2,086	11,837	9,751	2,235	2,700
1/4/1923 – 31/3/1924	11,837	14,564	2,727	596	3,296
1/4/1924 – 31/3/1925	14,564	19,089	4,525	1,282	4,578
1/4/1925 – 31/3/1926	19,089	26,241	7,152	1,564	6,142
1/4/1926 – 31/3/1927	26,241	40,071	13,830	2,916	9,058
1/4/1927 – 31/3/1928	40,071	57,820	17,749	4,089	13,147
1/4/1928 – 31/3/1929	57,820	77,455	19,635	3,368	16,515
1/4/1929 – 31/3/1930	77,455	82,689	5,234	1,359	17,874
1/4/1930 – 31/3/1931	82,689	91,519	8,830	1,842	19,716
1/4/1931 – 31/3/1932	91,519	103,328	11,809	2,401	22,117

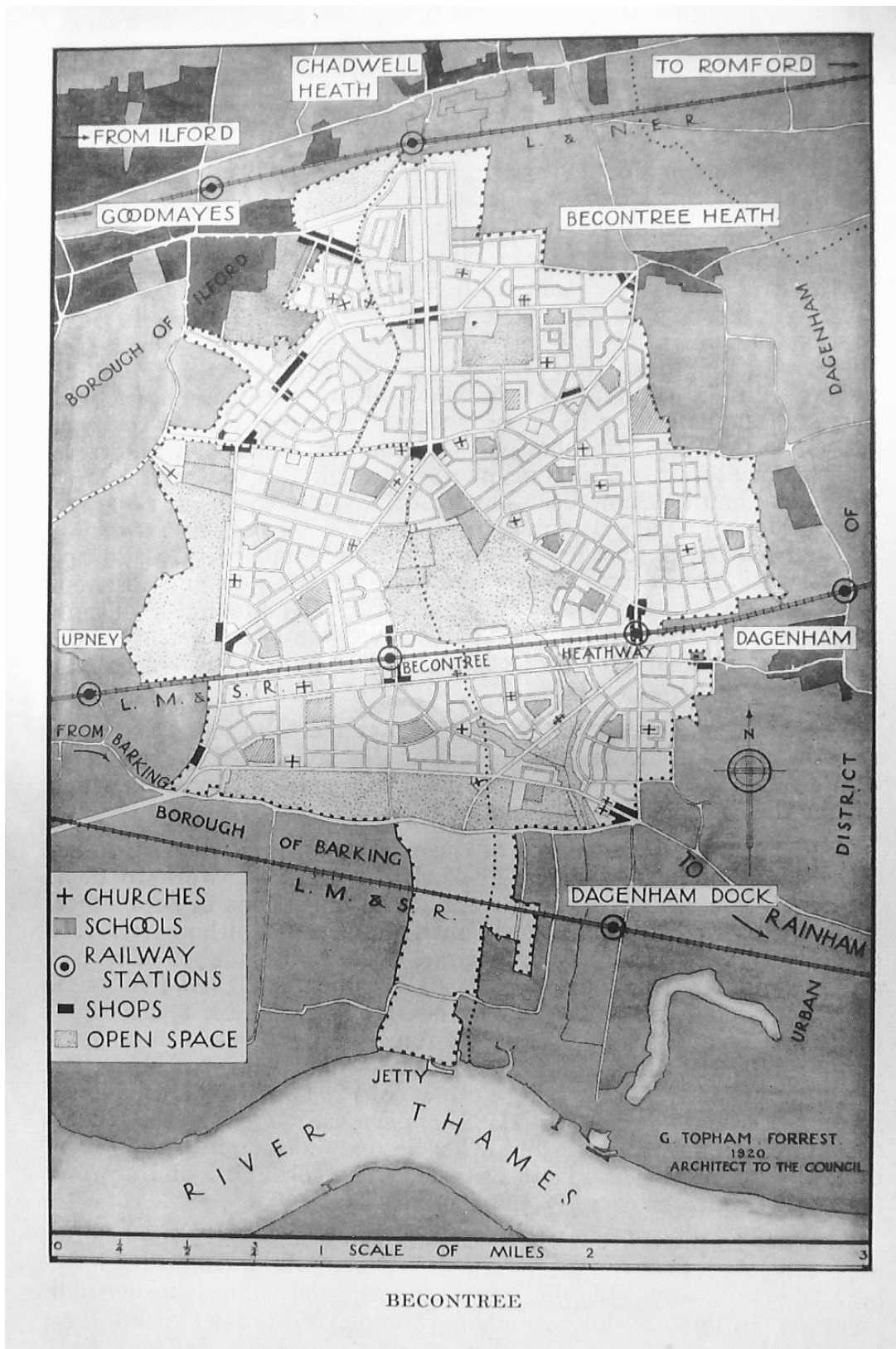


Figure 4: L.C.C. Architect G. Topham Forrest's plan of the Becontree Estate (1920)

Source: L.C.C., *London Housing* (London, 1937), p.158.

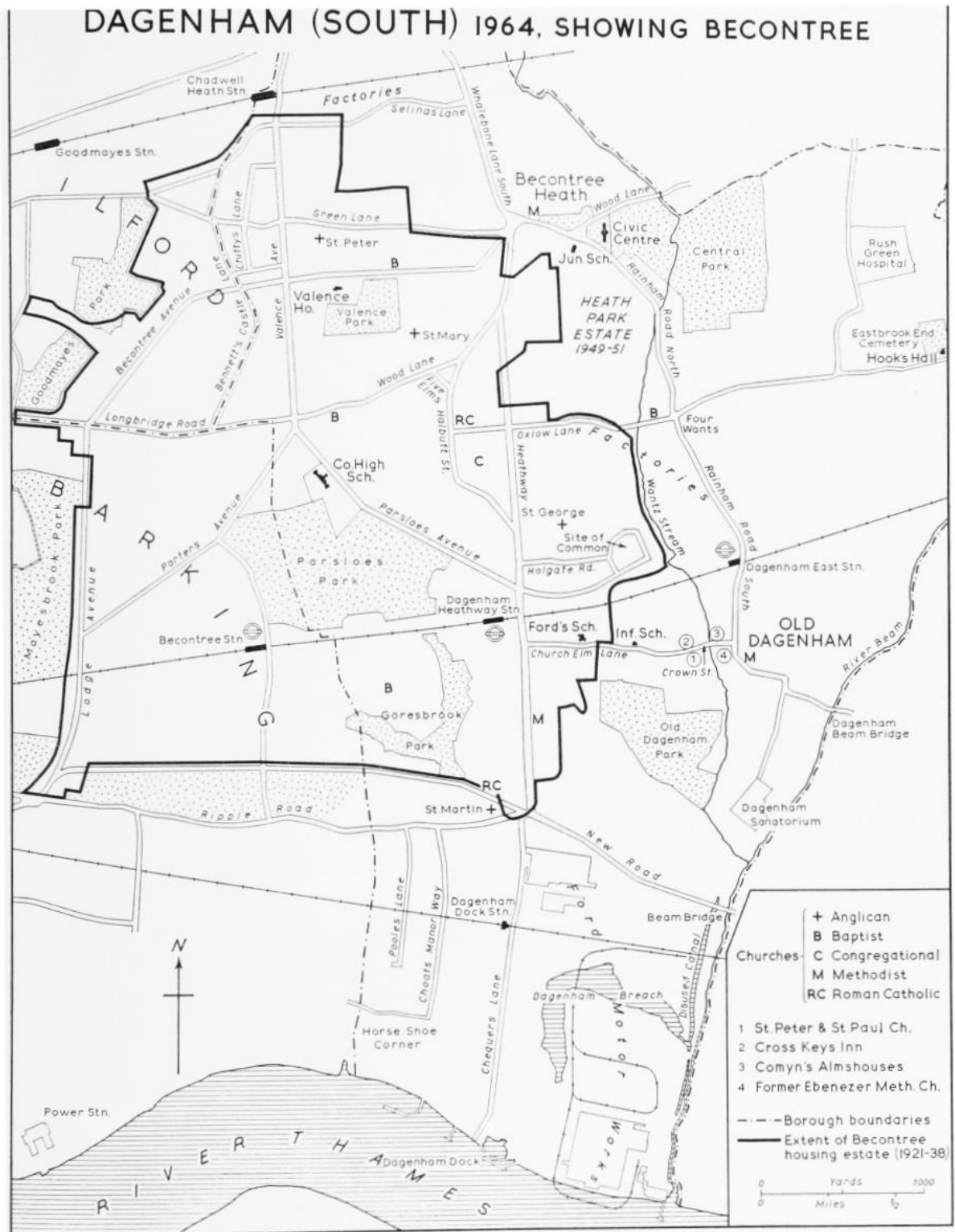


Figure 5: Map of Dagenham, including the Becontree Estate (1964).

Note how Becontree is presented almost as a separate entity, split from ‘Old Dagenham’: Dagenham Village. This division is recorded in contemporary accounts.

Source: The Victoria History of the Counties of England, A History of Essex, Volume V (Oxford University Press, 1966) p.271, available online at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/essex/vol5/pp267-281>

Chapter 4

‘Everything seemed bright and new and happy’: The St. Helier Estate

St. Helier is another extremely significant example of the L.C.C. out of county developments that were prevalent during the interwar area. The area which the estate falls into has developed over time, similarly to Becontree; when it was built the area was widely referred to as Carshalton in Surrey, which is evidenced up to the mid-1960s, but since its incorporation into Greater London, it falls under the joint jurisdiction of the London Boroughs of Merton and Sutton.¹ In line with the focus of contemporary writers, St. Helier was the second largest of the L.C.C. out of county estates; comprising of 9,068 dwellings and at the time of its completion spread over an area of ‘about 825 acres’.² The L.C.C. already had a remit to build outside the borders of the County of London, thus the initial problems would only come in the form of land acquisition. Yet, the L.C.C. gained the much needed legislation, the County of London (Morden and Carshalton) Housing Order, to enact compulsory purchase as early as the 15th December 1925. Originally, 846 acres were earmarked across Merton & Morden, Carshalton and Sutton & Cheam. Yet, as a result of a spate of enquiries and pressure from the local authorities, this figure was later reduced to 825 acres.³ As well as being the second largest cottage estate, in terms of houses, undertaken by the L.C.C. in this period, it was also the second largest cottage estate development full stop; the largest post Second World War development came up over 1,500 homes short.

Evolving housing legislation

New legislation later in the period had effectively superseded the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919, but St. Helier can still be seen as being built with the same principles

¹ ‘Picture Gallery’, *The Times*, Friday 18th March 1966, p.8.

² L.C.C., *London Housing* (1937), p.171; L.C.C., *Housing, 1928-30*, p.25.

³ Merton Library Service (ed.), *Merton in Pictures 4: The St. Helier Estate* (L.B.M. Libraries, 1998), p.3.

in mind as its larger sister estate at Becontree. Three successive Housing Acts were passed in 1923, 1924 and 1925. The first was purely temporary, and addressed the issue of financial assistance, hoping that it would encourage private enterprises to build houses.⁴ Private enterprise had previously shaped the development of Welwyn and was later responsible for building a small number of homes at Becontree, deemed to be of a higher class; higher rents boosting the income of the local government. Around this time also it was brought about that every new house or flat should be equipped with a fixed bath; a stark contrast to shared washrooms, which was almost the norm just ten years previously. This push for better hygiene, however, was only aimed at new projects, with little emphasis on retrofitting existing, yet inadequately equipped, homes. This act also gave local authorities an advancement of their powers, including the ability to prosecute those who took part in any schemes detrimental to the clearance and reconstruction of unhealthy areas.⁵ The Act of 1924 proved to be another step forward for housing, aiming to construct around 2,500,000 homes in Great Britain. The scheme was planned to last for fifteen years, with the production rate gradually increasing over the period.⁶ Housing legislation had evolved since 1919, but the focus on health maintained, 'the Housing Act, 1925, is divided into five parts, three of which provide the main weapons for combating the evils attendant upon neglect, faulty construction and lay-out of houses and groups of houses, and insufficiency of accommodation'.⁷ By the time St. Helier came into existence, legislation may have developed further on the 1919 principles, but its roots can still effectively be traced to Lloyd George's Wolverhampton speech of the previous decade. Indeed, it is evident that the wider socio-political influences were successfully manifested at St. Helier.

⁴ L.C.C., *Housing* (1928), pp.8-9.

⁵ L.C.C., *Housing* (1928), p.9.

⁶ L.C.C., *Housing* (1928), pp.9-10.

⁷ L.C.C., *Housing* (1928), p.13.

Homes fit for Heroes: Douglas Haig Memorial Homes

There is one aspect of the St. Helier Estate that is consistently mentioned in contemporaneous literature on housing, both independently published by the L.C.C. and in national press. These are the Douglas Haig Memorial Homes, named for the Field Marshall who led the British Expeditionary force from December 1915 until the end of the First World War. Haig had passed away in January 1928, and soon after there were motions to build memorials to him; most notably the Lord Mayor of London, who pledged a sum of £5,250 for a memorial to Haig in March 1928.⁸ Nonetheless, it was decided that a charitable trust would serve as a longer lasting and wider reaching legacy to his name and, perhaps questionable, wartime achievements. Wealthy donors were sought for the trust fund, and it was mooted that the upcoming Empire Day celebrations might serve as a successful fundraising exercise.⁹ The trust gained some momentum, and it assumed a more sizeable budget when Edward, Prince of Wales, announced his patronage the following week.¹⁰ By June 1928 the trust had collected in excess of £100,000 and was beginning to investigate possible sites to build homes; with Liverpool and Sheffield identified at this earliest stage.¹¹

The trust gained more impetus and eventually approached the L.C.C. in 1929 to discuss the possibility of building Douglas Haig Memorial Homes on St. Helier to serve both as a tribute to him and to accommodate disabled ex-servicemen and their widows.¹² The majority of the fifteen acres of land were gifted to the trust, but they were later given the option to invoke a 999 year lease on an additional nine and three quarter acres at a nominal fee of £5,750 paid in full to the council.¹³ On the surface, this initial action seems incredibly generous from the L.C.C. and their planners, if 9.75 acres of land was priced at £5,750 it can be calculated that

⁸ 'City's Gift to Lord Haig Memorial', *The Times*, Friday 9th March 1928, p.14.

⁹ 'Haig Memorial Fund', *The Times*, Saturday 10th March 1928, p.9.

¹⁰ 'Douglas Haig Memorial Homes, Prince of Wales as Patron', *The Times*, Thursday 15th March 1928, p.16.

¹¹ 'Haig Memorial Homes, £105,000 Collected', *The Times*, Thursday 21st June 1928, p.12.

¹² L.C.C., *Housing (1928-30)*, p.33.

¹³ 'Haig Memorial Homes', *The Times*, Tuesday 29th October 1929, p.28.

they were losing out on around £8,850 in revenue by donating the land, if of course the same premium was applied to it as was to the smaller section of land. Yet, a cleverly implemented clause in the agreement made certain the L.C.C. recouped their initial losses; at least 90% of tenants should be selected from potential applicants who lived in the County of London or who had worked within its boundaries for a substantial amount of time.¹⁴

Although it is clearly evidenced that the L.C.C. were not as generous as it was first assumed, it can still be seen that they were making a concerted effort to keep the notion of Homes fit for Heroes alive a decade after it first came to the fore. Thus, a clear trajectory of Homes fit for Heroes can be traced from the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919, through Becontree and the subsequent legislation to the construction of the Douglas Haig Memorial Homes at St. Helier. Yet it must be analysed as to how far the rest of the estate complied with the town planning ideologies of the period as well as the efforts to build a fully functioning community, and its influence on post Second World War developments.

Garden Cities influences

Another of the period's conceptual mainstays can also be traced through the construction of St. Helier, as with Becontree before it: Howard's egalitarian principles of the Garden Cities movement. A report in *The Times* of October 1927 praised the planned preservation of natural features during construction, heralding it as an incorporation of the era's prevailing ideology:

'This will not be the largest of the L.C.C. estates on the fringe of London, but it will naturally be one of the most up-to-date, and a considerable proportion of the 843 acres will be reserved for open spaces, while a natural avenue of trees is to be carefully preserved together with the well-wooded nature of the land ... the River

¹⁴ L.C.C., *Housing, 1928-30*, p.33.

Wandle acts as a natural boundary, and the only road in Green-lane, with its continuation Wrythe-lane. The trees in the first-named lane are to be preserved by making the lane a footway and forming new carriage ways on either side.¹⁵

The continuation of the principles of the Garden Cities movement becomes apparent with an investigation into the ratio between the houses themselves and open tracts of land. The aforementioned newspaper article reveals that the first houses planned on the St. Helier site in 1927 were to be built twelve to the acre.¹⁶ Using the total accommodation figures published by the L.C.C. a decade later and the original architect's plans, one can calculate the approximate land usage. The most common style of cottage on the estate were the three roomed variety, numbering 3,107.¹⁷ If one uses these, with the approximate 349 square foot footprint, as a figurative example of the twelve houses built per acre, it is evident that just over 90% of said acre is left free for front and back gardens, other open spaces and roads.¹⁸ In total, 130 acres (16%) of the total land was open space.¹⁹ In addition, a great deal of care was taken by the architects to preserve as much of the existing natural features as possible, even if the preservation of a tree meant losing space for a cottage. From contemporary accounts, one can also imagine the visual splendour of the estate. Five brick colours and four shades of roofing tiles were used in different combinations to avoid the degree of monotony at Becontree, where the endless identical homes were only distinguishable by their gardens.²⁰ Although such neatness may have been aesthetically pleasing, residents and the council alike were eager to break the tedium. At Watling, an L.C.C. estate in Middlesex, Virginia Creeper

¹⁵ 'New L.C.C Housing Estate, Development of 800 acres in Surrey', *The Times*, Fri 21st October 1927, p.13.

¹⁶ 'New L.C.C Housing Estate', *The Times*, p.13.

¹⁷ L.C.C., *London Housing* (1937), p.171.

¹⁸ Estimated from G. Topham Forrest's plan for a three room cottage on the Becontree Estate, Dagenham, dated July 1923, in the LBB D Becontree Estate House Plan Collection. The architect then worked on the St. Helier Estate later in the decade, thus there is a large probability that dimensions would have been kept as a standard.

¹⁹ Merton Library Service, *Merton in Pictures*, p.3-4.

²⁰ Gardening on all L.C.C. estates was encouraged by the regular holding of competitions. See *L.C.C. Becontree Tenants Handbook* (December, 1933), p.20 and L.C.C. Housing and Valuation Department, *A Guide to Gardening* (1948), held in Becontree Topic Box 2 of 2, at the L.B.B.D Archives.

was planted which slowly covered most houses and ‘turned brilliant red in the autumn ... and it looked absolutely beautiful’.²¹ This was only removed when it became too difficult to maintain, yet at St. Helier it seems that a viable aesthetic solution was found. Simon Parker, while discussing interwar housing schemes, praises the later schemes of Watling and Roehampton for their better social facilities and attempts to alleviate the monotony. However, he concludes that the some monotonous designs Raymond Unwin and Henrietta Barnett sought to eliminate in the garden cities were still persisted in the L.C.C. estates.²²

Infrastructure

However, much like its larger contemporary at Becontree, St. Helier was not without its complications. Yet, in the five to six years between the beginnings of Becontree and the initial development at St. Helier, the L.C.C. had more than enough time and evidence to alter any aspect they felt needed. As such, Becontree could be seen as an experiment in social housing, the results of which would define approaches to social housing and estate building for the rest of the inter-war period and arguably beyond, into the post-war housing boom and New Town projects.

The site that was to become the St. Helier Estate was recommended to the L.C.C. Housing Committee in November 1925, with a report stressing the advantages of Morden and Carshalton for the construction of a housing development.²³ This is in stark contrast to the way the site in Dagenham was chosen, according to O’Leary; whereby no larger site was readily available near to London, being twelve miles from Charing Cross, with the widely open area previously proving out of favour with suburban developers.²⁴ The earmarking of land in the region would have also been affected by the planned transport improvements

²¹ Rubinstein, *Just Like The Country*, p.43

²² Simon Parker, ‘From the Slums to the Suburbs: Labour Party Policy, the L.C.C. and the Woodberry Down Estate, Stoke Newington 1934-1961’, *The London Journal*, (Volume 24, Issue 2), pp.51-69.

²³ Merton Library Service (ed.), *Merton in Pictures: The St. Helier Estate*, p.3.

²⁴ O’Leary, *The Book of Dagenham*, 3rd Edition, p.40

around the area. The first of which was the Sutton by-pass, built as a result of large expenditure of around £4.3 million by the Ministry of Transport London Area Programme.²⁵ The by-pass was originally designed to relieve the strain put on the old Sutton high road by the increasing volume of motor vehicles in the 1920s. Although there were difficulties in the initial construction – the by-pass was intersected by the railway, and initially had no bridge thus presumably was forced to rely on a level crossing – it was officially opened in 1928.²⁶ From a parliamentary debate in the 1950s regarding road safety in the area, it was revealed that the by-pass was not altered since its construction; as such it remained a four lane highway, which narrowed in places to three lanes.²⁷ This would have been particularly beneficial for the construction of a large scale development, providing links to London that was seemingly adequate enough to accommodate heavy traffic. The L.C.C. architect who planned St. Helier and Becontree before it, George Topham Forrest, had himself voiced concerns about the poor state of London's roads in 1926, 'at present we are not making the best use of our streets ... some of them are over-used, some of them under-used'.²⁸

Railways stimulate the growth of St. Helier

The expansion of the railways into the area would have also made the St. Helier site more lucrative to the L.C.C.'s developers. Railways had been an important factor in the development of L.C.C. schemes for a long time. Land around the White Hart Lane estate was chosen specifically as it has access to two mainline stations, the tramways and there was the prospect of a tube project serving the area directly if built in the near future.²⁹ However, unlike W.G.C. and Becontree before it, the site did not have established rail links. A route between Wimbledon and Sutton had been proposed for many years, with the Wimbledon &

²⁵ Jackson, *Semi-Detached London*, p.112.

²⁶ 'Sutton By-Pass Road', H.C. Debate, Tuesday 22nd February 1927, vol. 202, cols. 1570-1571.

²⁷ 'Road Accidents, Sutton Bypass', H.C. Debate, Tuesday 29th July 1958, vol. 592, col. 1318-1324.

²⁸ George Topham Forrest, speech to Institute of Public Administration, 25th February 1926, later published as 'London One Hundred Years Hence', *Public Administration*, vol. 4, no. 2, (April, 1926), pp.156-174.

²⁹ Thorne, 'The White Hart Lane Estate', *The London Journal*, p.81.

Sutton Railway being established as part of the passage of an Act of Parliament in 1910.³⁰ War postponed the construction, and an updated version of the Act received royal assent in 1923. This gave the Southern Railway the impetus to begin building, with a focus on the encouragement of development in the area. In the very same session, the City & South London Railway Act, 1923, was passed allowing the line to extend from its existing terminus at Clapham to Sutton providing a link between the two companies; yet the route was later shortened to Morden after much deliberation.³¹

An article from *The Times* in 1924, when the extension of the line to Morden was still in the planning stages, discusses the benefits of the railways in encouraging the working ‘city men’ to settle in a residential area. The piece discusses the development of Golders Green, which became a northern terminus of the Charing Cross, Euston and Hampstead Railway in 1907. It was in this year that the suburb of Golders Green became a desirable area for the so-called ‘city men’, where land was worth £150 per acre, by the date of publication the estimate was £3,000, a positive result of the arrival of the ‘tube’. Perhaps most intriguing is the writer’s conclusion on the link between the expansion of the railways and urban development:

‘One of the most interesting sides of the transport system of London is the way, since the later development of the Tube and electric railways, the home builder and the railway engineer keep step, mile by mile almost, as the Tube reaches out farther into the country on the outskirts of London.’³²

Alan Jackson discusses the stimulation of the area brought by the railways, with no fewer than half a dozen distinct estate agents’ pavilions being in sight of the railway terminus at

³⁰ ‘Royal Assent’, including the Wimbledon & Sutton Railway Act, 1910, H.C. Debate, Tuesday 6th July 1910, vol.19, cols. 2023-2032.

³¹ ‘Royal Assent’, including the Wimbledon & Sutton Railway Act, 1923 and the City & South London Railway Act, 1923, H.C. Debate, Thursday 2nd August 1923, vol. 167, cols. 1822-1823.

³² ‘The Extending Tube, Opening up the Edgware Area’, *The Times*, Tuesday 22nd April 1924, p.9.

Golders Green.³³ Jackson corroborates with the story published at the turn of the century, even going so far as to triple the figures aforesaid. Agricultural land that had previously been leased to farmers at a rate between £3 and £3 10s annually was being sold off at an astounding fee equivalent to £10,000 an acre, which had risen from the £5,500 two years previously, and was treble the *Times*' estimation.³⁴ It must have been hoped that the arrival of the railways to the terminus at Sutton would have stimulated growth in much the same manner, as well as attracting wealthy patrons willing to invest in the local economy. However, as with the acquisition of the land at Becontree earlier in the period, this was not how the L.C.C. preferred to operate; compulsory purchase orders meant the landowners in Sutton and Carshalton were virtually forced to accept a previously agreed fee.

St Helier as a 'clump-suburb'

Initially, there was no provision made by the Southern Railway to build a station that directly served the estate or its residents; the preceding and following stations on the route would have been three quarters of a mile from the estate's boundary. Yet, with some bartering of land by the L.C.C. a dedicated St. Helier Station was fully operational by 1930.³⁵ It sat in an ample 12 acre parcel of land that was in fact conveyed to the railway company free of charge.³⁶ Although on the surface, the conveyance of free land may have seemed like a poor business model, but the benefits are highly apparent. As aforementioned with the Golders Green example, a dedicated station would have appealed to the working man based in the city; with quick, direct access to London via either rail company an attractive prospect. In this period the L.C.C. ran an extensive tram system which encompassed almost all of the County of London, and co-operation with the South Metropolitan Electric Tramways would have

³³ Jackson, *Semi-Detached London*, First Edition, p.74.

³⁴ It is not clear whether Jackson is using an equivalent figure from the time he was writing to illustrate his point, or whether he had calculated a price per acre from transactions of smaller pockets of land. See Jackson, *Semi-Detached London*, First Edition, p.75.

³⁵ L.C.C., *Housing, 1928-30* (Westminster, London, 1931), p.25.

³⁶ Jackson, *Semi-Detached London*, p.309.

allowed for the expansion of the service to the new estate at St. Helier, yet it appears this partnership did not come to fruition, and the L.C.C. solely dealt with the tramways.³⁷ Thus, it can be seen that St Helier is a model example of a ‘clump-suburb’, a term coined by architect Arthur Edwards to describe the evolution of a settlement around a transport hub which would have in time coalesced to form one major built up area.³⁸

Further development of the L.C.C. approach since Becontree

Nevertheless, what sets St. Helier apart from Becontree? It too had important rail links to the capital for employment, and to the coast for pleasure. Yet, transportation was fundamentally flawed due to the poor infrastructure; roads, if they existed beyond a well-worn track, were not suitable for heavy use and there was a distinct lack of mobility afforded between transport hubs. The designers of St. Helier learned from these mistakes, improving upon the flawed Becontree model. As previously discussed the Sutton by-pass was completed by the time the land was acquired by the L.C.C., and can be seen as a pivotal factor on the selection of that particular section of land for development.³⁹ It seemed as though in the earliest stages, the St. Helier pioneers, to continue Young’s characterisation of cottage estate residents, faced similar hardships to their Becontree predecessors.

Thus, as far as transportation is concerned, it can be seen the planning improvements made by the L.C.C.’s developers in comparison to their Becontree model. This would therefore allow the residents ease of access to the capital for work related purposes, and to allow the people of the new development to maintain family and community ties to their extended relations across the County of London. Good rail links also shaped the building of the estate. The L.C.C.’s convention of implementing light railways to transport materials around the

³⁷ L.C.C., *Housing (1928-30)*, p.25, p.28. see also L.C.C., *Housing (1928)*, p.107.

³⁸ Edwards, *The design of suburbia*, p.117.

³⁹ L.C.C., *London Housing (1937)*, p.166.

building site continued at St. Helier, as it had successfully done at Forrest's other schemes at Burnt Oak and Becontree.⁴⁰

Employment for residents

The high standard of infrastructure was indeed vital for the working man, and for the preservation of family ties. Ivy Ward, who moved to St. Helier early in its development held fond memories of her London family coming down to see their 'country cousins'.⁴¹ As was the case at Becontree, the majority of the tenants were of a working-class origin, but took on various tasks of differing skills, a far cry from the interpretation of impoverished, out of work people struggling to survive. Gerald Hyder, in his study of 1977, investigated the occupations of the heads of household in 1939, three years after the completion of the estate. It is fair to state that the figures he provides are a sufficient representation of the people living on the estate; 5,467 heads of household are recorded in the survey, approximately 60.3% of the total dwellings on the estate. By far the most prevalent occupation is that of labourer, returning a figure of 868, but there are also higher skilled jobs such as carpenter, electrician, engineer and plumbers as well as administrative and public service roles such as clerks, railway workers and bus company employees.⁴² It is almost certain that the majority of these roles involved travelling into the city, relying on the superior transport links afforded to the residents. One resident remembered her father's plight before moving to the estate, which meant he had to cycle between Dagenham and Wimbledon daily, a journey well over 20 miles each way, for work with a major scaffolding company. Presumably this was to save money on train fare, maximising his living wage. After his move, his journey to work would have consisted of a short train journey, thus vastly improving his standard of living.⁴³

⁴⁰ Merton Library Service, *Merton in Pictures*, p.4.

⁴¹ St. Helier Estate Reminiscence Group, *Reminiscences of St. Helier Estate*, (Wallington, Surrey, 1999), p.1.

⁴² See Table 3 for full table of employment, surveyed in 1939.

⁴³ St. Helier Reminiscence Group, *Reminiscences of St. Helier*, p.18.

Education

In terms of education, the provision of schools at St. Helier seems a vast improvement on the situation at Becontree, whereby the E.C.C. were entrusted with clearing up the confusion left in the wake of L.C.C. negligence. Upon the opening of a school, the Chairman of the Surrey County Council (S.C.C.), James Chuter Ede, remarked that ‘nothing could have been happier than the relationship between the S.C.C. and the L.C.C. in the provision of public services on the estate’.⁴⁴ There were nine school sites planned as part of the estates development, yet only eight were ever completed originally, with the additional site used as open space until demand for places got so high that a ninth school became a necessity.⁴⁵ Yet, this was a lot later in the estate’s development. In 1935, there were 9,212 children of school age on the site, seemingly not fulfilling the earlier estimate that 9,871 school places would have been needed. A ninth school could not have possibly been justified at this stage. It was estimated that the cost of maintaining the education on the estate, including the wages of 25 head teachers and 214 assistant teachers, would be around £126,472 per annum.⁴⁶

The first school on the estate opened two years after construction began in 1930, it was built by the S.C.C. and known simply by its number, ‘One’.⁴⁷ Kitty Birchall, who moved to the estate as a young girl remembered the large open plan classrooms where ‘everything seemed bright and new and happy’, which was almost certainly better equipped than her previous school.⁴⁸ Dorothy Barton, who arrived on the estate in the earliest weeks of the summer holiday, seemed content that she didn’t have to go to school, seeing as she couldn’t remember noticing anything that resembled a school building. Much like Florence Essam of Becontree, she lost her opportunity of a ‘higher’ standard of education; the offer of complimentary

⁴⁴ ‘Schools on St. Helier Estate, County Council Chairman and Administration’, *The Times*, Monday 25th February 1935, p.18.

⁴⁵ Merton Library Service, *Merton in Pictures*, p.6.

⁴⁶ ‘Schools on St. Helier Estate’, *The Times*, p.18.

⁴⁷ Merton Library Service, *Merton in Pictures*, p.6.

⁴⁸ *Reminiscences of St. Helier Estate*, p.9.

scholarship at a fee paying London school was quickly rescinded upon her move south of the river.⁴⁹ There were fears among the adult population that they would not get on with others, due to a hypothetical divide between those from northern London and those from the south, yet seemingly the children had no trouble building positive relationships with their classmates.⁵⁰ The only animosity recalled between the youngest residents was between those living on the main St. Helier estate and those living in the Haig Homes Estate which was situated on the outskirts; this however was no more than a childish rivalry.⁵¹ This is in stark contrast to the divisions between residents at the other L.C.C. developments, where tensions ran high between different groups, especially those who felt the new residents were intruding upon their way of living.

The development of community

The community itself followed the trend, with local residents establishing links and friendship with their neighbours. Sometimes however, the bonds forged were even stronger; Eileen Nielson and Cathleen Hargreaves remembered the prevalent yet spontaneous practice of intermarriage, whereby a tighter knit community was forged. Nielson and Hargreaves felt like the roads became small villages, where everyone was all but related to one another; even passing comment that people living near them were still related one generation on, during the reminiscence groups' research in the late 1990s.⁵² This is testament alone to the strength of the community values at St. Helier; despite the residents originating from all over London, they could come together as one and forge a new community out of what could well have deteriorated into a somewhat soulless development inhabited by indifferent residents.

⁴⁹ Rubinstein, *Just Like the Country*, p.66.

⁵⁰ St. Helier Reminiscence Group, *Reminiscences of St. Helier*, p.2.

⁵¹ *Reminiscences of St. Helier*, p.7.

⁵² *Reminiscences of St. Helier*, p.4.

As was common in this period, the main community hubs were either of a religious nature such a church or community centre, or the ever popular public houses. Forrest's plan from 1925 shows the intended locations for most aspects of community life; a variety of shop sites located at busy intersections, two cinemas, places of worship for various denominations, a community centre, a clinic, playing fields and allotments.⁵³ In line with the L.C.C.'s attitudes towards drinking and the association of alcohol with problems; the premises were to be 'refreshment houses' which would serve meals and non-alcoholic beverages as well as provide entertainment and accommodation. Indeed, the L.C.C. had a long history of intervening directly in working-class culture since its establishment in 1889.⁵⁴ Between its establishment and the beginning of the First World War, the L.C.C. took over the licences of 157 public houses in poorer, working-class districts, and allowed 153 of these to expire.⁵⁵ The most active step towards the elimination of public houses and overarching temperance occurred when the Boundary Street estate was opened in 1900. The 10 landlords in the immediate area were stripped of their licence when it expired.⁵⁶ Despite the temperance movement, three licensed refreshment houses at St. Helier were given the council's approval in March 1930, but not without opposition from some councillors, most notably from Nettie Adler. Her chief argument was surrounding the rural location of the estate, combined with the fact that the residents did not ask for refreshment houses, nor had any input in the facilities planned upon. In addition to this, there were also doubts over the rules regarding the focus being entertainment rather than passively encouraging alcoholism, with site visits showing that these facilities existed in theory only, being reduced to an unfurnished room in reality.⁵⁷ This conclusion was damning for the L.C.C.'s attempted revolution of public houses, yet, it

⁵³ See Figure 6, G. Topham Forrest's Plan for the St. Helier Estate, (1925).

⁵⁴ Chris Waters, 'Progressives, Puritans and the Cultural Politics of the Council, 1889-1914', in Andrew Saint (ed.), *Politics and the People of London: The London County Council 1889-1965* (London, 1989), pp.49-70.

⁵⁵ Waters, 'Progressives, Puritans and the Cultural Politics', in Saint, *Politics and the People of London*, p.69.

⁵⁶ Waters, 'Progressives, Puritans and the Cultural Politics', in Saint, *Politics and the People of London*, p.69.

⁵⁷ 'The St. Helier Estate, L.C.C. and Licensed Houses', *The Times*, Wednesday 19th March 1930, p.20.

can be said that while Adler's outlook stems from a logical argument of the 'evils' of alcohol, it was incredibly naïve given the pub's potential to become a cornerstone of working-class community life.

As far as the welfare of the new tenants is concerned, the development at St. Helier seemed strikingly similar to that of Becontree. The St. Helier Hospital was planned in the mid-1930s, and was due to be constructed opposite the open space situated at the northern end of the estate. The lack of funding was a hindering factor in the grand scheme of development. The plans ultimately come to fruition between 1937 and 1938, a move which assured public health services for the residents of the estate, although a lot later than initially hoped. The original 1935 proposal for its construction calculated an expenditure of £667,366, but this rose to £990,387 over two years due to the ever increasing costs of materials and labour.⁵⁸ Yet, an investment in public health services was what was sorely needed for the densely populated area that had grown over the last ten years. It was estimated by the S.C.C. that the large scale design of the hospital, with room to accommodate 862 patients could comfortably cope with the needs of the 400,000 strong population in the east of the county.⁵⁹

Conclusions

It can be seen that the St. Helier Estate follows a clear trajectory, from W.G.C., through Becontree and the other out of county estates. The Garden City principle of town-country were used at St. Helier more explicitly than evidenced at Becontree, with literature mentioning it a great deal, rather than being left to interpretation of land allocation and plans at the latter. Yet, in contrast to the Garden City model, residents still travelled out of the area to find work. While family members were spread around the County of London, a distinctly new community developed over time as would be expected with a working-class estate made

⁵⁸ 'New Hospital for Surrey, Estimated Cost of Nearly £1,000,000', *The Times*, Weds. 30th June 1937, p.13

⁵⁹ 'New Hospital for Surrey', *The Times*, p.13

up of predominantly ex-London residents. Amenities were plentiful in the planning stages, and given time they became reality, the development stimulated by the superb transport links. An L.C.C. publication from 1937 somewhat immodestly boasts that ‘the estate is entirely self-contained’.⁶⁰ Yet, such grand claims, as customary, are certainly unsubstantiated. For a development of such size, it is almost impossible to be self-contained. Indeed, there was provision for every child of school age to have a place; with one school not required due to an over-estimation, healthcare with the coming of the St. Helier Hospital was assured for the population, and there was plenty to keep the residents entertained. Yet, employment is the greatest challenge to this claim of self-containment, there were not enough jobs for everyone of a working age to be employed within the estate boundaries. Many still had to travel further afield to find employment, with London being the principal destination.

⁶⁰ L.C.C., *London Housing* (1937), p.171.

Table 3:

**Table of Occupations of the Heads of Households on the St. Helier Estate, surveyed
January 1939**

Source: Gerald Hyder, *The St. Helier Estate: the planning and establishment of an L.C.C. housing estate* (Brighton College, 1977) cited in Merton Library & Heritage Services, *Merton in Pictures, Book 4: The St Helier Estate* (L.B.M. Education, Leisure and Library Services, May 1998), p.5.

Heads of Households	Occupation in January 1939
Bricklayer	111
Carpenter	203
Clerk	342
Compositor or Printer	267
Electrician	112
Engineer	127
Fitter / Plumber	220
Labourer	868
Metal Worker	144
Motor Driver	408
Bus Conductor	162
Bus Driver	99
Packer	141
Painter or Decorator	350
Pensioner	237
Porter	212
Post Office Worker	428
Railway Worker	471
Warehouseman or Shopkeeper	372
Widow	149
'Miscellaneous' or No Employment	144



Figure 6: L.C.C. Architect G. Topham Forrest's plan of the St. Helier Estate (1925).

Source: L.C.C., *London Housing* (London, 1937), plate facing p.166.

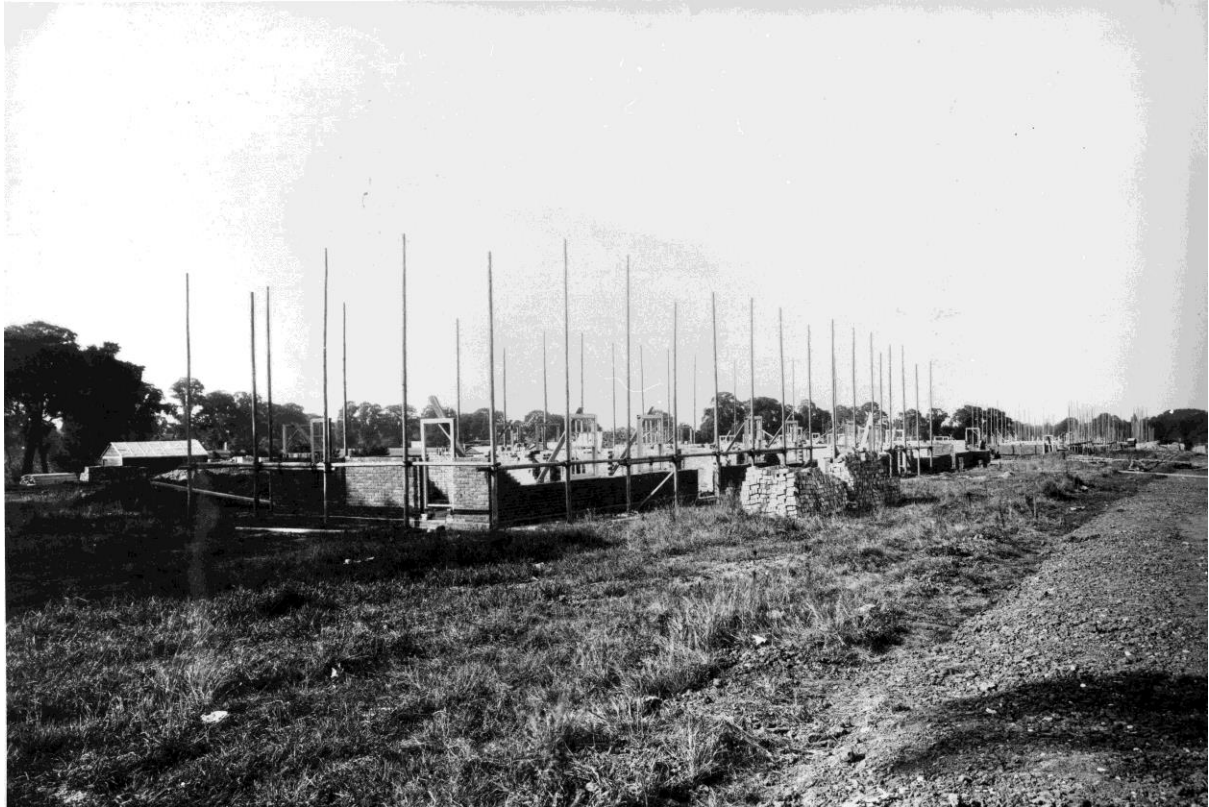


Figure 7: Construction near the Sutton By-pass (1929). Ref: SBCH 91



Figure 8: The St Helier Estate railway, date unknown. Ref: SBCH 91



Figure 9: Middleton Road under construction (c.1929). Ref: SBCH 91

Chapter 5

Legacy of the Interwar Developments and Conclusions

The Second World War abruptly halted housing regeneration for a six year period. It is estimated that half a million houses in Britain were destroyed and made uninhabitable during the Blitz, with a further quarter of a million suffering severe damage. By far the worst affected was London, where an estimated 50,000 homes were levelled and over a million required repairs of some degree.¹

The geographer Laurence Dudley Stamp likened the destruction of the Blitz to the Great Fire of London. He argued that the latter should have been used as a catalyst for modernisation, spearheaded by Christopher Wren who ‘not only designed St. Paul’s Cathedral but also produced a town plan for the surrounding devastated area’. Yet, London rose ‘from its ashes following the same, old narrow winding lanes as before’.² Stamp argued that the opportunity to modernise had arisen once more, and urged the L.C.C. not to make the same mistake.

Post-war legislation: County of London Plan (1943) and Greater London Plan (1944)

Stamp acknowledged that the City of London had long since ceased to be a residential centre, so rebuilding must be focused on the County of London, or ‘Greater London’, instead.³ This long awaited focus came in the form of the County of London Plan and the Greater London Plan, published a year apart. The plan’s architect and namesake, Patrick Abercrombie, spoke in October 1943 outlining some of its important aspects. He spoke frankly about London’s perceived shortcomings, yet all the while maintained his reverence:

¹ Milner Holland (ed.), *Report of the Committee on Housing in Greater London*, (London, 1965), p.11.

² L. Dudley Stamp, ‘Replanning London’, *Geographical Review*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (October, 1945), pp. 665-667.

³ Stamp, ‘Replanning London’, pp.665-666.

‘We accept London. We realize that London is our Capital. It is overgrown; it is congested; it is squalid by neglect and sprawls over the Home Counties. Nevertheless, there it is; and in spite of all its defects London is and has always been, in the main, beautiful. Any plan for London must accept, in my opinion, as a background those conditions. We must not, we cannot, and we should not attempt to dissipate London, to eradicate London, to crowd together something like a series of garden suburbs in the place of the great city of London, using the word city in its broadest sense’.⁴

Abercrombie discussed ‘the all-important issue of housing’, which one assumes means rehousing those who had lost their homes to war; yet, this does not seem to be the case. The chief issue was still the sub-standard living conditions, a problem Abercrombie blamed on the crowding of major European cities, London being no exception; ‘there are too many living in overcrowded and bad houses and on overcrowded sites’.⁵

The Greater London Plan sought to alleviate overcrowding by decreasing the population of Greater London. The target population of 1,030,000 was to be achieved by the building of satellite towns and a subsequent push to encourage outward migration from the city.⁶ It was hoped that this migration would bring the population density down to a much more manageable 75-100 people per acre.⁷ In the same year the Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act set a substantial budget of £150,000,000 for the purpose of rehoming bombed out families.⁸ Yet, this would be a short term fix, the budget covering the erection of prefabs with an intended life of just ten years, rather than permanent homes.

⁴ Patrick Abercrombie, ‘Some Aspects of the County of London Plan’, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 102, No. 5/6, (November – December, 1943), pp.227-238

⁵ Abercrombie, ‘Some Aspects of the County of London Plan’, p.230

⁶ Meryl Aldridge, *The British New Towns: a programme without a policy* (London, 1979), p.28.

⁷ Thomas, *London’s Green Belt*, p.59.

⁸ Holland, *Report of the Committee on Housing in Greater London*, p.12.

Post-war Cottage Estates

Despite the ever growing construction costs as a result of war, the L.C.C. continued its housing revolution after the Second World War. It was estimated in 1945 that a total of 200,000 permanent homes were needed in order to conform to the Greater London Plan; 100,000 of which were to be built as soon as possible.⁹ It must be asked what, if anything, these post-WWII housing developments learnt from their post-WWI counterparts.

The ideology of the cottage estate, of which Becontree and St. Helier were the largest, survived the war. By 1949, one cottage was expected to accommodate a family of the national average of 3.6 persons. As such, the post-war cottage estates which included Borehamwood in Hertfordshire and Aveley in Essex were expected to accommodate a population of 150,000 people.¹⁰ Perhaps the best point of comparison with the earlier out of county estates is the extensive Harold Hill Estate; which comprised 7,380 dwellings at its eventual completion in 1958.¹¹

Harold Hill is less than ten miles from the earlier, landmark development in Dagenham, and a clear trajectory can be seen from interwar cottage estates and its' Garden City predecessors. The Garden Cities influenced open spaces and green belts ubiquitous in the L.C.C.'s cottage estates are still easily identifiable on plans of both Harold Hill.¹² The preservation of, and somewhat respect for the Green Belt by the L.C.C. was praised by the contemporary Romford authorities, although it meant they could not possibly expand further if the population was to swell once more.¹³ Meanwhile at Borehamwood open spaces were also well utilised. The overall development was split in three distinct sections positioned on three

⁹ London County Council, *Housing, A Survey of the Post War Housing work of the London County Council, 1945-1949*, (Westminster, London, 1949), p.7.

¹⁰ L.C.C., *Post War Housing*, p.12.

¹¹ L.C.C., *Post War Housing*, p.13, p.16.

¹² L.C.C., *Post War Housing*, p.13, p.16.

¹³ *Romford, Essex: Official Guide – 1955/6*, pp.31-32.

sides of the existing settlement. Of the total area of the two larger sections, 605 acres, 99.25 acres (16.4%) were open spaces.¹⁴

Lessons learned from the interwar period

During the interwar period, the L.C.C. focused predominantly on the building of houses, leaving other provisions such as education and transport to their county counterparts. In most cases, a lack of communication meant the new residents suffered. J.G. O’Leary effectively summed up the lack of foresight by the L.C.C. at Becontree in 1937, ‘I doubt if the original promoters of the scheme realised its vast implications and the endless ripples that this stone would create which they threw into the quiet pool of Dagenham’.¹⁵

It must be assessed as to how much the L.C.C. remedied their mistakes when they embarked on a new social housing crusade after the Second World War. From the plans of the Harold Hill Estate it is clear to see that there had been eleven school sites earmarked for development spread across the site in 1948, covering a total of 121.6 acres.¹⁶ It was proposed that the walking distances between houses and amenities, schools in particular, would be kept to the minimum, utilising the layout of the estate whereby school sites were linked with green strips.¹⁷ It is evident that eleven school sites would have still made the local schools oversubscribed when the Harold Hill Estate was eventually finished. Thus, it is apparent that plans were hastily changed to meet the needs of the new tenants. In a local government produced guide of Romford published eighteen months before the estate’s completion, a total of thirty new sites were identified – of which eight secondary (grammar, technical and

¹⁴ Total figure calculated from the sum of entries for ‘woodlands’, ‘recreation grounds’, ‘children’s play space’, ‘public parks’, ‘Brookside reservation’ and ‘sports grounds’ in tables ‘Schedule of Areas’ in L.C.C., *Housing, A Survey of the Post War Housing work of the L.C.C.*, pp.20-21.

¹⁵ O’Leary, *The Book of Dagenham*, (1937), p.34.

¹⁶ L.C.C., *A Survey of the Post War Housing*, pp.16-17, p.28.

¹⁷ L.C.C., *A Survey of the Post War Housing*, p.28.

modern), thirteen primary and nine nurseries. These were in addition to the existing schools – nine secondary and thirty primaries.¹⁸

Conclusion

The principle aim of this study was to determine whether the three inter-war housing developments analysed were communities complete in themselves or merely early instances of dormitory towns. As such, a range of key themes were assessed in detail; the plans of the developers, how they took steps to aid the development of a community from virtually nothing, and what life was like for the new residents, including the provisions made for employment, education and transport, arguably the most important amenities.

Despite the individual traits of the three inter-war housing developments, it is clear to chart the trajectory bisecting them all. Although the developments were a result of the poor living conditions around the time of the First World War, their roots lie in the late nineteenth century. The developments of Port Sunlight and Bournville; model villages built to accommodate workers and alleviate the evils of housing, were ahead of their time. Within the parameters of this study, these towns were complete communities; amenities were provided and the majority of residents worked in the adjacent factories. The Garden City Movement was inspired by, and frequently paid tribute to, Lever and Cadbury. Although Howard is arguably the most recognised reformer of the period, historians have been quick to acknowledge his predecessors in order to reiterate that his concepts were a synthesis of earlier successful ideas. Letchworth and Welwyn were the only Garden Cities built, a far cry from the twenty initially envisioned. Yet, they were to have a profound impact on the later twentieth century developments; shaping the L.C.C. out of county estates, which followed the main Garden City principles to an extent making them ‘essays in the application of Howard’s

¹⁸ *Romford, Essex: Official Guide – 1955/6*, pp.28-29.

principles'.¹⁹ The largest developments, Becontree and St. Helier, were heralded as masterpieces of civil engineering; the latter overshadowed by its pioneering contemporary.

Yet, it cannot be said that any developments were perfect; all three had their flaws, in spite of the meticulous plans made for their development. The second Garden City at Welwyn was built with the lessons learned from Letchworth and two decades of progress in mind. Schools, although innovative in design, were not built quickly enough to accommodate the influx of children, resulting in many being taught in excess space, or being forced to look to neighbouring towns. There was an inherent problem with cohesion at Welwyn, highlighted by Silkin during the New Towns Act debate; the route of the railway split the community, with a class divide emerging between the two sides. Moreover, Welwyn never reached the level of autonomy that Howard had wished for, and although many high quality businesses were attracted to Welwyn, Shredded Wheat among them, there would never be enough jobs available to achieve self-sufficiency. Theoretically ambitious, and in reality an unachievable paradox, this was Welwyn's fundamental flaw and essentially relegated it to dormitory town status. The superior rail link to London, which served Howard admirably during the countless international delegations, soon played a key role in its shortcomings. Edwards highlights the technological developments of transport during the period as another decisive factor; commuting was become easier, cleaner and indeed more attractive with the advent of the motor car and the electrical revolution on some of the nations' railways.²⁰

Becontree, it seems, would inevitably make the same mistake. In contrast to Welwyn, it was government funded, under the banner of Lloyd George's 'Homes fit for Heroes' crusade at the end of the First World War. A substantial budget was to be set aside for the construction of out of county estates built by the L.C.C. after they were granted impetus with the passage

¹⁹ Edwards, *The Design of Suburbia*, p.83.

²⁰ Edwards, *The design of suburbia*, pp.83-84

of the Addison Act. After funds were squandered by the frivolous Addison, spending had to be curtailed, yet a high standard of construction was somehow maintained, with a focus on green belts and open spaces. Despite these influences, Young maintains that 'Becontree is a housing estate not a Garden City'.²¹ For the new tenants life was an improvement upon their old lives in the East End. Many, however, could not cope with their new surroundings and struggled to separate themselves from 'home' in Bethnal Green, Whitechapel or Stepney.

Education was chief among Becontree's flaws, with the provision of schools seemingly an afterthought on the part of the L.C.C. Many young residents were forced to forego their ambitions of attending grammar schools as lack of provision and equally poor transport links meant the nearest one was inaccessible. Yet, perhaps more importantly, those attending state schools, the vast majority, were equally as blighted, with some missing months of education. Major, internationally significant industry was eventually attracted, as it was at Welwyn, with the arrival of the Ford Motor Company in 1931. The majority of the factory's workforce originated in the Becontree Estate, such was the widespread prose of 'dependable Ford cars' built by assiduous British workmen in the 1920s and 1930s.²² Nonetheless, many early Becontree residents sought to keep their jobs, actively seeking justification to leave as frequently as possible; such was their difficulty in adapting. Although the transport between their location and the railway stations were poor, rail travel in itself was superb with a choice of two railway companies each completing the journey to London in thirty minutes, boosted by the arrival of the District Railway in 1932.

As such, the restlessness of the earliest residents, coupled with the proximity to, and ease of reaching London almost immediately transformed Becontree into a dormitory settlement. The scarcity of public houses, natural community hubs, would not have aided the situation. Yet,

²¹ Young, *Becontree and Dagenham*, p.26.

²² 'Ford, British Materials and Labour' advertisement, *The Times*, Monday 10th February 1930, p.9.

the L.C.C. still proudly declared that the development was a ‘township more or less complete in itself’, with Home concluding the ‘more or less’ preface reflects the ‘trepidation with which the venture was approached’.²³ Yet no rhetorical loopholes could offset the development’s shortcomings in the attempt to live up to this bold statement.

The same mistake was made in 1937, after the completion of St. Helier. A widely attainable publication by the L.C.C. boasted that ‘the estate is entirely self-contained’.²⁴ Once again, the assertions are merely superficial, with little or no supporting evidence. Although less than half the size of Becontree, it was no less as implausible for St. Helier to embody the idealised ‘township complete in itself’.

Education at St. Helier was a vast improvement on the somewhat dire situation at Becontree, as was the infrastructure, with the Sutton By-pass facilitating the large scale nature of the building process. Nine schools were eventually provided for the children of the new estate, with a tenth not built as there was no immediate need for it, such was the foresight and somewhat superior standard of planning. The Garden Cities ideologies were also evident at St. Helier, arguably more so than at Becontree, with natural features actively preserved, even if this eventually meant sacrificing space for a cottage or two. Open spaces were also extensive, with part of the green belt only forsaken during the building of the St. Helier Hospital in 1937. The community grew organically, with neighbourhood intermarriage common, but was helped by the measures taken to encourage its growth. The only friction recorded were petty rivalries between the children of the estate and the separate Haig Homes development. Employment on the estate was just as varied as it was at Welwyn and Becontree before it, albeit without a large scale business; with labourers, postal and rail

²³ Home, *‘A Township Complete in Itself’*, p.7.

²⁴ L.C.C., *London Housing* (1937), p.171.

workers, shopkeepers and clerks making up the majority of the heads of households.²⁵ Yet, those with specialist vocations still had to commute to their place of work, be it a longer commute to central London, or a short train journey to Wimbledon.

In the final analysis, it cannot be said that any of the three case studies were complete communities. Welwyn was seen as the pinnacle of housing and town planning by the majority of its contemporaries; it had been built using lessons learned from twenty years of Garden City development, and had inspired a spate of similar projects worldwide. Yet, it was far from a fully functioning community. The L.C.C. estates at Becontree and St. Helier built on the principles that were successful at Welwyn, and a community did develop, yet were too close to London to thrive as *complete* communities, and quickly became dormitory towns with many commuters opting to work in the capital rather than seek employment in their new surroundings. The only difference, according to Olechnowicz, being class; Welwyn was a middle class dormitory town, with Becontree, thus St. Helier also, leaning towards the working-classes.²⁶

The inter-war developments were the inspiration for a number of New Towns built after the end of the Second World War, and the ‘London overspill’ terminology is incredibly reminiscent, albeit lacking the appeal, of the ‘London in the country’ expression of the previous decades. It can be argued that these could never be complete communities either. ‘London overspill’ is, in essence, simply that; accommodation for London residents who would still presumably work in London, taking advantage of the transport links put in place.

Yet, it is unfair to judge the inter-war housing developments as total failures. Yes, they did not live up to the claims analysed in this investigation. Yet, they were successful in other areas. All alleviated the poor living conditions and poor health which initially inspired Lloyd

²⁵ See Table 3.

²⁶ Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing*, p.221.

George in 1918, with clean, modern homes. Much has been written surrounding the successes of Welwyn; the international visits, the global influences and the continuing fascination with the Garden Cities ideologies. The historiography alone is testament to its success.

As for the L.C.C. built estates at Becontree and St. Helier, they were the biggest of their kind, and the first out of county estates built. During this investigation contemporary writers have been criticised for their fascination with the size of Becontree in particular as it detracted from the historiographical debate sought. But, its size should not be overlooked; the fact that such an undertaking was completed is a feat in itself. One must admire the work of Forrest who endeavoured to make the developments individual, attempting to disrupt the monotony of the cottage estates, as well as catering for different needs. He used 92 different house designs at Becontree and implemented the use of several different colour bricks and roof tiles at St. Helier to aid the aesthetic nature of the development. As with Welwyn, they were frequently visited by dignitaries from at home; the King had visited Becontree in 1923; and overseas, most notably Russian and Australian dignitaries in the 1950s.

Housing and town planning is still, and will always be, an issue that requires attention. It is unlikely to be an issue shaped by the philanthropists and reformers, contemporary successors of Ebenezer Howard. It might never be an issue as politically charged as it was for David Lloyd George in 1918, but housing will always be pivotal in election campaigns. It has progressed greatly from the early twentieth century; the initial developments being shaped further by the post-war plans for Greater London, and the three generations of New Towns. Yet, despite the century of progression, there are still important lessons to be learned from the earliest developments. Chief among them is the provision of amenities for incoming tenants. After all, housing can be of the highest standard conceivable, but a shortage of school places and employment, and a lack of transportation will ultimately hinder the fledgling community.

Ebbsfleet: a twenty-first century Garden City?

Lastly, the Garden City terminology prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century is getting a new lease of life in the twenty-first century, with developments aspiring to the principles, just as Southport did in 1903. Arguably the most widely recognised example is that of Ebbsfleet in Kent, announced by Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne to be the site for a 15,000 home ‘Garden City’ as part of the 2014 Budget.²⁷ The naming of the development is an interesting one; yet it must be asked whether Ebbsfleet will live up to the true Garden City principles or is merely named as such in an attempt to make it more marketable. Some statements point to the latter, making homes built on former brownfield land seem more appealing for potential residents; the consensus seems to be on a twenty-first century Garden City in name only.

A total of £200 million has been set aside to provide infrastructure, aided by the Urban Development Corporation which is to be held accountable by local residents and businesses.²⁸ Although the infrastructure, to the modern eye, should be the first to be secured and established, this was never the case in the government supported interwar developments. In the out of county estates, the housing was the priority, with little thought given to anything else. Although government supported, as the L.C.C. estates were in the last century, Ebbsfleet seems to have learned from the mistakes of its predecessors. Indeed, it can be said that the development of Ebbsfleet, in theory at least, should be the pinnacle of civil engineering. After all it has had over a century of development to learn from – mistakes to rectify and positives to carry forward into the twenty first century.

²⁷ ‘15,000-home Garden City to be built at Ebbsfleet’, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-26600689>, 27/04/2015.

²⁸ ‘Oral statement to Parliament, Ebbsfleet Garden City’, Department for Communities and Local Government, 3rd March 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/ebbsfleet-garden-city>, accessed 12:07 on 27/04/2015.

In reality, however, the Ebbsfleet Garden City has slowly become trouble for its planners. As of January, 2016 just sixty five houses from the projected total of 15,000 have been built on the site.²⁹ *The Guardian* has discussed the nature of the development as drawing inspiration from the Swedish new towns, the Hammarby district of Stockholm in particular.³⁰ As such, housing has seemingly come full circle, with the original Garden Cities inspiring international developments, which then in turn inspire new British housing projects.

In stark contrast to the interwar developments, the focus does not seem to be on attracting large businesses, but attracting a lucrative, £2 billion, theme park run by Paramount.³¹ It is expected that this will bring in excess of 15 million people to the area per annum, boosted no doubt by the Eurostar link at Ebbsfleet International Station. The move towards the theme park in the area has already split the community of the fledgling development, with many threatening to move, despite the fact the price of their house has already increased significantly, and is still gradually rising.³²

The project has been over ambitious, and fundamentally flawed, with an average of 25 homes being built per year, when in reality 1,000 are needed. It is estimated that if the project continues, it will take another twenty years to reach completion, hardly solving the housing issue.³³ Perhaps the most damning statement has come from the Town and Country Planning Association, the organisation founded by Howard to campaign for the original Garden Cities. Kate Henderson, its chief executive has been quoted as saying ‘they are using the language of

²⁹ Vision for Ebbsfleet garden city for 65,000struggles to take root’, Guardian Online, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jan/04/ebbsfleet-garden-city-richard-rogers-critics>, 17/7/2016.

³⁰ Vision for Ebbsfleet garden city for 65,000struggles to take root’, Guardian Online, 17/7/2016.

³¹ ‘Ebbsfleet: new garden city but the same old worries’, Guardian Online, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/mar/17/ebbsfleet-garden-city-housing-osborne>, 17/7/2016.

³² ‘Vision for Ebbsfleet garden city for 65,000struggles to take root’, Guardian Online, 17/7/2016.

³³ ‘Vision for Ebbsfleet garden city for 65,000struggles to take root’, Guardian Online, 17/7/2016.

the Garden Cities to build public confidence in development, but using Garden Cities as a buzzword is not enough'.³⁴

In the final analysis, housing development has come a long way since the tail end of the nineteenth century, with subsequent projects learning from their predecessor. The L.C.C. took the successful principles demonstrated at L.G.C. and W.G.C. and incorporated them into their out of county estates during the interwar period. Yet, they themselves had their deficiencies which were to be overcome during the rebuilding of the nation of the Second World War, and the first period of New Town building. By the time of the subsequent waves of New Towns, the planners had arguably reached their apex, building on half a century of what can be loosely defined as trial and error. The modern developments, Ebbsfleet in particular, have not reached the heights of the twentieth century schemes. Although it is smaller than other government backed schemes, has almost a century of hindsight to learn from and modern building techniques to utilise, it has effectively failed.

The interwar period was a defining moment in town planning. There were attempts to alleviate the housing problems before, but never on the same monumental scale as the Garden Cities and Lloyd George's 'Homes fit for Heroes'. Although community values suffered during the earliest years of development given the dispersion of tight knit Londoners, the notion of community was strong once more within the decade. Without the period of substantial redevelopment, New Towns would have been delayed and the development of housing and town planning would have stagnated, despite war time damage.

³⁴ 'Vision for Ebbsfleet garden city for 65,000 struggles to take root', Guardian Online, 17/7/2016.

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