



Problems with living conditions in the 19th century

Rapid urbanisation transformed Britain into the “workshop of the world,” but infrastructure failed to keep pace. By 1851, half the population lived in towns, often in overcrowded tenements with poor sanitation. This led to deadly cholera and typhoid epidemics, while damp conditions spread tuberculosis and rickets. By 1900, infant mortality was high, and around one-third of Boer War volunteers were found to be medically unfit, prompting social investigators Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree to demand reform.

During the late 19th century, the British government and philanthropists sought to address these public health crises through legislation like the Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1875, and by developing model villages like Saltaire and Port Sunlight.

Strategic planning and housing

Letchworth translated visionary hopes into a practical urban model through strategic zoning and transport:

- **Layout:** The town featured a central park and distinct zones, placing factories at the edge and residential areas in the centre.
- **Housing:** Architects Parker and Unwin balanced innovation with affordability, showcased in the **1905 Cheap Cottages Exhibition**. Post-WWII, the town managed “London overspill” through estates like the Jackmans, which utilised the American Radburn design to separate pedestrians from traffic.
- **Connectivity:** Located 30 miles from London just off the Great Northern Road. A station opened in 1903. In 1909, it debuted the UK’s first roundabout, Sollershott Circus.

Ebenezer Howard and the garden city movement

Ebenezer Howard proposed the “garden city” as a “third alternative” to urban slums and rural poverty. Detailed in *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (1902), his “**three magnets**” concept combined town opportunities with country beauty.

- **Community ownership:** Land was owned by a company, with profits reinvested into a common good fund.
- **Controlled growth:** Populations were capped at 32,000 to prevent sprawl.
- **Letchworth (1903):** Established as the world’s first experimental garden city, it was funded by philanthropists like the Cadbury family.
- **Political support:** The idea gained rare cross-party consensus, appealing to Conservative business interests, Labour social welfare values, and Liberal land reform goals.

Ownership and governance

Letchworth’s management has transitioned through several unique phases:

- **Corporate protection:** After a 1960s takeover attempt, the **1963 Letchworth Garden City Act** transferred the estate to a public corporation to protect community profits.
- **Heritage Foundation:** In 1995, the **Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation** took over management of the town’s property and landscape.
- **Council structure:** Governance moved from parish and urban councils to **North Hertfordshire District Council** (1974). A brief town council (2005–2013) was abolished to reduce bureaucratic layers.

The green belt and environmental protection

A fundamental pillar of the movement was the green belt – a permanent buffer of countryside designed to stop towns from merging.

- **Origins:** Proposed by Raymond Unwin in the 1920s.
- **Legislation:** Formalised via the 1938 Green Belt Act and the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act.
- **Impact:** By the 1980s, green belts covered 15% of British land, remaining a critical component of national planning.

Social values

Influenced by religious non-conformity, Letchworth implemented a controversial ban on alcohol sales in 1907. Factory owners supported this to ensure a productive workforce. While residents “skirted” the ban by visiting nearby villages, the prohibition lasted until a 1957 referendum. The town still maintains a lower-than-average number of pubs today.

Global legacy and modern influence

The movement established a global blueprint that evolved into the post-war **new towns movement** (e.g. Stevenage and Milton Keynes) and modern “**eco-towns**”. Howard’s ideas influenced urban design on every continent except Antarctica – from Canberra and New Delhi to Radburn, USA. Its cultural reach even extended to the design of Disney’s EPCOT and the high-tech Masdar City in the UAE.

