

Utopian Communities in Britain in the Early Twentieth Century: The Example of New Town

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NEW TOWN, located in Welwyn Garden City, England, was a community formed immediately after the First World War. In this paper an account of the community is used to provide a point of reference to indicate the nature of the community movement in Britain in the early part of the twentieth century. The case study also provides an illustration of more general characteristics of Utopian communities, concentrating, in particular, on issues of motivation, organization and external influence.

The community of New Town was the brainchild of Quaker, W. R. Hughes, who (with others) promoted the idea of a fresh start after the horrors of the First World War. His plans were ambitious, encompassing all aspects of social life, and, inevitably, what materialized represented a compromise. Instead of a self-contained community, a group of followers had to settle within the boundaries of another innovative postwar settlement, Welwyn Garden City. The juxtaposition of the two experiments offers an additional source of interest in the analysis of New Town.

In turn, it is shown that New Town (and Welwyn) were themselves part of a nexus of ideas and practical attempts to transform aspects (if not the whole) of society. Various community experiments were initiated in this period, each of them fired by different sets of ideals though sometimes closely connected in a common cause of dissent. A fourfold typology is proposed—communities of production, communities of spiritual endeavor, communities of pacifism and communities of environment. Inevitably, in practice, the categories overlap, but as a research methodology the typology provides a useful basis for data collection and a framework for analysis.

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A World of Perpetual Sunshine

'People were attracted to a town that was intended to become a Utopia of clean, pure air, flowers and perpetual sunshine.'¹

The above quote is a reference to Letch worth, the world's first garden city, founded sixteen years before Welwyn. Apart from the direct linkage, through the garden city movement, with New Town and Welwyn, what the quote best illustrates is the continuity in the twentieth century of a search for the perfect place. Although lacking some of the intensity of nineteenth-century communitarianism (linked as that was at times with mainstream political movements) in the years before 1914, there is, nevertheless, evidence of a continuing tradition of Utopian ideas and communal experiments. It is this spate of activity that provides a context for understanding post-1914 initiatives like New Town. To explain this context, the fourfold typology introduced above will be used.

Thus, one element of continuity is to be found in a tradition of seeing in communities an opportunity to reject the competitive nature of capitalist production in favor of cooperation. Before 1914 the greatest source of inspiration for this was commonly attributed to the ideas of the Victorian artists and socialists, John Ruskin and William Morris. The latter, especially, through his explorations of the meaning of work as well as exemplary practice laid the foundations for what became known as the 'arts and crafts movement'. It was this movement that, in turn, encouraged in this period the formation of experimental communities.

Illustrative of this tradition is the work of J. R. Ashbee, who initially worked with Morris and established his own workshops in London.² In 1901, Ashbee took the decision to leave the metropolis, taking the view that craft-work could best be carried out in a rural setting; it was, in his own words, a decision 'to leave Babylon and go home to the land'.³ But Babylon (as other communitarians also learned to their cost) is not easily left behind, and Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft had difficulty in securing enough income to survive on Morrisian lines. Notwithstanding these difficulties, other craft communities were established in the country, for example, by Ernest Gimson and the brothers Ernest and Sidney Barnsley, at Sapperton just thirty miles from Chipping Campden.⁴

1. Gillian Darley, *Villages of Vision* (London: The Architectural Press, 1975), 123.

2. See e.g. Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England from 1880 to 1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1982)

3. *Ibid.*, 148.

4. *Ibid.*, 152.

A second source of inspiration for communitarian activity in the early twentieth century was that of spiritual endeavor, a term that applies in some respects to all Utopian experiments but which also has a specific meaning. As with the arts and crafts movement, spiritually-based communities in the present century have their roots in earlier teachings. In particular, around the turn of the century, Leo Tolstoy was especially influential amongst communitarians, advocating non-cooperation with governments and the discovery of the Kingdom of God within oneself.

Tolstoy's ideas encouraged the formation of a number of community experiments in the 1890s and remained in vogue for some years beyond. One reason for the persistence of these ideas is that one of the pioneer communities, Whiteway (in Gloucestershire), survived in a modified form into the twentieth century, and its founding members continued to spread the Tolstoyan gospel.⁵ Another source of 'religious anarchism' in the community movement was the persistence of the teachings of J. Bruce Wallace, founder of the Brotherhood Church and editor of a monthly magazine before 1914, *Brotherhood*.⁶

Closely related to spirituality, communitarianism was also attractive to those who practiced pacifist beliefs. Indeed, pacifism was one of Tolstoy's axioms and is acknowledged as an important principle in the early experiments. Communitarians were encouraged at a personal level to practice 'non-resistance', while J. Bruce Wallace expounded from the pulpit the necessity for international pacifism.

Clearly, however, it was the reality of the First World War that enhanced the importance of pacifism and, as a reaction to events, encouraged thoughts of a world without armed conflict. Communities already in existence were seen as natural havens for pacifists and, not surprisingly, Letchworth Garden City, with its Utopian reputation, was acknowledged in this light by critics as well as supporters. Pacifism was always a matter for contention, and, although there was a significant minority opposed to Britain engaging in the war, a public meeting in 1914 produced a majority in favor of the Government's stance. It was the existence of the minority, however, that caught the attention of the novelist, John Buchan (a temporary resident of Letchworth), a minority too numerous for his liking in spite of the fact that they were outvoted. In one of his novels, *Mr. Standfast*, he tarred the whole of the garden city with the brush of what he saw as a dangerous brand of anarchism: '... I mean the really dan-

5. Nellie Shaw, *A Colony in the Cotswolds* (London: C. W. Daniel, 1935)

6. The fullest account of the work of Wallace is provided in A. G. Higgins, *Brotherhood Church* (Stapleton: Brotherhood Church, 1982).

gerous fellows who want to close up the war at once and get on with their with blessed class war, which cuts across nationalities'.⁷

Reference to Letchworth provides an introduction to the fourth source of inspiration for community formation in this period, namely, a quest for a better environment. This, too, has a long pedigree, stemming back to an urban reform movement in Britain that has its origins in the first half of the nineteenth century. Particularly influential in this context was Ebenezer Howard, author in 1898 of *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*.⁸ It was this book (something of a conceptual bridge between two centuries) that presented the idea of garden cities and which led directly to the formation of a movement to promote them.⁹ Letchworth in 1903 was the first outcome and Welwyn in 1919 the second.

Although not Utopian communities in the strict sense of the term, both garden cities attracted radicals with a bent to innovate and were home for a variety of important experiments in vernacular architecture, cooperative housing, progressive education and communal organization. And underpinning both places was a firm belief (consistent with the motivation for earlier 'back to the land' experiments) that small settlements were better than large and that everyone needed to be close to Nature. The very term 'garden city' was indicative of what was intended.

In these various ways, then, the communitarian ground was already, by the time of the First World War, well-nurtured. Each of the above strains—production, spirituality, pacifism and environment—promised to lead to fresh growth. What was needed to bring this about was a catalyst, and that came with the outbreak of war in 1914. In the cauldron of world conflict, questions were asked that went to the very heart of human existence. Where, in this struggle for power, was there a place for free will and the rights of the individual? What had happened, in the face of the expression of ultimate competition, to the notions of cooperation and universal fraternity? Where were the principles of non-aggression and a simple creed of 'loving one's neighbors'? Where, indeed, were those qualities to be found in a tradition of community experiments, based not on the experience of warfare but on the very reverse? The world was being 'turned upside down', in a way that was inimical to the wishes of Utopians. Little

7. In Robert Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia: A Critical Biography of Ebenezer Howard* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 147.

8. Ebenezer Howard, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (London: Swann Sonnenschein, 1898).

9. See Dennis Hardy, *From Garden Cities to New Towns: Campaigning for Town and Country Planning, 1899-1946* (London: Spon, 1991).

wonder, then, that the First World War fired a response, providing a fresh context not just for intellectual questioning but also for new communal initiatives, seeking to reconstruct a corrupt society from within. New Town was one such experiment.

A City on a Hill

'It will at all events show, in some outward way, that it was a new beginning made with high hope in the days that came after the Great War.'¹⁰

The seeds of the idea were planted as early as 1917, with the formation of a small group of Quakers whose members were thinking about life after the war. H. C. Lander, an architect in the arts and crafts movement, wrote in his capacity as Honorary Secretary of the group to another Quaker, William Ravenscroft Hughes. Lander, enclosing a leaflet to outline what was proposed, invited Hughes to join the Council. "It is really wonderful how the idea was 'taken on' during the short time we have been at work", enthused Lander.¹¹

Hughes, it would seem, needed little persuading, and not only did he add his name to the list of Council members, but he soon took on the task of articulating the cause to a wider audience in the form of a book, *New Town: A Proposal in Agricultural, Industrial, Educational, Civic and Social Reconstruction*.¹² The purpose of the book was twofold—to promote thought and discussion of the inherent ideals that inspired the group, and to attract greater support for the practical proposal to build a new community.

At the time of publication in 1919, the New Town Council comprised fifty-two members, nine of whom were women, Membership was not confined to Quakers (the Dean of Worcester, for instance, was on the list) although most appear to be so. As well as Lander and Hughes, the Council included the names of T. Alwyn Lloyd, the pioneering Welsh town planner and advocate of garden cities, and three members of the Fry family (of Bristol chocolate and philanthropy fame). Proofs of the book were sent to every Council member, so that the final version was published with their joint support and agreement.

10. W. R. Hughes, *New Town: A Proposal in Agricultural, Educational, Civic and Social Reconstruction* (London: Dent, 1919), 38.

11. H. C. Lander, in a letter to Hughes, dated September 23, 1917. I am indebted to Michael Hughes, Senior Assistant County Librarian, Hertfordshire County Council, for introducing me to this and other correspondence and leaflets on New Town that are stored in the Local History section of Welwyn Central Library.

12. Hughes 1919, op. cit.

Over some 140 pages (sold in bound copies for two shillings) Hughes amplified the principles and details of what was proposed. In the opening lines he explained that this "little book contains the outlines of a proposal to found a Country-Town in England in such a spirit as shall stir the hearts of all who are seeking after freedom and fellowship."¹³ It was, therefore, a spiritual as well as a physical plan, stimulated by the ending of the war and thoughts of "that reconstruction and transformation of our national life after the war for which so many are working in a thousand different ways."¹⁴

In a sub-section entitled 'A city set on a hill',¹⁵ reasons were given for favoring a new settlement as opposed to seeking to improve what already existed. It was claimed that the overwhelming case for making a fresh start was that it would be possible to tackle all aspects of social existence without being constrained by administrative and other obstacles. For instance, Hughes argued that there would be little point in introducing a new system of education without giving equal attention to the home life of the child. As such, in its comprehensive approach, it was admitted that they were "aiming very high

. . . our ultimate object is to provide the right conditions of life for the full development of human personality."¹⁶

The precise location of this "city on a hill" mattered less to its proponents than the general requirement for about 3000 acres of agricultural land, ideally with good railway access and a site not too close to a large city. The right method, concluded Hughes, was "to plan a New Town, set in a New Countryside."¹⁷ A population of ten to twenty thousand was anticipated, that being thought to be the kind of number for which varied social needs could be met without suffering the problems of congestion. Beyond that, the brief for the town was quite specific, providing a blueprint for each of the main areas of activity. It was, in all quarters, intended to represent a fresh start.

In common with Ebenezer Howard's earlier proposal for garden cities¹⁸—a source that is readily acknowledged in the book as a model for New Town—the land was to be held permanently for the benefit of the community, with rising values accruing for the general good rather than for private profit. It was conceded that the town might

13. *Ibid.*, 9.

14. *Ibid.*, 9.

15. *Ibid.*, 11-12.

16. *Ibid.*, 10.

17. *Ibid.*, 11.

18. Howard 1919, *op. cit.*

have to be run as a limited company, but this was balanced by a concern that all residents should be able to influence the way that the town would be governed. The main company (responsible for the providing basic services) was to be supported in its work by subsidiaries, with such novel responsibilities as the provision and distribution of an adequate pure food supply (clean, fresh milk being one example), the undertaking of agricultural operations, the provision of houses, workshops and factories, public buildings and adequate transport. If all of this sounded too much like a socialist Utopia, a sense of balance was offered—"the reconciliation of the complementary ideals that we label 'individualistic' and 'socialistic.'" ¹⁹

As a planned settlement, what was envisaged sounded very much like a garden city: "New Town will be English, a town mostly composed of English-looking cottages and houses, built each for one family." ²⁰ Each house would have its own garden, with playing fields and parks in the residential areas; a civic center with "public buildings set in a garden where the greenness of trees and grass, the tints of flowers and fruits, will give joy to the citizen"; ²¹ and with industrial buildings in another part of town. In its layout it could well have been Letchworth, the first garden city (to which frequent reference is made in the text). Moreover, an image of how it would look was underpinned by a vague social notion (perpetuated in the design of British new towns some thirty years later) ²² that a variety of houses of different sizes and rents, mixed at random through the town, would foster a spirit of "neighbourliness and common interest." ²³

A discussion of domestic arrangements also reflected some of the experimental thinking that was associated with the garden city movement. Nothing was to be taken for granted, from the design of housing and furniture to the reduction of household chores. In all this, two sets of principles were pursued—one was that of securing a balance between individual and community objectives, and the other was the importance attached to improving the lot of women.

While no one would be compelled to subscribe to communal activities, at least the opportunity would be there; "New Town will not propose to force any of the suggested arrangements upon its inhabitants, but will rather hold itself in readiness to meet promptly

19. Hughes 1919. op. cit., 16.

20. Ibid., 38.

21. Ibid., 115.

22. Reith Committee, *Final Report of the New Towns Committee*, Cmd. 6876 (London: HMSO, 1946).

23. Hughes 1919, op. cit., 37.

the demands that they make for such assistance."²⁴ Hot water, for instance, could be provided on a communal basis, but each "home house" would also have its own open fire (in spite of an interesting reference to the prospective exhaustion of the nation's coal supply). Many of the proposals for communal facilities were linked to the idea of liberating women from traditional household chores.

This latter point was explored at a detailed level of design (through ways of removing difficult features to dust, like moldings on ceilings and headings on wood-work), and through more radical changes to domestic life. Among the latter were proposals for a People's Kitchen and restaurant and for what was termed the Household Auxiliary Corps. The People's Kitchen was not only to provide restaurant meals and a "take out" service, but was also to hold a stock of basic cooking utensils for use within the community. In turn, the Household Auxiliary Corps was to consist of "experts in household arts, the majority being all-round people, others being specialists as cleaners or needlewomen, cooks or waitresses."²⁵ Both innovations were designed to free women from the home, but it has to be said that both appear to be based on an assumption that women were to continue to perform the same kind of work (albeit in a different setting) as they had previously done. Thus, "the girl who would refuse 'to go back into the home' [after the experience gained in the First World War] as drudge for her parents, or even for her 'boy', would readily join the staff of a People's Kitchen working in shifts with regular hours, or enlist in a uniformed corps of Household Auxiliaries."²⁶

Thought was also given in house design to health standards. Learning from the example of nineteenth-century reformers, an effective way of securing improvements was simply to build homes with good ventilation and a sunny aspect, together with a supply of basic services. Some of the advice was deceptively simple; provide adequate heating was one tip, as "a chilly bathroom discourages cleanliness."²⁷ To this kind of advice was added the more novel idea of a Health Society, with a dual brief of preventative health care and a community support service for households in times of illness.

If not in every detail, at least in principle there are parallels in the above domestic arrangements with the experience of Letchworth and with the basic ideology (radical but not revolutionary) of the

24. *Ibid.*, 124.

25. *Ibid.*, 127.

26. *Ibid.*, 126.

27. *Ibid.*, 121.

garden city movement. But if New Town derived some of its aspirations from that source, Hughes was also at pains to show that his own plans were more far-reaching. The essential difference lay in what was proposed for industry and agriculture, and in the novel ideas for education, amounting to nothing less than "the perfecting of human character."²⁸

Industrial production and distribution would be guided by co-operative principles, and a firm seeking to set up business in New Town would be asked the searching question: "Does it tend to enrich the lives of all associated with it, whether as producers or consumers?"²⁹ What was clearly considered unacceptable was the exploitation of labor and the making of profits as an end in itself, although it was conceded that a limited interest on capital invested would be permitted. In contrast to attempts to reconcile individual and communal priorities in the domestic arrangements, the element of central control in industry and agriculture was strong.

Anticipating, perhaps, that with these restrictions New Town might not be the most attractive of locations for firms, provision was made for a Parent Company to initiate its own industry. Ideally, this Parent Company would manage all the industry of the town through departmental committees, "in one huge co-operative concern."³⁰ It was accepted, however, that this ideal situation might be beyond reach, and that other suitable enterprises would need to be accommodated as well. Additionally, in the tradition of all good Utopian schemes, there would be encouragement for small craft industries, using little or no machinery.

On the distribution side, apart from a presumption that only goods and services of high quality and good value would be provided, there was a firm proposal for a "Central Store, in the name and under the control of the people of the city."³¹ This, too, would be run on cooperative lines, with all householders of the town as members.

In agriculture, too, cooperative principles were brought to bear, and, as with industry, the degree of central control was marked. More so, in fact, to the extent that it was proposed to create an agricultural belt around the town and to farm most of it as a single unit, under the common direction of a Farming Company. If this, in itself, is enough to arouse thoughts of a collective farm, the details of

28. *Ibid.*, 19.

29. *Ibid.*, 45.

30. *Ibid.*, 51.

31. *Ibid.*, 58.

New Town agriculture endorse the comparison. Branches were proposed to represent different farming activities, and, while each of these was to operate semi-autonomously (with its own management structure), delegates were to be appointed to sit on a joint committee to manage the farm as a whole. At the latter, weekly meetings were to be held to receive reports from the branches and to agree on plans for future work.

Various advantages were given in support of this form of organization, including the opportunity to introduce the tractor and to restructure field patterns to enable a more productive working of the land. Some concession was made to allow smallholdings to be established as well, though there is a sense in which that was simply in order to demonstrate the inferiority of individualism as compared with cooperation on a large scale (even allowing for the fact that smallholdings could well be organized on a cooperative basis).

Formulated against a background of national concern about the state of the countryside, considerable store was attached to the plans for agriculture as a source of regeneration and as a contribution towards the reconciliation of town and country. 'Agriculture in New Town' (rather than around it) is how it was described, and to strengthen this concept it was envisaged that most farmworkers would live in the town and travel out each day to the land. Farmworkers, it was argued, would be an educated workforce who would be able to enjoy to the full the amenities of the town. Far from being marginalized, agriculture would form the mainstay of the local economy, producing not simply farm products but also associated refining and other related industries. As in so many community experiments, the promise of restoring bonds with the land was a powerful emotive force, used to excite and attract others to the cause. In a concluding section, headed 'A New England', the clarion call was sounded:

"... we hope to do something to help to colonise England, to show that her broad acres are not worked out, that they can support a vigorous population and hundreds of healthy towns, and that her people will thrive most, and be healthiest and happiest, when the keynote of all their efforts is association in work and in the rewards of work."³²

But for all the emotive appeal of the land, in New Town it was to be education above all other activities where most hope for the rebuilding of society was pinned. Here, according to Hughes, was the best opportunity to make a new beginning, for "the faith of the

32. *Ibid.*, 83.

founders of New Town is in the divinity within the little child."³³ Not a great deal was thought of existing methods of education, as practiced in most of the country's schools, and the communarians look instead to the ideas of innovators like Dr. Montessori. In place of inhibiting systems, what was sought was a means of allowing children to develop and express their own innate talents. The "utmost possible freedom for teacher and pupil"³⁴ was to be the order of the new day.

Thus, what was proposed was an integrated system of primary, secondary, tertiary and art schools, grouped near the center of the town together with public libraries, swimming baths, a picture gallery, museum, theatre, gymnasium, playing fields and public park. Adults would enjoy access to most of these facilities as well as children, and throughout there would be provision for open-air work.

In addition to basic instruction in "the three Rs" and in conventional academic subjects, a distinguishing feature of the curriculum was the emphasis placed on practical education. This was valued for its own sake (as a source of vocational skills) but also as a medium through which more abstract principles (measurement, reasoning, communication, etc.) could be learned. Forming the focus of this practical education, a cluster of workshops was planned for the likes of carpentry, food preparation, the making of clothes, publishing and furniture production. Significantly (in terms of uniting educational and land objectives), the chief workshop was that for farming, for "farming, gardening, the care of the park and playing-fields will also form part of the children's occupations."³⁵

Acknowledging the challenge to established practice inherent in the proposed system, the proposers felt it incumbent to spell out the advantages that could be expected. One advantage claimed was that of instilling a new work ethic, derived from the satisfaction and skills that children would gain from practical activities. A sense of self-imposed discipline, higher standards of moral and religious development, a closer involvement of parents in the life of the school, and, in turn, of children in the workplace, and greater autonomy and an unwillingness to accept low standards of urban life—all of these comprised additional advantages.

New Town, if even only some of these outcomes were to be attained, was to be a place of fine, upstanding citizens and a beacon

33. *Ibid.*, 84.

34. *Ibid.*, 93.

35. *Ibid.*, 95.

of light for the rest of society. Through education and through the design and arrangements of buildings, a New Town citizen would enjoy in home life enhanced opportunities for personal privacy and family life, combined with communality at a neighborhood and town level. It was idealistic (if not Utopian) but also, the protagonists believed, entirely practical. In any case it was seen to belong to a noble tradition; and acknowledgement was made to Plato and Thomas More, William Morris and "all the poets and thinkers who have described the city of their dreams."³⁶ Notwithstanding a failure by these past visionaries to enact their plans, New Town—"a place where a new life is to be lived"³⁷—was located firmly in this same tradition.

A Day Like No Other

"We are living in a day like no other that the world has ever seen. Never has there been a greater need for action."³⁸

The publication in 1919 of *New Town* was but the first step in realizing the ideas contained within it. The book itself concluded with a vigorous appeal to all sections of society to see in community the seeds of a fresh start. The time was right, it was argued, for an initiative of this sort. "Not only is there all the work of reconstruction to be done, but there is another war, the 'class war', smouldering in most lands and ablaze in some."³⁹ Various new paths were being forged: the State itself was taking a more assertive role, trade unionists were beginning to realize their own strength, municipal socialists continued to make progress in their own cities, and the co-operative movement still attracted widespread support. But; as Hughes and other advocates of New Town were consistently to impress, there was a way forward, too, for the individual—working with others "on a more manageable scale and in a more congenial atmosphere"⁴⁰ to create new forms of social relations.

In practical terms, Britain at the end of the First World War offered more promising ground than communitarians could recall. Attention was drawn to the fresh start that was called for in industrial life; to a need for up to a million new houses, and to the associated opportunity to locate at least some of these in new communities; to

36. Ibid., 36.

37. Ibid., 113.

38. Ibid., 136.

39. Ibid., 136.

40. W.R. Hughes, in a letter to *The Nation*, July 1920, p. 557.

lessons of comradeship gained during the recent war; and to changing prospects for women, following the experience of newfound liberties in wartime.

On such fertile ground, the foundations of New Town could be firmly based. In the way of idealists, it was confidently predicted that supporters could be drawn from all sections of society. Thus, an appeal was made to

"men of technical and business experience . . . , to keen Trade Unionists and to 'Labour' enthusiasts . . . , to those who wish to see daily labour redeemed . . . , to all who believe in the necessity for a new emphasis on full and free association in labour and in life . . . , to those who are anxious about the future of the English country-side . . . , to those who are concerned about our present educational system and methods . . . , to men and women who, because of the war, have lost their old positions or wish to make a change into some work of more direct service to their nation . . . , to those who cannot give personal service but who can give money . . . , to those who consider themselves as ordinary folk, with no special powers of conceiving or organising schemes of social benefit, but full of kindly feeling to their neighbours . . . , to women, now more free to co-operate with men than ever before . . . , to practical idealists, young and old . . . , and to the religious instinct in the heart of man that sets him seeking, by so many paths after the universal life and the beloved community."⁴¹

It was, to say the least, a broad church for which New Town was designed.

If all of these various interests did not immediately respond in a practical way to the new possibilities, the book did at least attract some favorable reviews. In the *Manchester Guardian* New Town was commended as "extraordinarily interesting" and "a message of hope." The wish was expressed that the book would have many readers and that from among them "may come some who will join in translating the ideas set forth into the reality of New Town."⁴² Evelyn Sharp wrote in *The Daily Herald* that, whether or not the plan was to be realized in full, "their attempt is real. Reconstruction will at least have been worth while, and it will certainly carry very much further the garden city enterprise of the past thirty years."⁴³ In *Country Life* credit was given for the proponents' ability to balance utopianism with some sound business methods.⁴⁴ Another supportive review appeared in the Christian periodical, *The Venturer*, accompanied by

41. Hughes 1919, op. cit., 138-40.

42. *Manchester Guardian*, April 16, 1919.

43. *The Daily Herald*, July 2, 1919.

44. *Country Life*, July 19, 1919.

an appeal to Christian capitalists to invest in a scheme that promised "absolutely moral surroundings."⁴⁵

The Venturer's reviewer was correct in pointing to the need for investors to come forward if the scheme was to commence. And the mechanism already existed through the formation by the New Town Council of a separate body, the Pioneer Trust Ltd. (incorporated as a Public Utility Society, a device much favored within the garden city movement as a way of enlisting private support). The Board of Directors comprised nine members (all drawn from the Council)—Edward Backhouse (a banker), Harrison Barrow (a tea merchant), Ralph Crowley (a doctor and formerly chief medical officer at the Board of Education), J. Thompson Elliott (a timber importer), Miss S. Margaret Fry (renowned for her work for penal reform and other good causes), Mrs. M. O'Brien Harris (a London headmistress), T. Alwyn Lloyd (architect and town planner, and an active supporter of the garden city movement), Harris Smith (an Essex farmer) and Henry Lloyd Wilson (a chemical manufacturer).

The Trust was constituted to raise the necessary capital and to secure a suitable site. With £12,000 already in the bank, it sought to raise on the open market an additional £63,000 for immediate use. The priority was to obtain a site of some three thousand acres, and to start building as soon as possible. But the way ahead was not easy.

For a start, support for the scheme was by no means universal, even among fellow reformers. At the time of publication, the York philanthropist, Joseph Rowntree, wrote to one of the Directors of the Trust to confess that "doubts arise and continue with growing strength."⁴⁶ He pointed out that what was proposed was little short of a revolution, yet without anything in the way of adequate thought and preparation. Notwithstanding the participation of fifty members on the New Town Council, Rowntree urged that expert advice be obtained on each of the main proposals. Another critical correspondent was the theorist of social evolution and town planning pioneer, Patrick Geddes, who was concerned that insufficient attention had been given to what was for him the crucial issue of town location.⁴⁷ The real problem, though, was less that of unanimity (an unrealistic goal in itself) and more the central issues of raising sufficient funds and finding a suitable site. The Trust found itself in a situation that would have been familiar to earlier community-makers—namely, that of convincing potential investors to part with their money in

45. *The Venturer*, undated review (probably 1919).

46. Joseph Rowntree, in a letter to Edward Backhouse, dated June 13, 1919.

47. Patrick Geddes, in a letter to W.R. Hughes, dated July 22, 1919.

advance of being able to demonstrate anything of worth on the ground. Yet nothing could be done to make the scheme appear more attractive without considerably more in the bank.

For Hughes, the way to break this initial deadlock was for the fifty members of the New Town Council themselves to dip into their own pockets. He wrote to members in June 1919, shortly after publication of the book, urging that each of them should try to raise no less than £1000 (either through direct investment or through persuading others) by the coming October, to yield capital of £50,000. Lest any of them had forgotten what it was all for, he insisted that they would be "giving a lead to the whole development of civilization in the coming age."⁴⁸ He announced that a Travelling Secretary would be appointed to organize a general campaign, but he also reminded Council members that they had a special responsibility to play an active part themselves. To set an example, Hughes explained that he had personally moved to a smaller house, and as a result had been able to donate £3000 to the common cause.

The Chairman of the Trust, Ralph Crowley (whom Hughes later attributed as contributing "perhaps more vision and energy to the movement than any other of its founders")⁴⁹ reinforced the appeal with a letter from him to Friends; and he announced his own personal donation of £1000. He stressed the urgency of it all as offers could not be made for available sites, while "every day that passes seems only to emphasize the need for the direct application of the principles upon which New Town is founded."⁵⁰

The sum required was raised to £100,000 and Hughes called for half that amount within a few months. But a year later the Trust could report the accumulation of only £25,000. With the first flush of public interest past, the shortfall was significant; and the prospect of adhering to their original ideal of buying no less than 3000 acres receded. Even Hughes was later to reflect that their scheme "was so comprehensive and idealistic that it seemed doubtful if it could ever win enough financial support to bring it down to earth."⁵¹

Thus it was that their own financial adversity drew them to another new settlement venture that was also struggling to achieve its ambitions. At Welwyn in Hertfordshire, a group of garden city pi-

48. W.R. Hughes, in a letter to the New Town Council, dated June 25, 1919.

49. W.R. Hughes, *Recollections of Early Days in Welwyn G.C.* (Unpublished ms, Welwyn Central Library, 1966).

50. R.H. Crowley, in a letter to Friends, dated July 10, 1919.

51. Hughes 1966, op. cit., 4.

oneers, inspired by Ebenezer Howard—who had surprised everyone by negotiating and attracting sufficient support to buy a large estate—were laying the foundations for the world's second garden city. Hughes had already pointed to the ideological affinities between the two movements (though always stressing that New Town sought to go further in terms of social reconstruction), so that, although it was brought about by expediency, the prospect of an alliance was not altogether ill-based.

In a confidential report (dated October 1920) to Pioneer Trust directors, the sequence of events is revealed.⁵² It appears that the first discussions were held between R.L. Reiss (one of the Welwyn Garden City Company directors) and Ralph Crowley, representing the Trust, with Reiss holding out the possibility of a tenure for up to 500 acres of land in the town's agricultural belt. A second round of negotiations in September 1920, this time involving three representatives on each side, proceeded on the basis of a firm set of proposals from the Trust. Five sets of requirements were advanced—the immediate acquisition of not less than 500 acres, with a reserve option on the rest of the agricultural belt; the reservation of sites for factories and workshops; an acceptance by the Company of the Trust's proposals for education; the involvement of the Trust in town planning; and the establishment of a central store on cooperative lines, with branches as necessary.

What was clear at that stage, however, was that Reiss had rather misled Crowley in their original discussions by giving the impression that the Welwyn Company was in a position to proceed in response to the Trust's proposals. In fact, it transpired that not all of the farmland was free to be disposed of and that insufficient thought had been given to the other aspects of the New Town scheme. Nor were the potential problems simply technical; "there were hesitants on both sides," recalled Hughes,⁵³ confirming contemporary documents which indicate a sense that what was proposed was, as compared with a scheme wholly their own, "second best". But financial expediency drove both sides towards an agreement. Sir Theodore Chambers, Chairman of the Welwyn Company, confessed that "had any of them known when they started how changing economic conditions of the country would militate against them not one of them would have put a penny of money or an hour of time into it"; while,

52. Confidential Report to Directors of New Town Pioneer Trust, dated October 16, 1920.

53. Hughes 1966, *op. cit.*, 4.

for the Trust, it was conceded that "it is problematical if we shall succeed in a reasonable time in adding greatly to our capital unless we can offer something tangible and more than 4%."⁵⁴

It was against this background that an agreement was reached, whereby the Trust was to make a capital investment in the development of Welwyn, to obtain their agricultural land through a tenancy, to enjoy favorable terms in respect to securing land for factory and housing development, and to nominate a director to sit on the board of the Company. It was generally recognized that both parties shared a common sense of idealism and that an agreement of this sort would at least ensure the partial realization of their original plans. For Welwyn, the injection of additional capital and fresh recruits contributed to its own future development; while for New Town, although perhaps not a city on a hill as envisaged, there was hope that it could still make a mark on the social landscape.

A Via Media

"The experience of housing reformers, of trade unions, of co-operative societies, of progressive civic authorities, of large distributive stores, of agricultural pioneers, and of educational organisers and enthusiasts can all be drawn upon and combined to give the new city a fair start on the way to a free development"⁵⁵

In appealing to diverse interests, New Town was seeking to provide a *via media*, a middle way, fusing spiritual and practical aims "in a social enterprise, small enough to be manageable, yet large enough to exemplify problems of social life of the same kind as those which the nation must face."⁵⁶ Its approach was offered as a working example for its own participants and also to encourage others. As such, it was important to maintain the essential, cooperative principles of the original proposal, and to apply them as widely as possible. Thus, in spite of the compromise made in associating with the garden city movement, every attempt was made in its early days to safeguard each of the main areas of potential development.

To promote its interests the Trust set up its own office in Welwyn, and some of its key founders (including W.R. Hughes, Ralph Crowley and H. Clapham Lander) moved to the garden city. Education was always at the heart of the scheme, and while importance

54. Sir Theodore Chambers, quoted in Confidential Report to Directors of New Town Pioneer Trust, dated October 16, 1920.

55. W.R. Hughes, in 'The joyous call of New Town', *The Challenge*, July 15, 1921, 167.

56. Ibid.

was attached to other issues too, "we recognise that education stands behind and above them all."⁵⁷ In a preliminary report in 1921 it was explained how this priority was to be fulfilled. The plan was for the formation of a new body to encourage and support (in association with the local education authority) a full and unified educational program for the town—with provision for adults as well as for children. Membership of the body (later termed the Welwyn Garden City Educational Association) was to be drawn equally from the Welwyn Company, the New Town Trust and local residents.

In the event, the Association adopted a policy of seeking to enhance the provision of a County Council school by means of raising additional funds. In this way, class sizes could be kept down to an acceptable level (instead of fifty or sixty children to a class), the school leaving age could be raised to 16 (as opposed to 14), various facilities could be provided, and, most important of all, the philosophy of the school could be influenced. This approach was preferred to that of establishing a separate school as it was seen to be more democratic, opening the doors to all children rather than simply to those who could afford fees, though in sharing responsibility with the County Council there was, inevitably, a degree of compromise involved. As well as the basic schools, some of the new town pioneers (led by Hughes and Crowley) also turned their attention to further education, library and museum work, and community health facilities.

The importance of cooperative agriculture, too, was recognized in the early development of the town, with a commitment to make a start from the latter part of 1921 with the first 500 acres, together with the formation of an Agricultural Guild to develop the full scientific use of the land. The whole venture was seen to be of national significance as a pioneering work towards self-government in the agricultural industry. There was also a spiritual side to the enterprise, with the very act of working on the land seen as an emancipating force: "while agriculture needs all the help that science can give, there is no doubt that the closer touch with nature, and the quieter ways of life which country work affords, provide something which our urban civilisation is unconsciously demanding."⁵⁸

Within the first two years of operation, the Guild increased the size of its holding to 1000 acres, and had plans to expand further. Reports spoke optimistically of high quality milk supplies, stock rearing, greenhouse production and general market gardening, and a chicken farm—all of which were geared primarily to supplying the

57. R.H. Crowley and W.R. Hughes, in a circular letter to Friends, September 29, 1923.

58. "Farming a city's lands", appeal letter from New Town Trust, 1921.

population of Welwyn with fresh food. The way of working was also important to the Guild, with reference to a system of workers' control in operation, and with a policy of fair wages (generally above the level pertaining on neighboring farms). The Guild itself was managed by a committee of nine—five elected by the workers on the farms, one by the Workers Union, one by the parish council and two by the New Town Trust.

Widely publicized as "the first agricultural guild in England", its appeal was directed to those "who desire to see a more intensive and more skilful cultivation of the soil of England, the production of the best food and the cleanest milk, the improvement of the conditions of life of the agricultural worker, the bringing of rural interests into the lives of our townsmen, and the organisation of the great service of food-production for the general good and not for private profit . . .",⁵⁹ The motives were laudable and central to the whole scheme, but it proved not to be a financial success. A report at the end of 1923 recorded a heavy loss, and the associated comment that the situation would improve was not borne out by events. Hughes was later to write, rather cryptically, that "this interesting experiment was actively pursued for several years, but finally proved financially unsuccessful, for reasons which need not be given in detail."⁶⁰ The fact is that the 1920s was not a period in which commercial farming flourished, and, in the case of the Guild, the situation was not eased by the fact that none of its holdings were prime agricultural land.

On the industrial front, the New Town Trust was unable at the outset to persuade the Welwyn Company to restrict all new businesses to those that were cooperative organizations. It was, however, able to win the Company's support for this principle to be applied to any business or service attracted to Welwyn primarily to serve the resident population. In such cases, subsidiary companies were to be formed, with profits used to benefit the town as a whole. It was expected that hotels, places of amusement and shops would all be run in this way on cooperative lines. Elsewhere, the hope was that as many as possible of industrial firms would be similarly organized. Printing was singled out as an activity that was especially suitable for "guild" production, but there were also plans for production related to agricultural output. The ultimate aim was that "as much as possible of the productive and industrial life of the town should be free from 'profiteering' and organized for public service, with full regard

59. "The first agricultural guild in England", New Town Trust, undated.

60. Hughes 1966, *op. cit.*, 4.

to the development of the personality of the workers."⁶¹ Towards this end, for a few years the Trust itself took over the running of the Town Laundry, renowned locally for its motorized collection and delivery service. As R. Filler (in his history of Welwyn)⁶² notes, until 1926 the laundry van was also used in cases of emergency as the town's ambulance.

It was accepted that most of the housing of Welwyn would be built by other agencies, though the Trust was keen to make its own provision. It was intended that construction should be undertaken by Building Guilds or by direct labor rather than through private contractors. A separate company was formed, New Town Housing Trust Ltd., which in 1922 converted a farmhouse into a hostel to serve initially as a base for newcomers who wanted to build their own homes.

The company was also responsible for a cooperative housing scheme known as Guessens Court.⁶³ Plans for a scheme of sixty flats and houses together with communal facilities, prepared by H. Clapham Lander (the architect of another cooperative scheme, Homesgarth, at nearby Letchworth) were laid as early as April 1921. It was not, however, until 1925 that a revised scheme (comprising forty flats and a three-storey block with a communal restaurant, kitchen and guest rooms) was finally built. A woman manager was appointed to supervise the flats, and residents could hire maids and make use of boot-cleaning and coal-carrying services. Annual rents of between £40 and £100 included use of tennis courts and ground maintenance. Five years after its opening it was said to be just about paying its way.

On all fronts—education, agriculture, industry and housing—the Trust was able to make a start with some of its plans. But it was all a bit tenuous. To achieve its varied aims, less comprehensive than those set out in its original manifesto yet still ambitious, the Trust was always dependent on suitable people coming forward and on increased financial support. Viability was a constant problem and practical issues had to be dealt with, yet it could not afford to lose sight of the fact that it was essentially a spiritual endeavor. The task of the New Town pioneers was to retain their own integrity while, at the same time, becoming a part of the garden city. They had to face

61. New Town Trust, Annual Report, 1921, 6.

62. R. Filler, *A History of Welwyn Garden City* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1986), 72.

63. Lynn F. Pearson, *The Architectural and Social History of Social Living* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 168-71.

up to the perennial problem of Utopians, seeking to live in the real world while trying to create a new one.

Indeed, their central task in Welwyn became that of seeking to enrich and sustain something of the spirit of social reconstruction that had surfaced in the days of the First World War and to which the original garden city pioneers were themselves committed. With hindsight, New Town probably achieved more in contributing to the practical idealism of Welwyn than in fulfilling as an autonomous experiment the original hopes of Hughes and others. The great hopes of social reconstruction were never entirely lost, and in critical areas of development like education, health and housing the New Town contingent became actively involved as local residents.

This integration of ideals was matched in institutional terms by the eventual incorporation of New Town Trust into the management structure of the town. In 1926 the Garden City Company acquired a controlling financial interest in the Trust, and the Company's Chairman, Sir Theodore Chambers, assumed the chairmanship of the Trust. Twelve years later, in 1934, the merger was completed with the formation of a limited company for the management and development of the town as a whole; an arrangement that was superseded after the Second World War with the incorporation of Welwyn within the national new towns program. Thus, what had started as a voluntaristic experiment eventually became a part of the State's institutional structure.

Flowers in the Desert

'[It is] impossible to live in a capitalist world and not become mixed up in it.⁶⁴

Utopian communities in the early twentieth century (and perhaps at any time) are like flowers in the desert, breaking into blossom in a harsh environment. Domestic poverty, two world wars and an international depression, all in the first forty years of this century, provided both the severest of constraints on free human development yet, at the same time, the strongest of incentives to address the issues. What the above quote by Nellie Shaw (reflecting on the digression of Whiteway from its original principles) illustrates is that, while the formation of communities is often stimulated by a reaction to events, it is impossible to simply turn one's back on the rest of the world. Just as waves of sand are blown across fields of bright desert

64. Shaw 1935, op. cit., 228.

flowers, so, too, are communities vulnerable to pressures from their own external environment.

And so it was for New Town, an attempt to create an island of purity in an imperfect world. Never in doubt was the authenticity of motives, articulated clearly and seeking to renew each of the main aspects of community life, spiritual as well as practical. And matching the novel proposals for restructuring social institutions was an organizational system of consultation and representation quite different from that practiced in the rest of society. Problems there would have been in the making, but the failure of New Town to meet its own objectives was less a function of what was proposed and more one of an inability to address the reality of external constraints. Quite simply, the epitaph of New Town might well have been Nellie Shaw's above words.

Thus, from the very outset the community's founders, while wishing to reject the workings of mainstream capitalism, were forced to act like any other corporation in raising funds and seeking to buy property on the open market. It was their failure to do so that then forced them into a situation of successive compromises, each one of which secured a continuing existence but only at the expense of precious ideals. The final irony was that their pioneering work was later subsumed within a State project for new towns, progressive in one sense but a long way short of what was intended.

New Town, then, was a story of mixed fortunes; an articulate expression of high ideals set against a record of shortcomings in practice. That, of course, is a record not unknown in communitarian history. What is also consistent with this history is the fact that, in spite of relative failings, fellow communitarians are never deterred from trying again to seed new flowers in the desert.

Thus, in the early twentieth century in Britain (and the evidence is that this was the case elsewhere too) a wide variety of community experiments continued to be promoted. It is in this context of continuity that New Town offers more than anecdotal interest. For not only was it an inheritor of an earlier legacy of community ideals, but it also served to embrace and enrich this continuing tradition.

The fourfold typology of communities of production, spiritual endeavor, pacifism and environment provides a helpful basis for locating fresh experiments in the 1920s and 1930s, just as it did in the period before the formation of New Town. Cooperative production (particularly in agriculture), for instance, was carefully explored at New Town, and a link was established between earlier examples of this form of community and subsequent experiments like that of

Peter Scott's attempt at economic revival at Brynmawr in the 1930s.⁶⁵ Likewise, as a spiritual endeavor New Town stands firm in a line of community experiments stemming from some of the nineteenth-century seers, through to a significant revival of religious activity in the 1930s (recorded in a valuable series of inventories under the title of *Community in Britain*).⁶⁶ Thirdly, as a pacifist-inspired community, New Town lent itself to an unbroken tradition, the appeal of which was considerably enhanced before and during the Second World War. The communitarian, John Middleton Murry, was one who believed that "a society of peace is a real possibility and not an idle dream [and that] the primary cell of such a society is a farming community or cooperative farm."⁶⁷ Finally, as an environmental experiment the evidence suggests that although the ideals of New Town were more ambitious than those of the related garden city movement (and largely because of that), it was the latter that exerted the greater influence. Inadvertently, however, because of its location and because of the continuing presence of some of the New Town pioneers in Welwyn, certain ideas (especially in the field of education) were to make their mark on the "parent" settlement.

Ongoing research by the author is designed to explore and identify the details of some of these experiments and the intricacies of their inter-relationships. It is already clear that the early twentieth century provides no shortage of evidence to describe an episode in communitarian history that is every bit as radical and innovative as previous and subsequent episodes. It is part of a remarkably consistent story, as Krishan Kumar asserts in the following observation:

Again and again, in the 1930s and 1960s as much as in the 1820s and 1840s, when it came to trying out new ideas in education, child rearing, personal development, mental health, environmental planning, industrial production, forms of work, types of technology and sources of energy, men and women have resorted, almost instinctively, to communities.⁶⁸

65. For a contextual reference, see W.H.G. Armytage, *Heavens Below: Utopian Experiments in England, 1560-1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul,), 410-12.

66. The first of these was *Community in Britain* (London: Community Service Committee, 1938).

67. George Ineson, *Community journey* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 96.

68. Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), 78.