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CERTIFICATE PROGRAMME IN LOCAL HISTORY: CORE MODULE A
CITIES, TOWNS AND VILLAGES: THE LOCAL COMMUNITY IN THE 19TH
CENTURY

KNEBWORTH

**A DISCUSSION OF CHANGES DURING THE LAST TWENTY YEARS OF
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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INTRODUCTION

Knebworth had been a typical agricultural village for hundreds of years, dominated by a large manor, and surrounded by a small farming community. But outside, much was happening. The telephone had been invented in 1876 and was changing verbal communication. Henry Ford had just made his first car and Queen Victoria was Empress of India, represented at the ceremony by Robert Lytton of Knebworth House and rewarding him in 1880 with the title of Earl of Lytton.

Throughout the 1800's, Knebworth had changed very little, but by the end of the century the industrial revolution was finally having a dramatic effect, creating another village just a mile down the road. The population had doubled and new trades and professions were arriving. This was all due to the arrival not just of the railway in 1850, but the opening of the railway station in 1884. These changes can be seen on the maps, Appendix I and II.

KNEBORTH BEFORE 1880

The first written record of Knebworth is in the Domesday Book – a village called Chenepeworde. It records an entry of a manor held by Aschil, one of King Edwards's thegns. The peasant farmers even then did not have absolute control of their lands.

The oldest part of Knebworth is the Church, built about 1120, and probably because the parish had been recently created and a priest endowed. By 1492 the manor had passed into the hands of the Lytton family and the house was rebuilt. It remained very little altered until the beginning of the 19th century when much of the work we see today was done.¹

The village has therefore been centred on Knebworth House for hundred of years. References to the farms date back to the 12th century and with one family holding the manor for hundreds of years, there has been more stability from the continuous control. There had also been a gradual process of enclosure, probably by mutual agreement.

The nearness of London provided a ready market for produce and also, in return, London had large quantities of manure for the farmers. Agriculture has been the main industry for Knebworth, specifically wheat, and barley for brewing.

During the centuries, Knebworth had changed little, and the census returns throughout the 19th century show a steady population, around 250 inhabitants. These people were employed either on the land or at the manor as domestic servants. But by 1850, the industrial revolution finally took its effect on Knebworth with the opening of the railway. But it was not really until the station was opened in 1884 that the real

¹ Knebworth: The Story of a Hertfordshire Village, Frank Richardson, 1988

changes started to take place – as by 1901 the census shows a doubling of the population to 522.

It is interesting that the route of the Great North Road, only a mile distant from Knebworth, did not have such a huge affect as the railway. This major road was a 17th century invention and was described as a fairly good route from London to Hatfield where the great House stood. By the middle of the 18th century, the road from Welwyn to Stevenage had been turnpiked, and ‘macadamised’ by the middle of the 19th century. The nearest coach stop to Knebworth was in Broadwater (now known as The Roebuck) or along the Welwyn to Hitchin road through Codicote. A map of 1878 shows a Gun Lodge on the outskirts of what is now defined as Knebworth, but nothing else.²

THE RAILWAY AND THE STATION

The arrival of the railway was to have a huge effect on the village. The initial proposals were to construct a line which would have passed through Welwyn village and Codicote to Hitchin. This scheme failed due to the lack of financial support as well as objections from Lord Dacre of Codicote. There were two rival companies and Appendix III shows a letter from the engineer, Willian Gravatt of the Direct Northern Railway explaining the situation to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton of Knebworth House. Appendix IV is a letter to Bulwer Lytton from DNR informing him of their intention to make an application to Parliament. The rival company was the London and York Railway and Apendix V and VI show letters from Bulwer Lytton to them expressing his concerns, particularly that they were not providing him with a station (as DNR were). These two companies eventually amalgamated in 1846, and later in the same year the Great Northern Railway received royal assent.³ Building of the section from London to Peterborough commenced in 1848, and opened in August 1850. But it was not until 1 February 1884 that a station was opened in Knebworth with seven trains per day each way.⁴ Lord Lytton had insisted on a station being built at Knebworth, as part of his deal with the railway company to allow passage through his estates.⁵

HOUSING AND LOCATION

So what impact did the opening of the station have – being built about one mile from the village? It created a new and separate settlement, which according to a map made at the beginning of the 1900’s, became known as Knebworth Station. New properties were built, and new people moved into them. What in fact they were doing was to create a whole new village, to be known later as New Knebworth, then, just as Knebworth, with the original village becoming known as Old Knebworth!

² Hertfordshire Histories, Tony Rook - 1991

³ Railways of Hertfordshire by F G Cockman, p.19

⁴ Welwyn’s Railways: A history of the Great Northern Railway from 1850-1986 by Revd. Gladwin, Peter Neville, Douglas White; Castlemead Pubns, 1986

⁵ Knebworth Past, John Band and Ian Gilmore, 1994

In the census of 1881 there were 30 dwellings listed and occupied by 250 people. If account is made for the 32 people in Knebworth House on census night, the remaining inhabitants of Knebworth were distributed at 7.5 per dwelling. During the next twenty years, the number of dwellings had risen to 109, the new properties all built around the station, and thus starting the new community. The numbers per dwelling had fallen by 1901 to 4.8.

NEW PROFESSIONS AND TRADES

And with the new railway came people to work on the railway – eleven new workers living in Knebworth in 1901, one residing in the Signal Box! It also attracted new professions – teachers, a Stockbrokers Clerk and a Solicitor. The village now also had its own Police Constable, and even a surgeon. New tradesmen included a butcher, a grocer and draper, as well as Charles Lowe, then a Cycle Agent and today a thriving Builders Merchant. John Smith also set up his own blacksmith's shop, opening it on a Sunday evening as a Congregational Chapel!⁶

THE PARISH COUNCIL

The village had had a Parish Council since Tudor times and records exist that go back to the 1600's. The Parish Council exercised various civil duties and powers, as well as its Ecclesiastical Authority. The parish in the 1880's centred around Knebworth House and St Mary's Church, with much of 'new' Knebworth in other parishes, Welwyn and Datchworth – as can be seen by the milestone in the present village High Street stating 'Datchworth'.

The dramatic changes brought about by the railways meant that this old system was no longer adequate so the then Liberal Government brought in sweeping reforms in a new Local Government Act, 1894. Civil power and authority were to be removed from the Ecclesiastical Parish, who would be left to manage the affairs of the church. For the first time, every parochial elector, both men and women, would have a voice in local affairs. Under this new act, Parishes containing 300+ inhabitants were entitled to their own Parish Council. In Knebworth, the first meeting of Parochial Electors was held on 4 December 1894 to elect their Councillors.⁷

THE FARMING COMMUNITY

Another small change happened within the farming community, attracting farmers from distant regions. Farmers in Scotland were finding things difficult in the 1880's and even in the 1881 census, Kenneth Douglas had just come down to Rustling End from Scotland, as had the Bailiff of Knebworth Estate. By 1901 another Scottish farmer had taken over Rustling End, George Muirhead had his family were in Deards End Farm, and a Welsh farmer, Thomas Willians was at Manor Farm. And during the last 20 years of the century, the numbers employed in farming had risen from 30 to

⁶ Knebworth – A story of a Hertfordshire Village, Frank Richardson

⁷ Knebworth Past, John Bland and Ian Gilmore

42, but as a percentage of the total population, this was a fall from 12% to 8%. This relatively small increase in the farming population could be attributed to improved cultivation and the introduction of better implements, as well as an improvement in transport facilitating the movement of produce and livestock, larger and more compact farms and the introduction of artificial fertilisers.⁸

RELIGION AND NEW CHURCHES

The parish church of St Mary's is thought to date back to 1120, and although no church was mentioned in the Domesday Book there may have been a Saxon church of timber on the site before the more substantial one was built. Sir John Hotoft, the lord of the manor at that time, erected the tower in 1420.⁹ This church served the village until the end of the century when the growing community felt it should build a new one closer to the congregation. It was designed by the Architect Sir Edwin Lutyens and built in 1915 by a local firm, Messrs W Darby, who made all the bricks and roof tiles in their own brickyard at Rabley Heath to Sir Edwin's requirements.

It was the new Scottish farmers who had an influence on the non-conformist facilities within Knebworth, initially holding their congregational services in the blacksmith's shop. But with permission of Lord Lytton, their own new church was opened in 1888, just a stone's throw from the Station. The 1901 census shows two Congregational Ministers, one even coming from Scotland.

KNEBWORTH HOUSE AND THE LYTTONS

It was Lord Lytton who had negotiated with GNR for the station to be sited near his house, and then seeing its effect on the community, set up a company, Knebworth Garden Villages, to build new residences on 800 acres of land on either side of the line.

At Knebworth House itself, the census for 1901 shows far fewer domestic staff employed on the estate, but it may be that many of them were away at the time of the census, as indeed the Lytton family appear to be. The 1881 census clearly shows all the family members, and the variety of birthplaces for the children as the Earl of Lytton carried out his duties in the diplomatic service – in Vienna, Paris and Simla. His daughter Constance was later to be a member of the suffragette movement, and was imprisoned for her activities.

The Lyttons had a good social conscience and Lady Lytton was known to teach the village children in Knebworth House. Of course her own children had a Governess, as can be seen in the 1881 census. The Lytton family also built a terrace of five almshouses in 1836, always occupied by elderly people, although two families had grandchildren staying with them in 1901.

⁸ Knebworth – A story of a Hertfordshire Village, Frank Richardson

⁹ Knebworth – The story of a Hertfordshire Village, Frank Richardson

SCHOOL

Provision of education in the nineteenth century often relied on the benevolence of a local inhabitant and Knebworth was no exception. Both Mrs Bulwer Lytton at Knebworth House and the Rector's wife are known to have provided tuition to the village children.¹⁰ A school building was erected in 1870 and extensions added to accommodate the growing population, But as the new village grew the children were finding it too far to travel the mile to Old Knebworth, so a new school was finally built in 1912.

WOMEN AND WORK

Typically in such a small village, the women were employed on the farms, and in domestic service. The influence of Knebworth House obviously had a huge influence as an employer of female labour, many of the women describing their jobs in the census returns as parlourmaid, kitchenmaid, or cook. Straw plaiting had long provided employment for women in Hertfordshire and there was still one recorded in the 1901 census.

By the end of the 19th century, there were 25 more women than men in Knebworth, compared with the 4 additional men in 1881. But although the number of women had **increased**, the numbers working had **decreased**. In 1881, 58.5% of the females over 15 years of age had a listed occupation, whereas in 1901 it had fallen to 31.7%. By looking more closely at the new housing, of the 71 women aged 15+, only 12 had a listed occupation – 17%. In the old housing, 46 of the 155 women aged 15+ were listed as working, a very high 40%. These 46 women were still described as having domestic occupations, whereas the newcomers included many more 'white collar' jobs, such as the Postmistress and the teachers (noting that one of them is only 16 years of age!). These women would have had to walk the mile back to the old village to their work at the school and post office.

POPULATION AND MIGRATION

While the population was increasing in total, young people still left the village. Sixty people were born in Knebworth in 1851, aged under 20, but by 1881 only 15 aged 20+ lived in the village. The same pattern appears again when 50 under 20's appear in the 1881 census, but only 21 aged 20+ appear in 1901.

With only one quarter of the 1881 population born in the village, and another quarter moved in from with a 5-mile radius, this seems to go against Ravenstein's Laws of Migration. For example, he quotes 'the majority of migrants only go a short distance' – in Knebworth 50% in 1801 and 57% in 1901 migrated further than 5 miles; 'migrants who go greater distances go to great centres of commerce and industry' – in Knebworth 46% in 1881 and 43% in 1901 migrated from outside Hertfordshire.

¹⁰ *ibid*

The migrants in the 1881 census are distorted by the occupants of Knebworth House, and the two large families from Scotland – one as a farmer and the other as Steward of Knebworth Estate. The remaining migrants are mainly from surrounding counties. But in 1901 we see more migrants from London, especially as railway workers, and other distant areas of the country, such as Norfolk, Nottingham, Kent, and Surrey. In fact the new ‘professionals’, the surgeon and the solicitor, came from Surrey. And still more farmers arrived from Scotland.

Another long distant migrant from Somerset was the Matron at the Home for orphan boys. This home had been set up in 1888 by the Church of England Children’s Society for waifs and strays. This was the idea of the local rector Rev. Jones and he asked a local widow, Mrs Smith to act as Matron. They all lived in a tiny two-up, two-down cottage until a new home was built in ‘new’ Knebworth in 1915.

Looking at the occupations of the residents in 1901, it appears that they all work in and around the village, and are not using the railway to travel. This is of course difficult to verify, but none of the stated occupations give an indication that they work in say Hatfield or Stevenage, the nearest local towns with railway stations. The exception may be the Solicitor, the Civil Service Clerk and the Stockbrokers Clerk who may have been Knebworth’s first commuters to London.

POPULATION IN KNEBWORTH FROM CENSUS RETURNS

	1851	%	1881	%	1901	%
Born in Knebworth - age 20+	21	7.2	15	6	21	4
Born in Knebworth - age under 20	60	20.7	50	20	72	14
Born within 5 miles	78	27	60	27	130	25
Born 5+ miles in Herts	35	12	10	4	75	14
Born in other counties	96	33	115	46	224	43
TOTALS	290		250		522	

CONCLUSION

Knebworth was now beginning to expand around the station, and the first real signs of an ‘industry’ coming to the village with the move of the body building part of Lacre Motor Co from Letchworth to the blacksmith’s yard – later becoming Creasey Bros.¹¹

Having negotiated for the station with GNR, Lord Lytton continued to play a prominent role in the village and wished to further exploit its connection to London. He therefore promoted Knebworth as a Garden Village on the lines of Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City, only on a smaller scale – the concept developed by Ebenezer Howard. Lord Lytton’s connection with Sir Edwin Lutyens ensured he acted as Consulting Architect for Knebworth Garden Village. The plans were drawn, and the plots of land advertised for sale. A few properties were built but the project lapsed during the run up to the Great War.¹²

However, the village has continued to develop, Old Knebworth remaining very much as it was hundreds of years ago, but with ‘new’ Knebworth becoming a large and lively community of around 5000 over the next hundred years. Those early decision of Lord Lytton to route the railway through his land and build a station convenient to his stately home certainly had a dramatic effect on the Knebworth community.

Primary Sources:

1881 and 1901 Census returns
Maps dated 1878 and 1902
Railway timetables – February and May 1884 (Herts Gazette)
Kelly’s Directories
Letters to and from Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton
Photographs of Knebworth Station

Bibliography:

Welwyn’s Railways: A History of the Great Northern Line from 1850 to 1986;
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¹¹ Knebworth Past, John Bland and Ian Gilmore

¹² *ibid*

