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Project: Knebworth Garden Village

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Ann Judge

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20th century, a plan was devised for the development of a ‘garden village’ at Knebworth, along the lines of the Garden City at Letchworth which had started in 1903. An estate of 800 acres was laid out, but the plan never totally materialised. So, why was it planned, how did it progress, and why was it never completed?

BACKGROUND

In 1898, when Ebenezer Howard wrote down his ideas for a garden city in his book ‘Tomorrow – A peaceful path to real reform’, it was in response to the problems of squalor, congestion and poverty that he saw in London. It inspired him to believe that he had the solution to the problem of the uncontrolled growth of towns, and the migration of people from the countryside to the towns, seeking jobs and homes. He wrote “*There are not only 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 all the beauty and delight of the country, may be secured in perfect combination. Human society and the beauty of nature are meant to be enjoyed together*”.

His idea was to create a ‘Garden City’, where there would be comfortable, well designed houses, with gardens set in tree lined streets. The factories would be clean, healthy and safe places to work in, and would not pollute the environment. The countryside would be brought into the town.

Howard’s first ‘garden city’ project was started at Letchworth in 1903 and at the same time, Victor, Lord Lytton (see photograph Appendix A) was planning something along similar lines. The Garden City movement attracted pioneers, modernisers, socialists, idealists, people with a vision of Utopia – and Victor Lytton was similarly described as coming from a long line of individualists, with strong minds of their own. In notes written by C M Woodhouse, the son-in-law of Lord Lytton, he is described as “*slow to find his cause that could draw out his whole personality and powers*”. But his speeches between 1901 and 1911 included subjects such as the welfare of the industrious poor, the Poor Law and Holidays for Workers. And

amongst his public duties, he worked on the City Parochial Foundation, the Moral Education Committee and the British Institute of Social Services. Victor was a convinced Free Trader and he joined the Free Trade League.¹ His sister Constance was already actively involved in the women's' suffrage movement. It is no wonder therefore that Victor Lytton should want to find his own 'cause' and get caught up in the Garden City movement.

In 1904 he consulted with his brother in law, Edwin Lutyens who wrote back to Lytton saying *“Milne has sent me two plans for approval of buildings, proposed to be put up on land you have sold or leased to different people. I think, if you want me to help you, you ought to come and arrange some definite scheme or policy as regards the development of Knebworth, and not willy nilly to the beck of all comers. Your buildings proposed are horrible and very vulgar to look upon – do you mind this? It is bound to detract from the appearance of the estate and the class of tenant you will be able to command”*. (see Appendix B). Possibly the Report, dated 30 July 1904 prepared by William Young (Appendix C) was a further attempt by Lord Lytton to produce something more to the liking of Edwin Lutyens.

By 1908, plots of land were being bought up by local builders, as can be seen from a letter dated 1.7.08 from Mr Milne, Knebworth Estates Manager, confirming sales²:

Plots 198 and 199	Mr C Lowe	£75
Plots 202 & 203	Mr C Lowe	£139
Plot 246	Mr F Welland	£62
Plots 200, 201	Wm Darby	£150
Plots 139, 140	Wm Pettit	£27 10s 0d
Plots 141, 142, 143	G Rayment	£49 10s 0d

By referring to specific plot numbers, a plan had obviously been developed and finalised by 1908. But then Lord Lytton approached Thomas Adams, who was managing Letchworth Garden City, to take on responsibility for managing the whole

¹ Knebworth House Archives – unpublished biography of Lord Lytton

² Knebworth House Archives – letters sent from Mr Milne dated 1.7.08

Knebworth project. He accepted, visited the estate and in January 1909 wrote a report with his recommendations. (see Appendix D and E)

THE CHARACTERS INVOLVED

Naturally, Lord Lytton wanted to consult with his own brother in law, Edwin Lutyens, but the key architects were Pepler and Allen. George Pepler was a colleague of Raymond Unwin who was working at Letchworth, and together they founded the Town Planning Institute. Pepler had trained as a surveyor but was drawn to housing and town planning. His partner was Ernest G Allen, and in 1908 they won two gold medals at the Wolverhampton Model Housing Exhibition. They also designed houses for Hampstead Garden Suburb (which also involved Lutyens). Another architect was C M Crickmer who was also designing both for Hampstead Garden Suburb, and Letchworth. After the First World War, the architects AS and JCS Souter designed houses in Deards End Lane, while at the same time acting as architects to the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust.³ The Knebworth scheme was therefore attracting the most influential architects of the day.

But it was not just the architects who Lytton brought in to help him; he also employed others involved in the Garden City movement. For example, in November 1911, Lord Lytton held a meeting to consider the formation of a co-partnership tenant society at Knebworth, and he invited Anthony Wilson to address a meeting of local residents. Mr Wilson had come down from the Lake District where, as a Quaker, he was involved in the setting up of Derwentwater Tenants Limited, a co-operative movement where tenants were encouraged to take shares, and take part in the managements of their estate.

Also acting as an adviser was Thomas Adams, who had been Secretary and then Manager of First Garden City at Letchworth from 1903 until 1906. He had in fact worked closely with Ebenezer Howard to locate the site for the first Garden City. He was born in Scotland and a farmer in his early years. He came to London as a journalist and became interested in the garden city movement, then established a

³ Letter dated 16.12.05 from Dr Mervyn Miller to Ann Judge

practice as a town planner. Adams was also the first President of the new professional body of the Town Planning Association and the first person in England to make his living entirely from planning and designing garden suburbs. He eventually went over to Canada in 1914 and was a founder of the Town Planning Institute of Canada.⁴

HOW THE PLAN DEVELOPED

With Thomas Adams now acting as a Consulting Surveyor, the project took on a new momentum. In September 1909, the Earl of Lytton had held a meeting with local residents to explain the arrangements he was making for the development of his land. He explained that *‘the development of the estate had been proceeding for some years on ordinary lines, but, following the example of Letchworth, Bourneville and other Garden Cities, the Earl decided a year ago to have a proper town planning scheme. It provides for wide main avenues, ample recreation spaces, and large gardens. The average number of houses to the acre is less than 10.’* Lord Lytton also explained that in addition to describing his plans for the estate, he was also concerned that he had to deal with three different Councils, Welwyn, Stevenage and Hertford, *‘not one of which had the smallest interest in the inhabitants of Knebworth’*. To meet this difficulty, he suggested the formation of a Residents Council with whom he could communicate from time to time, and keep informed of the development of the estate. (Appendix F).

A Residents Council did indeed form, with its inaugural meeting in February 1910, but during that year, an application was made by Knebworth Parish Council to form a new civil parish, and the new enlarged Knebworth Parish Council was formed in July 1910.

An important aspect of the Garden City movement was ‘planned industry’ and in 1909, Thomas Adams wrote to Lord Lytton with information about an American company who were looking for a site in England. (Appendix G) The company was the White Cross Milk Company and Adams felt that *“the time is ripe for the milk*

⁴ Web pages of Canadian Institute of Planning – www.cip-icu.ca

supply of London to be put on a more healthy footing...it is the kind of factory that would attract attention without injuring the Estate from a residential point of view". The Company did indeed set up its factory in Knebworth and it was opened by the Countess of Lytton in 1908. Milk was collected from farms within a six mile radius, separated, sterilised and reduced in bulk. This was sent to London where sterilised water was added before delivery. The factory manager was Danish and production continued until about 1936.⁵

A letter to Lord Lytton from the architects Pepler and Allen, dated 18.7.10 discusses the need for publicity "*to encourage development*", including an offer from Great Northern Railway to prepare posters and distribute booklets free of charge. (Appendix H).

In July 1911, the claims of the garden village at Knebworth were brought prominently to the notice of the public by an exhibition of building plans at Kings Cross. The *Herts Express* quoted in its article that "*Lord Lytton is keenly interested in the scheme and he is determined that the village shall be in many respects a model one, with advantages for the residents in the matter of recreation grounds and public buildings. The company has struck out on a new line at Knebworth for instead of purchasing a quantity of land and sinking a large amount of capital on which interest has to be paid, it will purchase from Lord Lytton, the landlord, only such land as is actually required*". (Appendix F)

Also, brochures were also produced, containing plans of the 800 acre site, plans and elevations of the houses to be built, photographs of the surrounding countryside, and details of the costs of the properties and how they could be paid for. They also contained wonderful descriptions of the advantages of living in a garden city environment.

"The charm of our old towns and villages arises in great measure from the individuality of their buildings. Each was built to meet the tastes and requirements of its owner and has on it the impress of his personality, thus enabling us to picture in

⁵ Richardson, Frank, *Knebworth-The Story of a Hertfordshire Village*, p. 74

our minds who and what manner of man he was and how he liked to live. Moreover there was a pleasing variety created by the juxtaposition in the same street of houses of different classes, and this juxtaposition tended to create and foster a feeling of neighbourliness based upon a mutual understanding of, and sympathy with, each other's doings – these old towns and villages were, in short, real 'communities'. What a contrast is the modern town with its mile on mile of dreary uniformity – its endless streets of houses turned out by the dozen only to be occupied by tenants who are here today and gone tomorrow. But a new factor has now to be reckoned with in the Garden city movement which is spreading so rapidly through the country, and one after another is asking himself why he should go on renting a brick box in a sordid street when for the same annual cost he can live in a house built to suit his own tastes and requirements and standing in a pleasant garden where not only he himself but his wife and children may enjoy abundance of fresh air and sunshine with all the added zest to life that comes from sharing in the interests of his neighbours.”

William Wilson was the Agent acting for Garden Villages Limited in the Estate Office at Knebworth House. During 1910, he received many letters from George Pepler which indicate the progress of the Garden Village. For example, a letter dated 22 March 1910 says *“I have an applicant for land at Knebworth. He says he would like to come down with his wife and spend a month or so there in the summer so as to look round before fixing on any particular plot”*. Then 12 April 1910 *“Lord Lytton wants us all to meet with Lutyens to decide on policy with regard to providing further shops”*. And on 26 April 1910, *“I am glad to hear you have had so many sales. Mr Lutyens raised again the question of passing the plans and we shall have to be stricter about the matter. I am very anxious that nothing should be done to seriously hinder sales and I have arranged a conference with Mr Lutyens and hope Lord Lytton will be able to be present”*.⁶

The idea of a Tenants' Society had been discussed with Thomas Adams in 1909, but it was not until November 1911, that Lord Lytton held a meeting with residents to consider the advisability of forming a co-partnership tenant society under the name of Knebworth Tenants Limited. He mentioned that if such a society was established,

⁶ Knebworth House Archives – letters received box dated 1910

Garden Villages limited, who were already building houses on the Knebworth Estate, “would set aside a number of plots round the open space in Stockens Green so that the society would have some of the most delightful site.” (as quoted in *The Herts Express* on 25.11.11) (Appendices F and J)

An article in *The Builder*, dated 26 September 1912, reports “*The first sod of the Knebworth Garden Village on the estate of Lord Lytton was cut on Saturday last. About 1000 acres at Knebworth have been set aside and a comprehensive scheme of development has been prepared by Mr Edwin Lutyens, acting in conjunction with Mr Thomas Adams. A feature of the scheme is the formation of a Co-partnership Tenants Society which is arranging to build cottages with good gardens round the village green. These cottages are to be let at 5s. 6d. and 6s. 6d. a week, and each has three bedrooms and a bathroom. The ceremony was performed by Mrs Harmsworth (husband of Mr Cecil Harmsworth MP) and Sir T Sydney Lea, Chairman of Garden Villages Limited. Mr Harmsworth said that the garden city movement was one of the romances of the time.*” (Appendix K)

The *Herts Express* also wrote articles about progress in Knebworth. In January 1912, they quote that *the new school has an imposing appearance, the scaffolding being now removed. Garden Village Ltd are making extensive improvement near Gun Lane, where land is being laid out in readiness for a new street. Three houses have already been built and new houses in London Road are nearing completion. On another part of the estate, near Woolmer Green, large motor and engineering works and garage are being erected by Mr W Lises and adjoining these works steam saw mills and general joinery works are being built by Mr N Lises. These works should be of great convenience to builder in the neighbourhood. And in August 1912 the development scheme of the Knebworth Garden Village is proceeding apace. The old water mains are being replaced by larger pipes in view of the larger supply necessary in the future. The long talked of gas supply has at last made its appearance and houses in the London Road are being connected with the mains. A much needed improvement has been made by the widening of Swangleys Lane used by the children going to and returning from school.* (Appendix F)

DETAILS OF THE PLANS

The brochure prepared to market the Village, gives details of its altitude (300-400 feet above sea level), its soil (sand and gravel sub-soil overlying chalk) and says that the Estate is *'situated in a healthy and bracing locality, and commands some charming and picturesque views of the surrounding country'*. The health aspect of life in Knebworth was an important part of the sales literature, and it goes on to say that *'the fact that one of the objects is to restrict the average number of houses per acre, indicates that the district is likely to have exceptional advantages from a health point of view. Towns which possess crowded districts or slums of any description, however healthily situated, are productive of unhealthy conditions. Although these conditions only affect the well-to-do resident to a limited extent directly, they undoubtedly produce a large amount of disease indirectly'*. No doubt the outbreaks of cholera in the 19th century were still fresh in their minds.

The land itself was considered *"admirably suited for gardens, as well as being excellently adapted for building foundations"*. It advertises that *"capital bricks are made locally, and Peterborough bricks are delivered at a very cheap rate. Ballast for concrete is at hand, and the local chalk is particularly good for lime, and is burnt and sent to all parts in large quantities on account of its peculiar excellence"*.

Facilities at Knebworth were also highly marketed. Top of the list was of course Knebworth Golf Club, the course laid out by Willie Park, and the Club House designed by Lutyens. Amongst the Committee members were The Earl of Clarendon, the Right Hon Henry Asquith, The Right Hon A J Balfour, the Duke of Rutland and the Marquis of Salisbury. The railway and the station were quoted as showing *"every desire to encourage the development of the estate. Season Ticket rates are as follows between Knebworth and King's Cross: First Class £25 4s 0d; Third Class £14 7s 0d"*.

The 800 acre site was divided into 250 building plots, and a schedule indicated the size of the frontage, the cost per foot of frontage, the minimum value of the house to be erected, and whether the land would be freehold or leasehold. The frontage widths varied between 50 feet, in London Road for example, to 200 and 300 feet. They also

suggested various ways in which to buy your house – by direct payment or by instalments, quoting an example of a mortgage from the Co-operative Society. There was also an option to buy the freehold outright, or to pay less for the property, but having also to pay a Ground Rent. Costs of the houses varied from £800 down to £200. Compare this with the 1905 Cheap Cottages in Letchworth for £150.

In 1911, the idea of a Co-partnership Tenant Society was implemented at Stockens Green, and the following extracts from the prospectus explains its method of working:

- *To acquire or erect substantially built homes, provided with good sanitary and other arrangements for the convenience of tenants;*
- *To let the Society's houses at ordinary rents, pay a moderate rate of interest on capital and to divide the surplus profits among the tenants*

It was considered that tenants having a share in the society would be encouraged to keep the houses in good repair and the share capital could be taken for arrears of rent if necessary. (Appendix J)

Designs of cottages by Pepler and Allen and Crickmer were built, with rents varying from 6/- a week for the cottages to 10/6 a week for a house. The designs for the cottages show three bedrooms, living room, kitchen and a downstairs toilet, but no bathroom. In the house, designed for an 'artisan', there is a 'parlour' as well as a living room, and an upstairs bathroom. The scheme was supported by local farmers and their employees could have some priority. In fact local artisans did not fill the houses and a number were occupied by railwaymen travelling to London to work.⁷

⁷ Richardson, Frank, *Knebworth, the story of a Hertfordshire village*, p.82

THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND BEYOND

During the First World War, building everywhere in the country came to a grinding halt. And the cost of materials rocketed. Also, because of the slow down in completing the Garden Village, Lord Lytton made a reduction in the ground rents for those who had already purchased houses, or who were renting. At the same time, the 1918 Labour Party manifesto wanted “*a substantial and permanent improvement in the housing of the whole people. At least a million new houses must be built at once at the State’s expense, and let at fair rents, and these houses must be fit for men and women to live in.*” A letter from Hitchin Rural District Council to Knebworth Parish Council dated 5 March 1919, states “*I am directed to send you a copy Notice of a Compulsory Purchase Order made by the Council yesterday in respect of land situate at Knebworth and Broadwater belonging to Lord Lytton*”. A new era of council housing was starting.

In the view of Dr Mervyn Miller, “*The Co-partnership model was sidelined after the First World War. Indeed, I came across highly critical remarks about their activities in documents now preserved in the Public Record Office at Kew..... The 1919 Housing Act placed emphasis on the local authorities, funded largely by the State, as the developers of working-class housing, and extensive Council housing dates from this period. This would severely have limited the ability to build further housing for those of modest income at Knebworth. The development of Welwyn Garden City further south would also have impaired the viability of Knebworth Garden Village. Unsurprisingly, the estate appeared to concentrate on middle-class housing during the interwar period and beyond*”.⁸

In 1919, a second garden city, named Welwyn Garden City, was started. As it was only 13 miles from Letchworth, attempts were made to get an understanding between the two companies so that they should work together, having a common interest, but First Garden City (Letchworth) refused, looking on the new scheme as creating unnecessary competition.⁹ The competition between the ‘garden cities’ was noted as early as 1910 in a letter from Pepler & Allen to Lord Lytton “*Although such*

⁸ Letter dated 16.12.05 from Dr Miller to Ann Judge

⁹ Purdom, CB, *The Letchworth Achievement*, J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1963

competition is hardly 'cricket' still it has got to be met and in particular the Nast Hyde Estate by Hatfield bring the competition close home". (Appendix H)

Following the First World War, the architects AS and JCS Souter were now retained by Lord Lytton and in their letter dated 23.6.20 (Appendix L) they discuss the continuing development of the estate according to Lutyens' plans, and their frustration of turning down "*everything that is submitted.....I generally find that they propose to build either a bungalow or a small villa and that their designs are more or less unsuitable, so that I must either turn them down or if possible offer them suggestions for improvement..... only offer such portions as are suitable for the erection of small houses*" (see Appendix L).

By 1921, Garden Villages Limited was sending out letters to potential clients, marketing new houses for sale "*We are not out to make a profit but his Lordship felt there was a scarcity of attractive country houses of this character. We are putting these up as an experiment. The price we can sell it, freehold, is £1650*".

By 1923, Lord Lytton was now in India, and his Estate Manager, William Wilson was writing monthly reports, including progress on new building in the village. In December 1923 he writes that "*there is a revival for plots for building*", but nothing exceptional is reported until 1926. In April that year, surveyors write about a new road, and road widening, and the map shows the original Lutyens design with the new road marked in Red. (Appendix M).

CONCLUSION

So what happened? My research has found no specific documentary evidence explaining the failure to complete the project. The papers for Garden Villages Limited have not been located, and I would need to trawl through all the correspondence at Knebworth House Archives to uncover further letters relating to this matter for the years 1920s to 1940s.

But we can draw some conclusions. Responsibility for providing cheaper housing was now being met by the local authorities, and the co-partnership model went out of fashion. Housing for sale was now being provided at Welwyn Garden City, and Hatfield, as well as at Letchworth, so there was more competition. And also, the 1930s was a period of depression and high unemployment, so the idea of home ownership was out of the question for most people. The Town and Country Planning Act came into force in 1947 so responsibility for the approval of new homes now came under the local authority. All these factors probably contributed to the slow down, and eventual disappearance of Knebworth Garden Village. Knebworth was even considered as a possibility for a new town, but the decision was made to create this at Stevenage where the station served two lines from London.

When one compares the plans designed by Edwin Lutyens with the village as it exists today, one can only wonder what it might have been like to live in a garden village.

SOURCES

Knebworth House Archives – letters sent and received by the Estate Office
Richardson, Frank *Knebworth, the story of a Hertfordshire Village* (revised 1982)
Internet sites to search names of Architects, Surveyors etc, using Google
Brochures produced for Knebworth Garden Village – dated circa 1910
Letter from Dr Mervyn Miller to Ann Judge dated 16.12.2005
Newspaper cuttings from The Hertfordshire Express, Stevenage Library – from
Cuttings Books, 25.9.09 to 31.8.12
Hertfordshire Archives and Library Services – Knebworth cuttings folder

APPENDICES

- A Photograph of Victor, Lord Lytton
- B Letter dated 1.1.04 from Edwin Lutyens to Lord Lytton
- C Report on The Knebworth Building Estate, dated 30.7.04 from William Young
- D Letter from Thomas Adams to Lord Lytton, dated 5.5.08
- E Letter from Thomas Adams to Lord Lytton dated 27.1.09
- F Extracts from the newspaper, *Hertfordshire Express*, 25.9.09, 11.6.10, 13.5.11, 8.7.11, 21.9.11, 25.11.11, 13.1.12 and 31.8.12
- G Letter from Thomas Adams to Lord Lytton, dated 7.5.09
- H Letter from Pepler & Allen to Lord Lytton dated 18.7.10
- J Details of meeting to consider Knebworth Tenants Ltd, 18.11.11
- K Extract from *The Builder*, dated 26.4.12
- L Letter from AS and JCS Souter to Lord Lytton, dated 23.6.20
- M Letter from J R Eve & Son to Wm Wilson, dated 30.4.26 and letter from William Wilson to Lord Lytton dated 18.7.26 discussing roads