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Garden cities and the English new towns: foundations for new community planning

Mark Clapson[1]

Abstract: The postwar new towns in England were initiated by the New Towns Act of 1946, a keystone in the reconstruction of Britain after the Second World War. Further and mostly smaller new town designations were to follow during the first half of the 1960s. It was the 1965 New Towns Act, however, which brought into existence some of the largest and most famous new towns of the postwar period. Today, over 2.6 million people live in over thirty new towns in the United Kingdom. The majority of the new towns and their citizens are in England, the most populous country in the United Kingdom.

Keywords: Letchworth, Welwyn, Radburn, Milton Keynes, English new towns.

Letchworth and Welwyn: the Edwardian and interwar foundations of the English new towns

It is impossible to understand the predominant housing forms and residential neighbourhoods of England's new towns without knowledge of the foundation garden cities of Letchworth and Welwyn. Letchworth was planned by the architects Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, and established in 1903. Its houses are low-rise low-density domestic architecture with strong influences from the Arts and Crafts movement in *fin de siècle* Britain. Welwyn was initiated in 1920. During the First World War of 1914-1918 a largely unsuccessful campaign had been waged by planners and garden city advocates based in Letchworth to persuade the British government to provide a large-scale programme of garden cities. In the event only Welwyn was constructed. It was realised according to the Master Plan drawn up by the architect-planner Louis de Soissons. Unlike Letchworth its housing was designed to a more formal neo-Georgian style. In common with Letchworth much emphasis was placed upon attractive landscaping and a variety of roads

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small and large. Unlike Letchworth, Welwyn benefited from a beautiful central park with a formal layout, complete with a fountain and planting. It avoided the twee-ness of the more rustic vibe in Letchworth.

Both Letchworth and Welwyn were the urban progeny of the 'father' of the British garden cities Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928). He was essentially a Victorian liberal social reformer who like so many of his contemporaries was appalled at the degradation, over-crowding and insanitary conditions in many areas of the unplanned industrial cities of nineteenth century England. Dubbed by the playwright George Bernard Shaw 'Ebenezer the garden city geezer' Howard wrote his seminal work *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, which was first published in 1898 and republished in 1902 as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. This was the textual keystone of the Garden City movement both in Britain and across the world. It is an essential text in any understanding of large-scale planned new communities in the twentieth century. It proposed that *decentralisation* of the people and of industries from the overcrowded cities was the most efficient and effective solution to urban problems. According to Howard, a vision most powerfully expressed in his Three Magnets diagram, the garden city would take the best of town living and merge it with the finest attributes of country or village life. Instead of urban ills and rural isolation, the poles at either end of the magnet, the garden city synthesised the best of both: beauty of nature with social opportunity; parks and open spaces alongside roads and pathways for easy access; full employment, high wages and low rents instead of high rents and lo ages; and 'bright homes and gardens – no smoke, no slums.'

Both Letchworth and Welwyn were developed in the south-eastern county of Hertfordshire, not very far north of London. Following Howard's principles, they pioneered *low-density* low-rise housing design, attractive landscaping of main roads, boulevards and residential streets, and the principle of *zoning* in land use. This meant separating residential areas from industrial and large-scale commercial activities. Mixed use, or the jumbling-up of housing, commercial and industrial activities in one street or neighbourhood, was rejected. The idea of *self-containment* was a further foundational principle which would later inform the new towns. This simply meant that people would live and work in the same garden city, obviating any need for commuting to and from work. Both the Garden City Pioneer Company which established Letchworth, and the Welwyn Garden City Company from 1920 advertised and offered economic inducements to companies to locate new plant or relocate to the garden cities.

Garden city ideals were encapsulated in the famous aspirational statement which the Welwyn Company used in its marketing materials from 1920: «A town designed for healthy living and industry of a size that makes possible a full measure of social life but not larger, surrounded by a rural belt; the whole of the land being in public ownership, or held in trust for the community».

That term 'a full measure of social life' was another key goal of the garden cities. With target populations of 50,000 people, or sometimes a little more, they were to avoid the alleged anonymity of the larger supposedly impersonal industrial city. With a population working and living at home in the same city, Howard and his followers envisaged an active population engaged in a wide range of associations, clubs and societies. There is something of a self-congratulatory tone in the writings of Howard's contemporaries in the governance of both Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities. The earliest settlers who included famous garden city propagandists such as Frederic J. Osborn and C.E.B. Purdom constantly referred to themselves and their first citizens as 'pioneers'. They set up local branches of the Labour Party, amateur theatrical, rambling and reading clubs, to name but a few. The emphasis was on *rational recreation* rather than the vices of drink and other 'irrational' forms of leisure that had wreaked havoc in the older cities.

The organised life of the new towns was also to be encouraged by political participation within 'wards', or the spatial units of a few thousand people living in the same district. Each ward was given a name, often from a nearby field or village. The wards would become the neighbourhoods of the garden cities, and herein lies another important founding principle of the English new towns: the neighbourhood unit. Although planning historians debate the origins of the neighbourhood unit it appears to have entered into England from the United States of America, as town planners and social reformers in both countries looked to each other's experience of urban problems and their solution between the wars. The American sociologist and city planner Clarence Perry devised the neighbourhood unit based around schools, community and recreational centres and other services serving a local population. These ideas found expression in Radburn New Jersey, an automobile suburb built in New Jersey from the late 1920s.

Radburn deserves to be viewed as a foundation suburb of the English new towns. For in addition to the pioneering of neighbourhood unit principles, Radburn also experimented with some bold urban design to separate pedestrians from motor traffic. Housing areas were

designed in superblocks, alongside which main roads flowed, and from those main roads smaller internal roads took motor vehicles into the residential areas. Underpasses and elevated walkways separated people from conflict with motor cars.

The new towns after the Second World War represented one of the most profound achievements of British town planning in twentieth century. Arguably, this would have been impossible without the experience of the Home Front during the Second World War. The shared experience and endurance of the Blitz on London and other large cities from 1940-41 was held by socialist politicians and left-wing writers to have created a 'Blitz spirit' that brought the otherwise indifferent or even hostile classes together. Evacuation of working-class children and mothers to middle-class provincial homes was also seen to contribute to this new spirit of national unity. During the general election campaign in the summer of 1945 the Labour Party had harnessed this idea to the call for a new more equal Britain to be forged in a process of reconstruction. Labour was elected to power for the first time in its history with a large majority in July 1945. The Minister of Town and Country Planning Lewis Silkin established the New Towns Committee. Chaired by Sir John Reith, the former Director General of the BBC, its terms of reference were to consider the general questions of the establishment, development and administration of the new towns as self-contained and balanced communities, and to discuss the nature and implications of the policy of urban decentralisation. The membership of the Committee provides an interesting portfolio of the national leaders involved in postwar reconstruction planning. Of the fifteen members of the New Towns Committee, there was only one woman, namely Monica Felton.

The committee was regularly attended by Lewis Silkin, and by leaders in postwar reconstruction including Ivor Brown, the editor of the *Observer* newspaper, L.J. Cadbury, Chairman of the *News Chronicle* newspaper, and Frederic Osborn. Osborn was a long-standing exponent of Garden cities, along with other leading advocates of new communities he had campaigned for a programme of new towns during both the first and second world wars, and between the wars. With the exception of Welwyn, little had eventuated after 1918. But now Osborn was delighted to see a large-scale programme of planned communities at the heart of postwar reconstruction. Whilst serving on the Reith Committee Osborn also worked on 'social and welfare facilities and equipment' for new towns. Meeting regularly during difficult early postwar years of economic hardship, the Committee

was forced to negotiate its idealistic goals of brave new planned communities with practical problems such as town boundaries, compulsory purchase of land, the nature of governance in the form of the development corporation, relationships with local authorities, materials supply, labour supply and wage rates, housing design, neighbourhood design and layouts. This it mostly successfully did.

The legislation of 1946 created the first wave of new towns, the majority of them in England. London, heavily bombed during the war, gained eight new towns in the counties surrounding the capital, each of which was designated before 1950. These were: Basildon and Harlow in Essex; Bracknell in Berkshire; Crawley in Sussex, and Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City in Hertfordshire. Hertfordshire, the home of Letchworth and Welwyn, now witnessed the first designation of a new town in 1946, namely Stevenage. And in 1948, Welwyn's transition to a new town meant that it was no longer governed by a company but by a development corporation. Osborn had been living at Welwyn since the 1920s, and he personally participated in and witnessed the transition of Welwyn from its garden city status to new town. Notably, however, the name 'Welwyn Garden City' was retained, a symbolic link between the planned new communities of the Edwardian, interwar and postwar years.

The first generation of new towns synthesised the founding principles and practices of the Garden City movement with the exemplar at Radburn. Most housing was small scale and low-rise, although some modern flats and less traditional styles of domestic architecture were constructed. Harlow, for example, whose Master Plan was drawn up by Frederick Gibberd, one of the most influential British modern architects of the twentieth century, saw the opening of the first provincial high-rise block of flats in 1951, called 'The Lawn'. The houses were built in neighbourhood units typically of less than 10,000 people, which were zoned separately from industrial areas and from the town centre. The units were provided with schools, places of worship, and a limited number of shops and local services, because the town centre was still viewed as the destination for the weekly shop of most households. And the London new towns also pioneered the postwar introduction of Radburn-style separation of pedestrians from motorised traffic. Underpasses beneath the attractively landscaped main roads became a key environmental feature of the planned new towns, a feature which spread to comprehensive redevelopment in established towns and cities such as Birmingham and Coventry during the 1950s. Each new town was

steered into being by a development corporation which commissioned a Master Plan and then enacted it over a twenty-five year period.

The 1946 Act was the bedrock of further programmes of new towns. Most of these were built in England during the 1960s, or initiated over a period of time in that decade. The Conservative Government of 1959-64 initiated the new towns of Dawley and Redditch in the Midlands, Skelmersdale in the North West of England and Washington Tyne and Wear in the North East. They were partly built to assist with slum clearance and re-housing in the cities, but also intended to cope with the growing housing shortage caused by the 'baby boom' of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet the most important phase of subsequent new towns came with the passage of the New Towns Act of 1965. The first Labour Government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson put a great deal of emphasis upon planning and modernisation, and the towns planned in its wake need to be seen in that light. Existing towns such as Northampton and Peterborough were re-designated as new towns, and placed under the control of a development corporation which worked with other local authorities, notably town and county councils, to deliver the new plan. Dawley was re-designated as Telford in the later 1960s and is now mostly seen as a post-1965 new towns.

Yet the largest and most successful of the new projects of the 1960s was Milton Keynes, situated in North Buckinghamshire. Designated in 1967, it initially had a target population of 250,000. Most new towns were intended to have less than 100,000. Like earlier new towns and its contemporaries, Milton Keynes zoned residential areas separate from industrial and commercial districts. It also adopted a Radburn-style system of underpasses and overpasses over its main roads to avoid people versus car conflict. Yet it differed from other new towns in two important respects. One was the introduction of a large-scale Los-Angeles style grid road system. The Master Planner Lord Llewelyn Davies and his team had trialled a grid system at Washington New Town, but for topographical and other reasons it was not very successful. At Milton Keynes the grid roads now lend the city a distinctively non-urban feel as the motorist drives through the city, because in fine garden city styling they are attractively landscaped with trees and shrubs.

The grid system, however, rejected neighbourhood units for the more prosaically named 'gridsquares'. The planners of Milton Keynes argued that the rapid growth of motorisation, and the growing popularity of telephones, were proof positive of the ideas of the American urban theorist Melvin Webber, who saw the city of the future as more fluid

and less local in its social and personal interactions. In key publications in the 1960s he used terms such as 'community without propinquity' and 'the non-place urban realm' to get across his ideas. According to the *Master Plan for Milton Keynes*, published in two volumes in 1970, each of the gridsquares was to have its 'local centre' perched on the edge of the gridsquare next to the main roads to encourage interactions across the grid, and to attract passing traffic. Sadly, this did not always happen, and some gridsquares have local centres literally in the centre of the residential area, which renders them arguably more inward-looking that outward-looking.

Despite this, Milton Keynes has been mostly been a success. Its proximity to London, and the fact that it is over 13,000 hectares and is spatially growing through two more expansion areas in the east and west, is proof of that. Furthermore, over 70 percent of its population live and work in the new city, a level not achieved by the eight earlier London new towns, including Welwyn. Milton Keynes is a true heir to the garden city movement, to the progenitors of the early decades of the twentieth century whose legacy continues into the present one. And in common with the other English new towns, it is a foundation city in a global context. Since the 1950s, town planners from Asia, Europe and the USA have visited the English new towns while drawing up their master plans. Currently, Milton Keynes is the template for at least two new cities in China. Planning principles pioneered during the early last century have been updated and re-applied in new community development since 1945 and now in this century. The story of the English new towns is by no means over.

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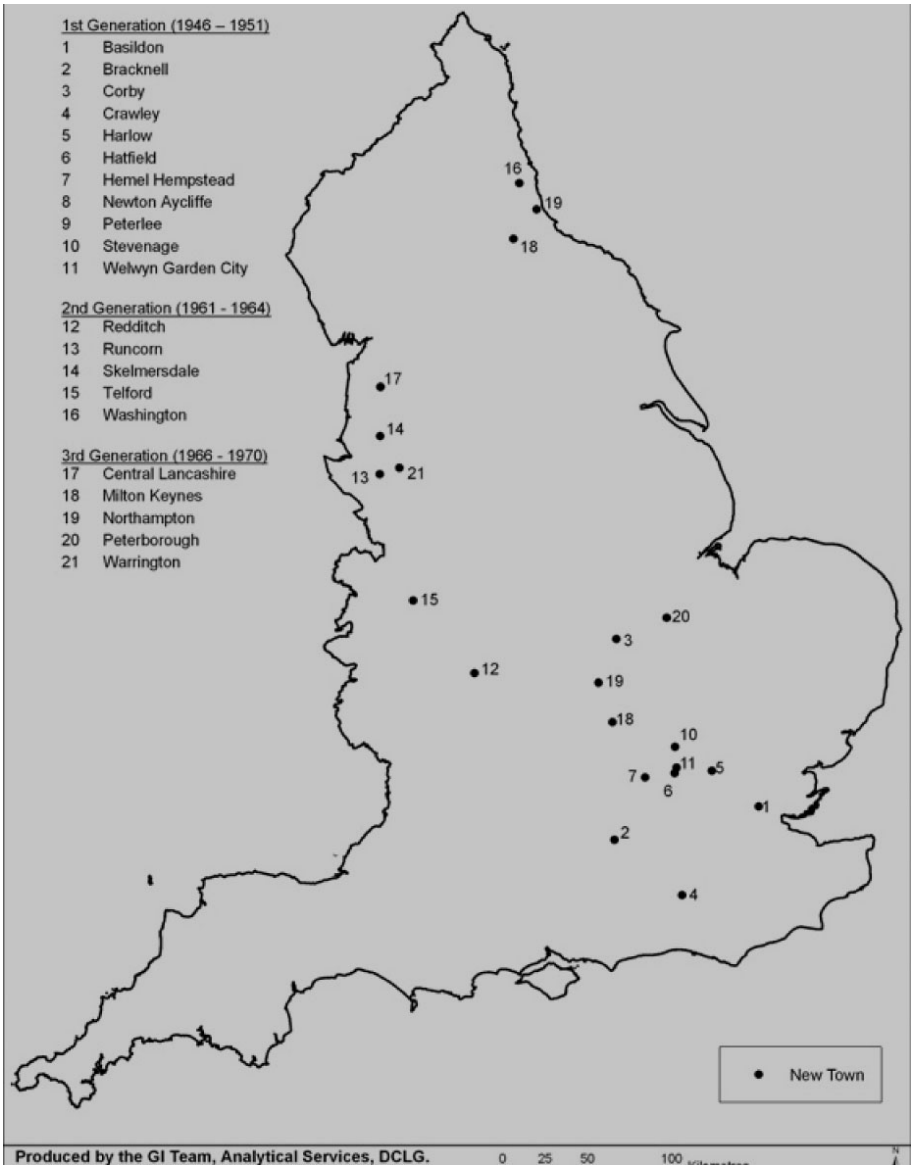

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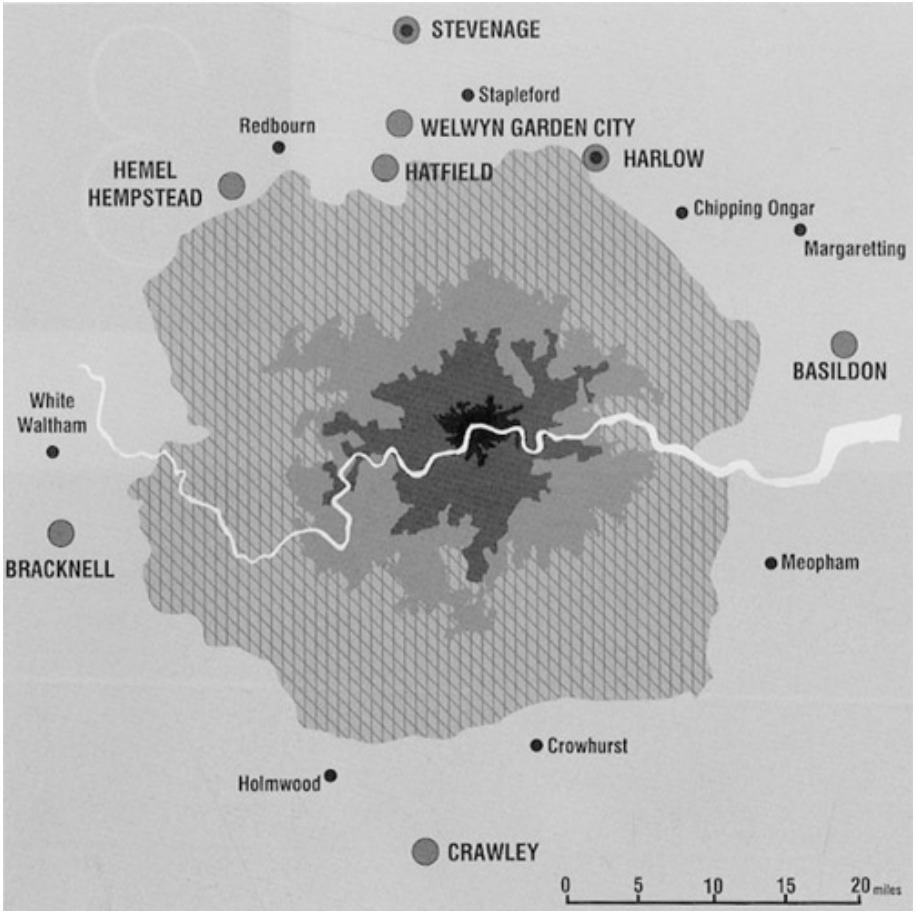

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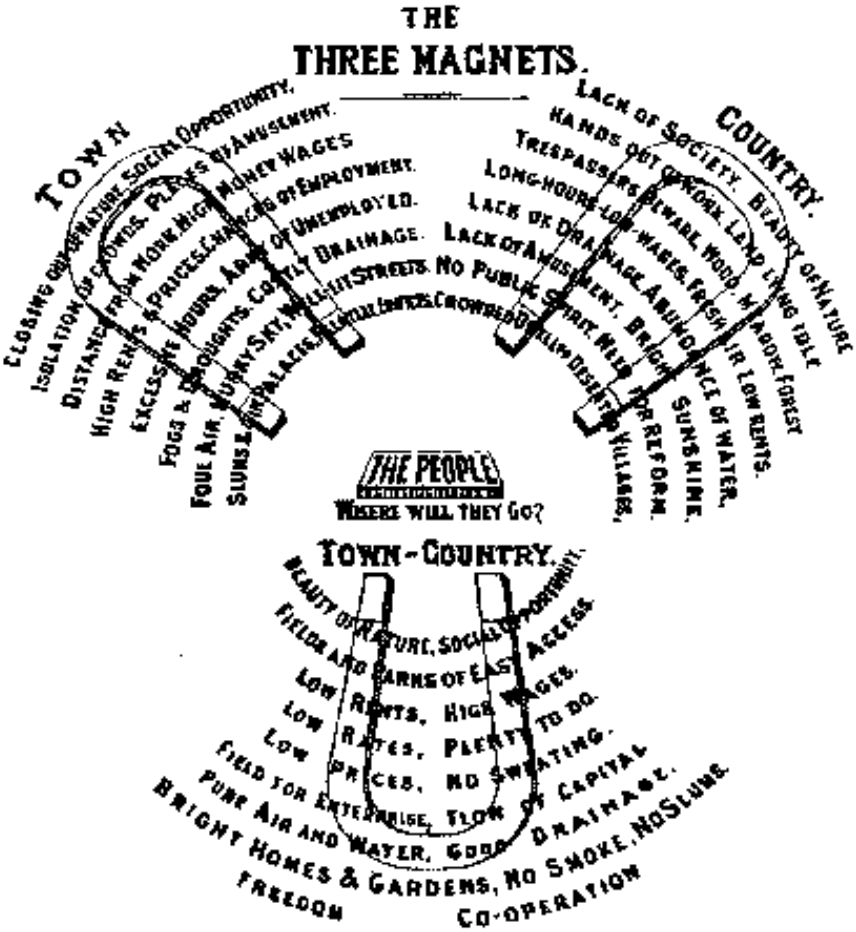

Ebenezer Howard's Three Magnets, a synthesis of the best of town and country.

Howard's house at Welwyn Garden City: the semi-detached remains one of the most popular housing types in England (photograph by author, 2015).

Radburn-influenced separation of motor traffic from pedestrians: an underpass in Milton Keynes (photograph by author, 2016).