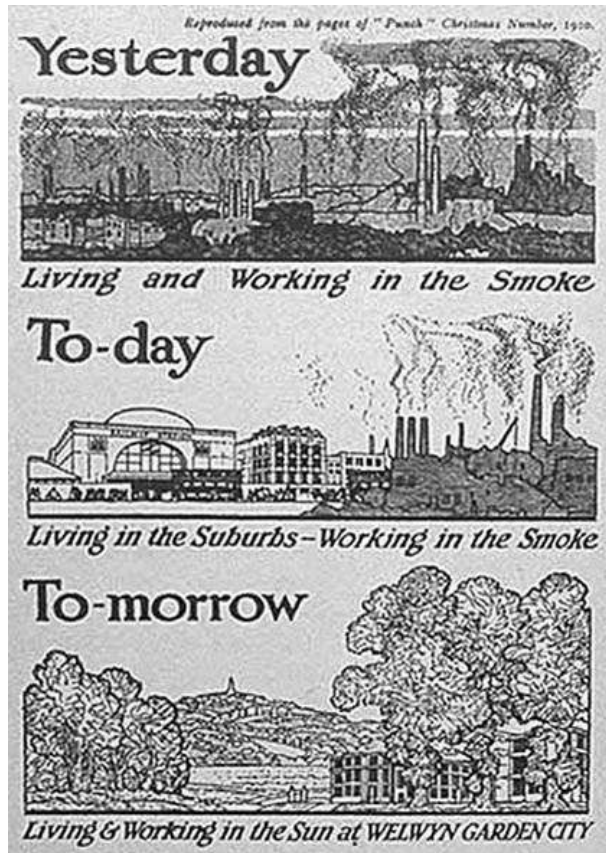


Sir Ebenezer Howard (29 January 1850 –May 1, 1928)



Ebenezer Howard was born in Fore Street in the City of London, the son of a shopkeeper. At an early age he was sent away to school, firstly in Suffolk, then Cheshunt in Hertfordshire and finally completing his education at the age of 15 at Stoke Hall, Ipswich.

He worked in a series of clerical posts and learned shorthand. Transcribing sermons for one of his early employers, Dr Parker of the City Temple, who observed that he could have been a successful preacher.

Aged 21 he emigrated with two companions to the United States with the intention of farming and he settled on 160 acres in Howard County, Nebraska as a homestead farmer. It did not work out, due to his friend's lack of commitment and he moved to Chicago, Illinois to resume his career as an office worker. He worked as a reporter for the courts and newspapers. In the U.S. he became acquainted with, and admired, poets Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson and it was in America that Howard began to ponder ways to improve the quality of life.

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In 1876 he returned to England where he found a job with Hansard, which produces the official verbatim record of Parliament. Here he was responsible for recording the details of debates, committees and commissions. Through his work he became aware of and frustrated by how difficult Parliament found it to find solutions to the problems of housing and labour.

As a young man Howard had spent his spare time moving in various intellectual circles including nonconformist churchmen, other religious groups and reformers both in his time in America and at home in England. The land question was a major source of discussion among these groups, and the many issues concerning land ownership, land nationalisation, land taxation, land values, and the problems of urban squalor and poverty would have been issues he was well aware of.

Howard observed that all parties no matter how politically opposed were united by one issue, the continued stream of migration from country to the already overcrowded cities.

Industrialisation had drawn people into the cities with the promise of better wages and more opportunities for work and social activities. Unfortunately the cities became overcrowded, with inadequate housing, water supply and drainage and with high rents and prices for food and goods.

On the other hand, in the country, agricultural land was being stripped of its able bodied population. This depressed the economy of these areas, leaving villages deserted, with the remaining population crowded into poor quality dwellings.

The migration of the population led to appalling living conditions, in both the cities and the country, for the working man. Charles Dickens, in his novels, paints us vivid pictures of the harshness and brutality of the life of the poor in Victorian England. Howard was determined to find a way to alleviate the lot of the working man.

Howard had always been interested in inventions and inventing. He revisited America between 1876 and 1898 in connection with these inventions he introduced the Remington typewriter into England. Although it is doubtful that he ever made any profit from his inventions, they were an important part of his life, and he had a small workshop to develop his ideas throughout most of his life.

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In 1879 he married Elizabeth Ann Bills, the daughter of a Nuneaton innkeeper. She was an intelligent woman with a love of the countryside. She was also a very good household manager, which was fortunate because Ebenezer was never to become a rich man in monetary terms through out his life. She was devoted to Ebenezer and his work and spoke often at public and private meeting in support of his ideas. They had three daughters and a son, and nine grandchildren. The photograph on the left is of Mrs Elizabeth Howard.

Various attempts were being made by industrialists to set up healthy, well planned model communities for their employees. There were several earlier developments, the most notable being by W.H. Lever (1851-1925) and George Cadbury (1839-1922) who were both later involved in the Garden City movement.

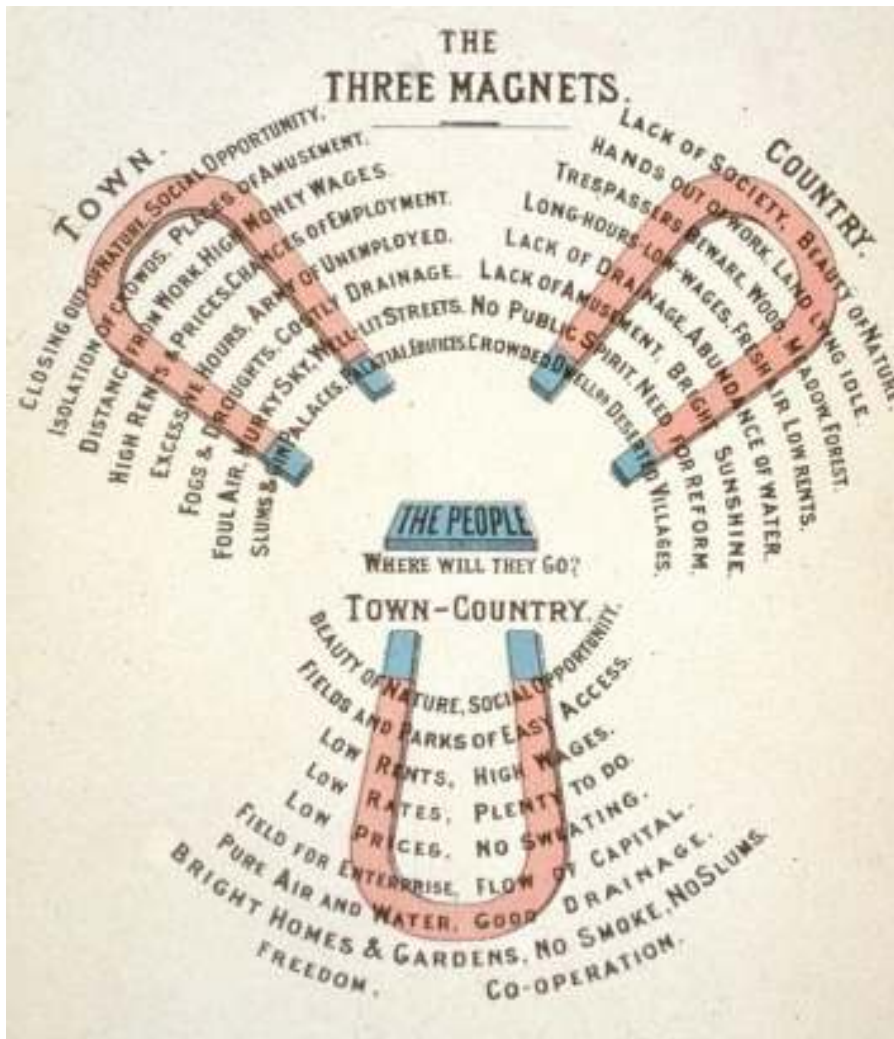
By the late 1880's a new movement in architecture and design was being advocated by John Ruskin and William Morris. Ruskin foresaw the Garden City movement with descriptions of improved environment, and integration of town and country in his writings.

Morris lectured for the socialist league and promoted the concept of "decency of surroundings" which included: "Ample space, well built clean healthy housing, abundant garden space, preservation of natural landscape, pollution and litter free". Raymond Unwin joined the socialist league in the 1880's and was closely involved with Morris.

Howard's reading included a wide variety of works on diverse political and economic theories and he later credited various philosophers and reformers with nearly discovering the Garden City.

An American novelist Edward Bellamy wrote, "Looking Backward" (a futuristic novel about Boston in the year 2000), published in 1888 it impressed Howard so much that he purchased 100 copies which he distributed among his friends. He was inspired by this rather Utopian vision of a future city and society, and he began to create his own plan of the Utopian dream which was published in 1898 entitled "Tomorrow a Peaceful Path to Real Reform"

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He described his concept in great detail using diagrams and economic argument but made it clear that the plan was to be adjusted to suit the site of the city. The diagram on the left shows his Key ideas.

The individual Garden City was only part of a much larger development which proposed a cluster of Garden Cities around a Central City all

interconnected and sharing leisure facilities and services. To this end Howard acquired the land for Welwyn Garden City shortly after Letchworth was started.

His book, "Tomorrow a Peaceful Path to Real Reform", met with mixed reaction. Howard however began lecturing around the country and by June 1899 enough interest had been aroused in his ideas for the Garden City Association to be inaugurated. The Association met and discussed practical ways of implementing the plan.

The first Garden City Association Conference was held in 1901, hosted by George Cadbury. Among the speakers was Raymond Unwin.

Support grew and in 1902 the Garden City Pioneer Company was formed to locate and acquire a site on which to create and manage the proposed Garden City. First Garden City Limited was formed in September 1903 and shares were issued to raise capital, and although

Ebenezer Howard

initial investment was quite rapid this slowed. The early development of the city reflected the lack of readily available funds.

The Estate was declared open October 9th 1903 at a very muddy ceremony by Earl Grey, Lord Lieutenant of Northumberland and a patron of the Garden City movement.

Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin arranged for plans to be presented to the board in January 1904 and in March 1904 Parker and Unwin were appointed consulting architects to oversee the project.

Mrs Howard died in 1904 just as the building of Letchworth began. She was so well liked and respected that the people of Letchworth raised enough money to build Mrs Howard Memorial Hall in Howard Park in memory of her. Ebenezer went to live in The First Garden City himself in 1905, and remarried in 1907. He lived in Norton Way South for a time and Homesgarth from 1911.

He was elected President of the newly formed Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation in 1913, and became an honorary member of the Town Planning Institute in 1914.

He moved to Welwyn Garden City in 1921 where he had begun his second Garden City and was knighted in the New Years honours for 1927. He remained in Welwyn Garden City until his death on May 1st, 1928 after being diagnosed as suffering from a chest infection and stomach cancer in March. He is buried in Letchworth cemetery.

Contemporaries described Howard as personally selfless and more than willing for others to take public credit for things he had done. He also left most matters of administration to others, and worked principally as a publicist for his movement. In order to support himself and his family he worked as a stenographer, a career he followed all of his life.

The Telegraph website: census: personal entries states:

‘Sir Ebenezer Howard, founder of the garden cities movement, described himself as a mere Proof-reader in the 1911 census. He was working for Hansard as a ‘proof-reader’, producing verbatim reports from parliament. By that time he had already written Garden Cities

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of To-Morrow, his manifesto for suburbia.’ (Telegraph website, 1911 census: personal entries)

Howard always maintained that his principal aim was not to create self-contained suburban idylls, but to foster feasible modes of regional planning that would benefit middle-class and poor alike. But critics of Letchworth pointed out that only forty per cent of Letchworth's inhabitants were working class, and its unrepresentatively abstinent, vegetarian, and (mostly) middle-class population imposed disproportionately light burdens on the town's services (Evans, 10). This criticism was accurate, but Howard could respond that the proportion of working-class people in Letchworth remained much higher than in other, comparably comfortable towns.

Letchworth has endeavoured over the years to try and remain true to the concepts and principles of Ebenezer Howard, with varying degrees of success.

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