

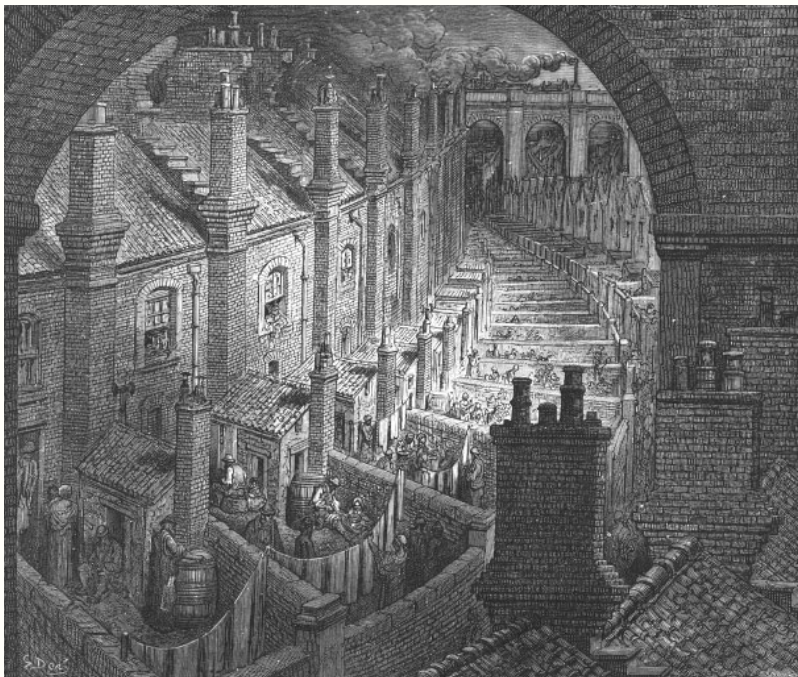


History: Health and Medicine

Letchworth Garden City c.1903 to the present day

Section A: The historical context

Problems with living conditions in the 19th century



Scenes from London in the later 19th century, by French artist Gustave Doré

"Poverty blights whole cities, spreads horrible pestilences, strikes dead the very souls of all who come within sight, sound, or smell of it." (Shaw, 1905)

The Industrial Revolution saw Britain lead the world in revolutionising manufacturing, and for a while it became known as the 'Workshop of the World'. However, this rapid industrialisation, and the sharp rise in population that accompanied it, also led to significant urbanisation around manufacturing and mining centres. By the time of the 1851 census, nearly half of Britain's population lived in towns, compared to just one in ten people a hundred years earlier.

Living conditions for working people were terrible. Many lived in poorly built, overcrowded tenements, with limited access to sanitation, relying on shared public facilities in their area. Waterborne diseases like cholera killed thousands of people in epidemics from the 1830s to the 1860s, whilst typhoid killed large numbers of people during the 1890s. In Maidstone, Kent, 1,800 people out of a population of 34,000 were killed in 1897–8.

Other diseases thrived in these environments. Tuberculosis, a respiratory disease, spread quickly in the overcrowded conditions amongst people whose lungs were already weakened with damp and smoke-filled air. Rickets, a disease which affects the development of bones, became more common because of a lack of vitamin D in the diet and lack of exposure to sunlight. It was so widespread in British towns that it became known internationally as the 'English Disease'.



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By the start of the twentieth century, it was clear that poverty and poor living conditions were having a severe impact on public health. In 1900, infant mortality rates (deaths before the age of one) in Britain stood at 150 per 1,000 live births. The poor health of working people was highlighted during the Boer War (1899–1902) when one third of British men who volunteered to fight were considered medically unfit for military service.

More came to be known about the extent and causes of poverty because of the work of social investigators such as Charles Booth, writing in *Life and Labour of the People* (1889), and Seebohm Rowntree, writing in his *Study in Poverty* (1901). They wrote about the struggles faced by the poor and highlighted how terrible living conditions contributed to poor health.

Attempts to improve public health and housing in the second half of the 19th century

Edwin Chadwick played a key role in getting the government to take more responsibility for improving public health. Although he believed in the miasma theory (a belief that wrongly attributed disease to bad air), his work helped explain the connection between poor living conditions and disease and encouraged reform. His work on the 1839 Royal Commission resulted in the 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, which recommended that Parliament should pass laws to get local councils to improve sanitation, paid for by local taxes.

The resulting 1848 Public Health Act was a step towards improving living conditions. The Act allowed, but did not force, local councils to set up boards of health to investigate problems and recommend solutions. Within a decade, over 180 towns had set up their own boards. However, because local authorities were under no obligation to act on their findings, there were few improvements to begin with. Later laws, like the 1875 Public Health Act, would force local authorities to provide sewers and drains. In the same year, the Artisans Dwellings Act meant local councils were given the power to demolish slums. By 1900, there had been significant progress, but there were still slums in many of Britain's towns and cities.

Meanwhile, individual entrepreneurs and philanthropists tried to find their own solutions to these problems. Some factory owners had realised that they could get more work from their employees and increase productivity if they improved workers' living conditions. They chose to build decent housing for their workers.

- Robert Owen built New Lanark in the 1830s as a model industrial village for his workers, and others followed.
- Titus Salt built Saltaire in West Yorkshire in the 1850s.
- John Lever began work on Port Sunlight on the Wirral in 1888.
- George Cadbury built Bournville in the West Midlands from 1896





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Port Sunlight

In 1902, two young architects from Derbyshire called Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin were employed by the Rowntree family after the publication of the *Study in Poverty* to build cottages for the Rowntree workers. They designed New Earswick, a model village near York, a job they completed before they began work in Letchworth. However, unlike other projects where the factory was built first and housing for the workers followed, in Letchworth it would be houses first and then the factories.

Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City movement



Ebenezer Howard statue

'There are in reality not only, as it is so constantly assumed, two alternatives – town life and country life – but a third alternative, in which all the advantages of the most energetic and active town life, with the beauty and delight of the country, may be secured in perfect combination.' (Howard, 1902)

Ebenezer Howard published his blueprint for garden cities in 1898. It was called *Tomorrow – a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, but was renamed *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* when it was republished in 1902. Howard was a parliamentary reporter, recording the details of debates for the journal *Hansard*.

Earlier in his life, he had worked in the US city of Chicago, where he saw the terrible living conditions created by this city's rapid growth and the severe shortage of housing. When he returned to England, he had noticed similar, and in some cases, more extreme problems in British towns and cities.





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Having listened to MPs debate the issue of slum housing on multiple occasions, Howard was unconvinced they knew how to solve the problem. He identified problems not just in towns, but also in the countryside, and thought that they were connected. Towns were divided: wealthier areas had suburbs, theatres, libraries and parks, whilst the working-class lived in overcrowded and unsanitary slums. Meanwhile, in the countryside, cheap food was being imported into Britain from abroad which made farming unprofitable. This drove an increasing number of people to move from the countryside into the towns, adding to the problem of overcrowding.

Ebenezer Howard developed an idea to solve both the problems of urban slums and rural poverty. His solution was the garden city concept, based around three 'magnets', which combined the best parts of life in towns and in the countryside to transform town planning. The garden city would mix green spaces with the housing and amenities of a working town. To make it affordable to ordinary people, a Garden City Company would own the land the town was built on and they would keep rents as low as possible. Any profits made by the company would be spent on facilities for the community. Shareholders would be paid a very limited dividend on their investment.

Politically, this concept had wide support. Conservatives supported it as a private business, Labour supported it as the town would look after the people that lived there, and the Liberals supported it as it would modernise how land was used in the countryside.

Letchworth was chosen to be the location for the first attempt to build a garden city based around Howard's design.



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Section B: Features of Letchworth Garden City

Old Letchworth

Letchworth has been inhabited since at least 700 BCE, when it began as a Bronze Age fort. It appears in the Domesday Book of 1086 as 'Leceworde' in which it was said to have nine households. The name comes from the Old English 'Lycceweorth' meaning a farm surrounded by a fence.

Modern Letchworth actually encompasses three villages: Willian, which had 300 inhabitants in 1901; Norton, which had 150; and Letchworth, which had just under a hundred. Each village had its own church built just after the Norman Conquest in the twelfth century: St. Mary the Virgin in Letchworth; St. Nicholas in Norton; and All Saints in Willian.



St. Mary's Church, Letchworth

Before the Garden City was built, Letchworth was a just a few houses, the church and a medieval hall. Most people in the area worked as agricultural labourers and the main form of transport was still by horse on country roads. Although the railway passed through the area, there was no station.

By 1903, the Alington estate in Hertfordshire, which included Letchworth, was one of three sites being considered for the first Garden City according to Ebenezer Howard's design. The other two sites were Clacton-on-Sea and Ardleigh in Essex, considered because of their transport links to London that made them ideal for commuting, but also had the potential to provide work for people who want to escape the London slums.





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The Garden City Concept

'I think Mr Ebenezer Howard is to be greatly congratulated upon the fact that within five short years his visionary hopes for 'To-morrow' have become the almost fulfilled realisation of today... The fortunate community living on this estate will rejoice in the knowledge that the unearned increment which may result from the rent of 30,000 souls will not go to enrich any individual landowner, but will be spent in such a way as will tend to refine the lives, ennoble the characters and exalt the minds of all who reside on the estate.' (Johnson 1975)

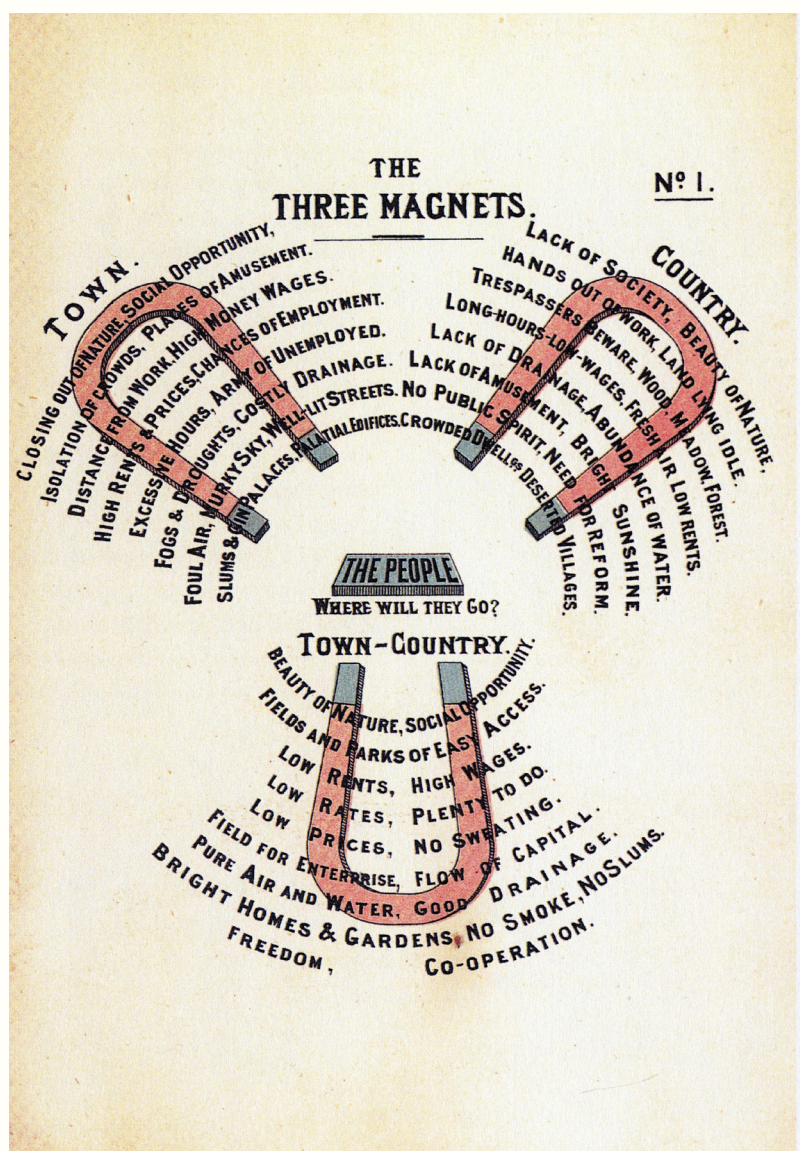
Earl Grey, Lord Lieutenant of Northumberland, speaking as he dug the first piece of soil to mark the beginning of Letchworth Garden City, 9th October 1903

Although only two Garden Cities were built in Britain, Ebenezer Howard's basic principles went on to influence urban planning to the present day.

Howard's book (*To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in its 1898 version, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* in its 1902 version) argued that it would be possible to build towns that incorporated the best aspects of life from both towns and the countryside, but without any of the downsides. Howard identified the positive and negative aspects of life in his Three Magnets diagram. One magnet represented the positives and negatives of town, one represented the positives and negatives of country life, and the third combined the best elements of both.

This combination of urban and rural life would then be made possible by designing the Garden City around certain features.

- At the centre would be a park which would be a venue for community events like farmer's markets.
- Commercial and residential districts would then be built radiating out from this central point.
- There would be a grand avenue through which the parks, schools and churches would be built around.
- Factories would be based around the edge of the town.



Howard's Three Magnets diagram





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There was also to be a greenbelt outside of the town, reserved for farming, which could not be built on. This would stop the town from endlessly expanding. Each Garden City should have a maximum of 32,000 people living in it. If more space was needed for people, then another Garden City could be built nearby. Howard considered that a ring of garden cities around London would be connected by road and rail.

Howard proposed that each Garden City would be owned by a single organisation, which would own about 6,000 acres of land. Profits from rent and ownership of the land would be reinvested into improving the facilities of the town. The organisation that owned the town would also be accountable to the residents. Unlike the 19th century philanthropists, who kept tight control over the estates they built for their workers, Howard's model introduced a new form of community ownership and governance.

Range of housing

A wide range of housing has been built in Letchworth as part of the Garden City project. The company that began the building process was called First Garden City Limited. Once it was formally set up in 1903, architects were invited to submit their plans to turn Howard's vision into a reality. A plan by Derbyshire architects Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin won the commission and building work started almost immediately.

The first houses were built near to Norton Common by local builders Picton and Hope from Hitchin. Six houses on Baldock Road, known as Alpha Cottages, were among the first built, with the first families moving in in July 1904. The earliest houses were built to the east of what would become the town centre. They were designed in the style of small workers' cottages and were positioned to be a short walk away from the proposed industrial areas. On the opposite side of the town centre, closer to the old Letchworth village, larger and more individual houses were built for middle-class residents.

While it was relatively easy to build big houses towards the edge of the town for middle class commuters, it was more of a challenge to build affordable homes for local rural workers, who were also to be part of the town. The 1905 Cheap Cottages Exhibition aimed to address this by showing workers' cottages that could be sold for less than £150, making them cheaper than the first cottages built in Letchworth, which sold for £160. The winners of the competition set up Garden City Tenants Limited and had built 300 affordable workers' cottages by 1914. Other companies, like Letchworth Cottages and Buildings Ltd and the Howard Cottage Society, built workers homes as well and between them they had built over a thousand houses by 1914.

The First World War interrupted building, meaning a lot of public buildings that had been scheduled to be built down Broadway were never started. However, some projects were resumed in the 1920s, factories like the Spirella corset factory and a large number of shops in the town centre were completed. Houses continued to be built, with more workers cottages to the east and larger houses for the middle class to the west.

However, after the Second World War things began to change as Letchworth became part of projects designed to deal with London overspill, meaning the people who could no longer be housed in the capital. Land was bought from the First Garden City Limited company by Letchworth Urban District Council to build council estates to provide rental houses for London's workers. The Grange estate was started to the north of the town centre in 1947, and the Jackmans estate was started to the southeast in 1959. Jackmans





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was built to a design inspired by Radburn, New Jersey, USA, where houses were built with greenspaces and a path separating them to cut down on traffic, with roads and garages built behind houses for cars.

Housing to be bought by families, rather than rented to workers, also continued to be built after the war, although this happened a lot more slowly as the government focused on rented council housing. Post-war rationing also meant that there were restrictions on which building materials were available until 1954. These new private estates were built to the south of the town centre.



Cottage on Icknield Way, Letchworth



Houses on Lytton Avenue, Letchworth

Transport links

Easy transport links were an important part of Howard's Garden City plan. In the first phase, Howard envisioned this would make it easy for people to move between the capital and the Garden Cities he imagined growing around London. He also hoped that good transport links would connect the Garden Cities to each other.

Letchworth met Howard's transport requirement as it was just over thirty miles north of London. The Great Northern Railway's London-Cambridge line passed through the Garden City site, providing good rail access. Letchworth was also situated just off the Great North Road, which connected London to Edinburgh. This road would be redesignated as the A1 in the 1920s. Letchworth could easily be reached by railway, by bus and by bicycle, although cars would become an increasingly important mode of transport over time.

As soon as plans for the Garden City were put in place, sheds began to appear along the railway line to store the materials and house the workers who would be needed for the building of new roads and drains, as well as pipes for water and gas supplies. Letchworth's factories would eventually be built along the railway line, taking advantage of the ease to transport goods.

A railway halt, a temporary station where trains would only stop by request, was opened in 1903. In 1905, a more permanent wooden station was built, and services to Letchworth became more regular. In the same year, 35,000 people bought cheap day return tickets from London between April and October to see what the Garden City looked like, and in some cases, to judge if they would like to move out and live there.





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Letchworth railway station

The modern station, with its design based on William Morris's Arts and Crafts style, was built in 1912. Although it was built with four platforms, only two of them have ever been used for passengers. The other platforms lead to sidings where railway rolling stock is left, enabling local businesses and factories to have access to goods transported there. Trains regularly travel south into King's Cross, London, and some services go all the way to the south coast to Brighton, via St. Pancras, London. Trains to the north go to either Cambridge or King's Lynn. These connections explain why Letchworth remains popular with workers who need to commute for work.

There is also the first example of a roundabout in the UK in Letchworth, known as Sollershott Circus (originally Sollershott and Broadway Circus), which was built in 1909. When the plans for Letchworth were being fully drawn up in 1904, there was a place where three major roads converged – Broadway, Spring Road and Sollershott. Architect Raymond Unwin had been influenced by the Place de l'Etoile in Paris, the roundabout around the Arc de Triomphe.



Sollershott Circus, Letchworth





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The intention was to make sure that vehicles approaching from each direction could pass through the junction safely. While there were few cars in 1909, it was possible for traffic to go around the roundabout in any direction they wanted. The signs to indicate that traffic should keep to the left were not added until 1932. The term used to describe it was originally 'traffic circle', although this was changed to 'roundabout' in 1926. Today, roundabouts are a commonly used road safety feature across Britain's roads.

Non-conformist churches and the controversy over public houses

One of the features of some working-class communities that spread quickly to Letchworth was the temperance movement. This had been founded in Britain in the 1830s, driven largely by religious non-conformists, such as the Methodists, who believed that alcohol and alcoholism were important causes of poverty and child neglect. By the start of the twentieth century, it was estimated that one tenth of the population of Britain was teetotal, drinking no alcohol at all.

The debate about whether or not alcohol should be available in Letchworth began before any houses had been built in the town. In November 1903, an organisation called the Women's Temperance Association had asked for the public to be consulted on the sale of alcohol. The Resident's Council organised a public vote which took place in 1907, and 54% of the people who took part voted for alcohol to not be available in Letchworth.

The influence of non-conformist religion in the town can be seen in the building of the Primitive Methodist chapel on Broadway and Howgills, the Quaker Meeting House. The temperance movement was also popular with the factory owners who established premises in the town, as it meant that alcohol would not distract workers from their jobs. This resulted in the reputation of people from Letchworth being very idealistic and obsessed with their health.

A ban on alcohol in new premises did not stop Letchworth from having public houses. As part of the 1907 vote, the Skittles Inn public house was built as a place for people to meet, even though it did not serve alcohol. It became a focal point for community events like dances and trade union meetings. However, by 1925 the Skittles Inn had become The Settlement, an adult education centre.



Howgills, Quaker Meeting House, Letchworth





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The Settlement adult education centre, Letchworth

This does not mean that the people of Letchworth did not drink alcohol. The public houses in Norton (the Three Horseshoes) and Willian (The Fox) that had existed before the Garden City continued their business and benefitted from providing alcohol to people who were not able to buy any in Letchworth itself. Public houses in nearby Hitchin and Baldock also benefitted. A new pub called the Wilbury Hotel was built just outside the town limits in 1940, along with many others, highlighting that the ban on alcohol in town did not stop residents seeking it elsewhere.

The ban on alcohol in the town was ended by a referendum in 1957. The Broadway Hotel became the first licensed public house to sell alcohol in Letchworth when it opened in 1962. Even though more pubs have opened in Letchworth since, it still has a smaller proportion of pubs to residents compared to similar towns. There is some irony in this as Letchworth was used as a location for a pub crawl in the 2013 film *World's End*.

Modern range of properties

Letchworth is now made up of a mix of architectural styles. In the centre you find the original cottages for agricultural workers, surrounded by houses for the middle-class commuters in the suburbs. These are mixed with the large council estates built to solve the London overspill problems after the Second World War and the private Lordship and Manor Park housing estates built in the 1970s. Due to the age and unique character of many of the houses, Letchworth has conservation areas where new buildings and changes to existing buildings are strictly controlled. However, it has some of the poorest neighbourhoods in the county of Hertfordshire, particularly the Jackmans and Grange estates.



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Ownership of the town shifted during this period. It passed from First Garden City Limited to the Letchworth Garden City Corporation in 1963, and then to Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation in 1995. By 1973, the company was finally making enough of a profit that it could properly invest in the amenities of the town. Norton Common and Howard Park were already big, green, open spaces for residents to use but added to this were:

- Standalone Farm, working farm tourist attraction (opened in 1980)
- North Herts Leisure Centre (opened in 1982)
- The Ernest Gardiner Hospital (opened in 1984).

Additionally, money has been spent refurbishing the Broadway Cinema which opened in 1936. It has been fully restored and altered so that it can now be both a cinema and a theatre, preserving its historic charm while offering modern entertainment.



Broadway Cinema





Section C: The significance of Letchworth Garden City

First Garden City

Letchworth proudly proclaims on its town website that it is the world's first Garden City, founded on the principles laid down in Ebenezer Howard's 1898 book *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Howard's book describes a utopian vision of a town balanced between housing and green public spaces, where people could live healthily, away from the problems of overcrowding and poor sanitation in the industrial towns. According to Howard's plan, the garden city would only be allowed to grow to 32,000 people before a new site would be found for the next garden city.

Construction of the garden city at Letchworth began in 1903. Howard had been at least partially inspired by the rebuilding of central Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871, which he had witnessed while living and working there as a journalist in the 1870s. However, aspects of the garden city design were unique to Howard's vision, especially how the land the town was built on would be owned by the community, and that any profits were to be re-invested in facilities for the residents.

Philanthropists such as the Lever and Cadbury families got behind Howard's vision immediately, raising enough money by 1899 to create the Garden Cities Association to promote the idea. This attracted the interest of several MPs, the London City Council, and even the writer George Bernard Shaw. By 1902, the new Garden City Pioneer Company raised enough money to buy the Alington Estate, Letchworth, with the help of funds from Lever and Cadbury. In 1903, the First Garden City Limited was established and raised £300,000 to begin building.

Letchworth was followed in 1920 by nearby Welwyn Garden City. However, this was to be the final UK garden city as changing priorities in town planning. This changed in part because Howard's disciples, Frederic Osborn and Patrick Geddes, adapted the ideas into broader urban development strategies, especially the New Town movement that dominated housebuilding in Britain after the Second World War.

Influence on the New Town Movement

Although only two garden cities were built in the UK, the Garden City Movement significantly influenced urban planning and housing policy. Even before the first house had been built in Letchworth, the Garden City Concept could be seen influencing town planning when Henry Vivian, a follower of Ebenezer Howard, started Brentham Garden Suburb in London in 1901. Hampstead Garden Suburb was built from 1906 based on designs by Parker and Unwin, the architects of Letchworth. Other followers of Ebenezer Howard, including Patrick Geddes and Frederic Osborn, were involved in developing government policies on town planning between the two world wars.

After the Second World War, the Labour Government decided to build 'New Towns' to rehouse people whose homes had been destroyed in the Blitz as well as those whose houses were being demolished as part of slum clearance programmes. The first of these





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'New Towns' was Stevenage, near Letchworth, which was started in the 1940s. The last being Milton Keynes, finished in the 1970s.

New Towns were planned and built by Development Corporations, just like the First Garden City Limited that was responsible for Letchworth. There were other similarities which included: the involvement of the community in important planning decisions, well built houses that were value for money, healthy environments with lots of green open spaces, decent shopping and recreational facilities, as well as a transport network that separated pedestrians and cars.

The Garden City Concept can also be seen in modern plans. Prime Minister Gordon Brown unveiled plans to build 'eco-towns' in 2007, which proposed new developments to include low cost and carbon neutral houses. In 2014, the CBI (Confederation of British Industry – which represents UK businesses) asked for more new towns and garden cities to help solve the UK's housing crisis. That same year, the Letchworth Declaration was made by the New Garden Cities Alliance to encourage the building of more garden cities. As recently as 2024, the UK government has planned to build 'garden villages' built around green spaces to help solve housing issues.

Influence beyond Britain

As soon as Ebenezer Howard's book *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* was published in 1898 it sold very well, not only in Britain but across the British Empire and beyond. By 1902, it had sold so many copies it was reprinted with a new title *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*. There is a story that even Lenin, a Russian communist who would go on to be the Soviet Union's first leader, visited Letchworth in 1907 while he was in Britain attending an international political conference.

According to the Garden City Museum in Letchworth, there are towns influenced by Howard's garden city idea on every continent on the planet, apart from Antarctica. These are some of the towns inspired by the garden city concept:

- Europe: Suresnes (France), Tuinwijk Beringen-Mijn (Belgium), Hellerau (Germany), Wekerletelep (Hungary), Tapiola (Finland), Mežaparks (Latvia) and Nova Kakhovka (Ukraine)
- Canada: Grand Falls (Newfoundland and Labrador), Powell River (British Columbia)
- USA: Radburn (New Jersey), Forest Hills (New York), Chatham Village (Pittsburgh)
- South America: Ciudad Jardin Lomas del Palomar (Argentina)
- South Africa : Pinelands (Cape Town)
- Asia: New Delhi (India), Quezon City (Philippines), Da Lat (Vietnam), Den-en-Chofu (Japan).
- Australia: The capital of Canberra.



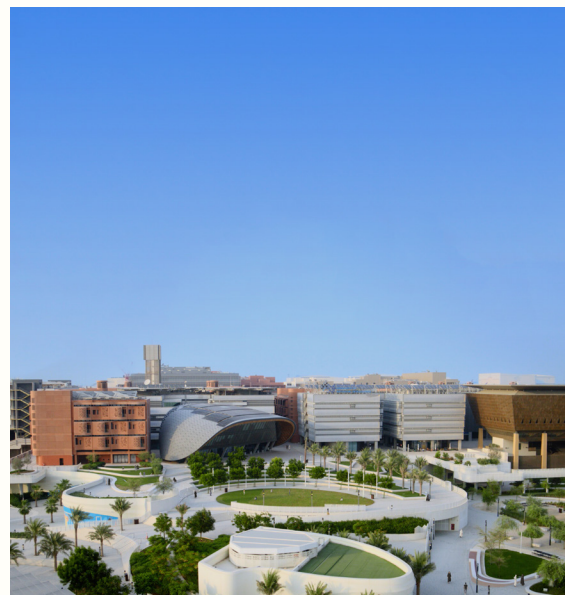


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Tapiola, a garden city in Finland



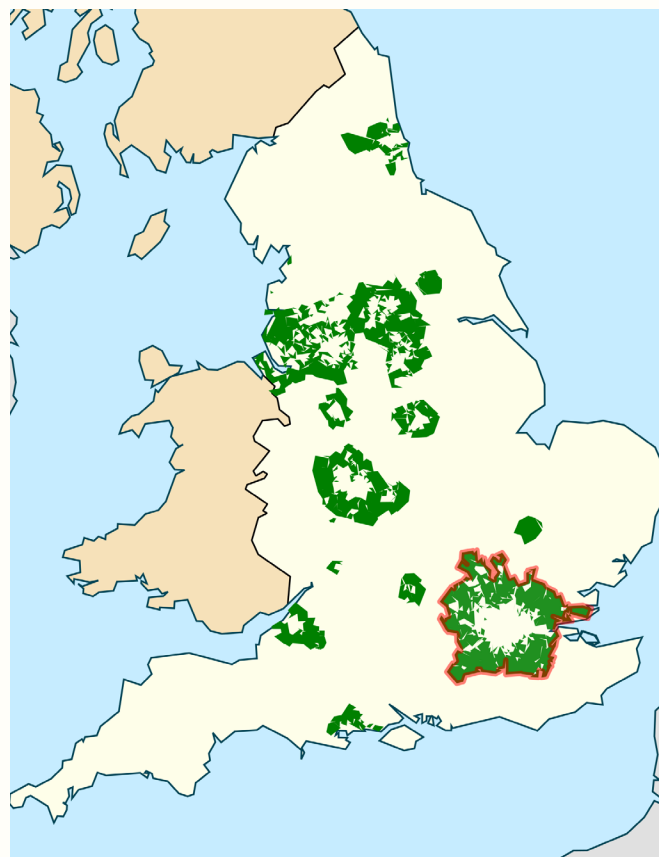
Masdar, United Arab Emirates

Howard's ideas even influenced the design of Disney's EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) theme park, which opened in 1982, and the modern smart city of Masdar in the United Arab Emirates.

Concept of open countryside and its influence on the idea of the green belt

A key part of the Garden City Concept was the idea of the green belt, where there is land in the countryside that cannot be built on so as to preserve it. The greenbelt was intended to separate garden cities from the original towns and cities like London, and from other garden cities. It was also intended to protect farming in the area, while garden cities would provide somewhere for agricultural workers to live.

The term green belt was first used as a planning aim by Raymond Unwin, one of Letchworth's architects, in the 1920s. The green belt formally became part of town planning in designs for London after the 1938 Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act, and it was written into the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which required builders to get planning permission for their projects. By this point, with the rapid growth of existing towns and the building of new ones, the concept was more important than it had ever been in the past to preserve the countryside.



Areas of Britain currently designated as green belt

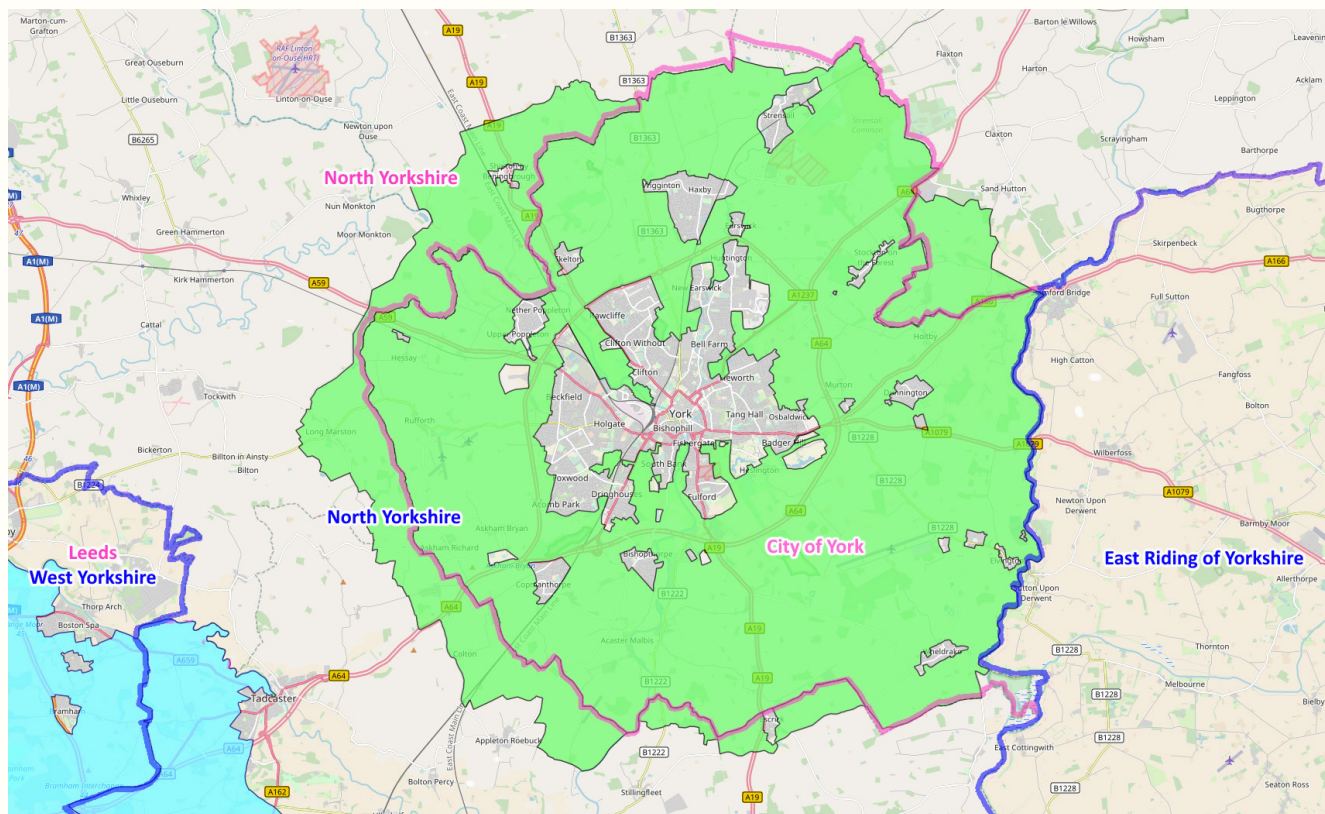




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In 1955, the government minister Duncan Sandys encouraged local councils to clearly define areas they believed should have the protection of being green belt. By the 1980s, green belts covered 15% of all of the land in Britain and it remains a very important part of Britain's planning system.



Map showing green belt around the city of York

Changing governance

The First Garden City Limited company was founded in 1903 to raise the money to build Letchworth Garden City. Profits from the value of land or the sale of houses were paid into the Common Good Fund to pay for community projects. After the Second World War, profits grew rapidly which led to shares in the company being sold on the stock market.

However, by 1963, First Garden City Limited had been taken over by Hotel York, a company owned by Mrs Amy Rose. It started to sell off freehold plots of land to private buyers. This resulted in Parliament passing the 1963 Letchworth Garden City Act which gave ownership of the estate to the new public company, the Letchworth Garden City Corporation, to make sure that profits were still going to the community. By the 1970s, this meant around £300,000 a year in profits was being spent on the town.

This lasted until 1995 when the Letchworth Garden City Corporation was replaced by the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. This followed on from a decision in the 1970s to have Letchworth designated as a heritage conservation area, using powers given to the local council by the 1967 Civil Amenities Act. The Foundation continues to manage Letchworth, managing both the town's property and landscape.





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Politically, Letchworth's governance at a local level has changed over time. The original three villages of Letchworth, Norton and Willian were the responsibility of the Hitchin Rural District Council, being too small to have a council of their own, and overseen by Hertfordshire County Council. Once Letchworth Garden City started to be built the people who moved there formed their own unofficial council. As the town grew, Letchworth Parish Council was established in 1908, which became Letchworth Urban District Council in 1919. From 1974, North Hertfordshire District Council, based in Letchworth took overall responsibility for local government in the area. Letchworth did briefly have a town council again between 2005 and 2013, but local residents thought that with the Heritage Foundation, the District Council and the County Council there were too many layers of local government.

Letchworth remains an unusual place for local government as it has the same county and urban councils as other parts of the country, but it also has the company element from the original Garden City as well. The balance of power between them has changed over time. When Letchworth was founded, the company controlled most of town planning, but as new planning laws were passed after the Second World War, town planning became more and more the responsibility of the local council.





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