

food and welwyn garden city – prescribing a sociable future?

Susan Parham looks at how connections to food played out in the antecedents to and early development of Welwyn Garden City

In this centenary year of the founding of Welwyn Garden City, and in the light of increasingly urgent food issues globally, it seems timely to explore how connections to food have played out in Welwyn Garden City, especially in its antecedents and early development, and to give thought to contemporary food issues and future resilience possibilities.

Ebenezer Howard's *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path To Real Reform*¹ demonstrates to a striking degree engagement with the food aspects of his proposed Garden City constellation. Howard offered very detailed proposals for what we might now call ecologically based feedback loops in a localised food system, linking each Garden City to its own green belt and to other Garden Cities in a productive symbiosis. Howard also proposed or supported a range of interesting ideas on how food would be organised within the Garden City, from the domestic kitchen and the productive private garden, through community gardens, allotments, orchards and smallholdings, and into reshaped food shopping, dining, vegetarian diet, and food waste arrangements.

This food focus is reflected in a number of the Garden City Principles since distilled by the TCPA. The most obvious is 'beautifully and imaginatively designed homes with gardens, combining the best of town and country to create healthy communities, and including opportunities to grow food',² but other principles connect food arrangements to resilience, land value capture, stewardship, accessibility, jobs, and much else. As applied, these principles are not just about physical masterplanning or architectural design ideas – although Welwyn is in part known for

its architectural heritage through the masterplanning and architectural work of Louis de Soissons and his collaborators, which responded in various ways to Howard's principles. Food was one of the ways that Howard intended Welwyn to achieve his radical prescription for social good. Howard was perhaps our first social prescriber.

It is a well worked trope that Howard drew on and brought together in a uniquely accessible way a wide range of place-making concepts that were already in circulation in the 19th century. Many were connected to food – his proposals for the Crystal Palace, for example, are thought to prefigure today's shopping malls. We know that Howard was familiar with the work of leading German agricultural theorists and with the development of parkland towns like those being built in 19th-century Australia – these informed his productive ideas for the green belt around Welwyn Garden City. His Garden City principles also reflected some of the bold proposals of the American material feminists – collective kitchens and dining were to free at least some women from domestic labour.

The proposals of advocates of land nationalisation such as Alfred Russel Wallace were reworked by Howard in the foundational principle of shared ownership through land value capture which benefited everyone in the town in perpetuity. The vision of a peaceful place in which to live and work together in social felicity and health through the best of town-country showed the influence of the views of utopian thinkers, including Edward Bellamy.

It is clear that at least some of these insights were integrated into a holistic vision for Welwyn Garden



Front gardens in an early council housing scheme at Welwyn's Applecroft Road - the houses had very generous garden (and thus potentially food-growing growing) space, especially to the rear

City, and to a much more limited extent built into its food-related architecture and planning space. Welwyn was Howard's 'second go' at developing a Garden City. As in Letchworth previously, Howard was keen to put food to the fore in an egalitarian way, including advancing plans for agricultural smallholdings in the surrounding agricultural estate. Howard and his collaborators made a preliminary announcement about their plans for Welwyn in 1919 that gave prominence to the nature of the proposed food system:

*'The greater part of the estate is now farmed, arable crops predominating. The coming of a new large population will create a big demand for produce and much increase the value of the farms and the number of workers on the agricultural belt. Small holdings will be provided for ex-Service men, groups of co-operators and others.'*³

It might be expected this would be reflected in Louis de Soissons' 1920 masterplan for Welwyn Garden City,⁴ and one of de Soissons' early diagrams from CB Purdom's *Town Theory and Practice*⁵ does show areas around the town clearly marked as 'agricultural belt', in keeping with Garden City principles. Yet, perhaps because the spatial scope of the masterplan aligned with the urban edges of the town, the plan is without the finer grain of proposed food-related land uses in the peri-urban and broader green belt area that was a feature of Howard's earlier Garden City diagrams.

It was not clear from the masterplan what might be covered in food terms on the edge of the city – orchards, market gardens, community gardens and

dairying, for example – or what kind of more arable farming might be undertaken a little further out depending on topography, soil and other landscape and climate conditions. 'Meanwhile' food-related land uses, such as those in Letchworth's masterplan established while the Garden City's residential areas were built out,⁶ also did not seem clearly indicated in the Welwyn masterplan diagrams.

Yet early in Welwyn's development it did appear that some of the Garden City principles in relation to the local food potential of the agricultural belt might be realised. Some green belt fruit tree planting, glasshouse vegetable production and poultry farming were reported,⁷ although it is not clear if this was more Garden City-oriented than the usual set of peri-urban food land uses around a town. Clearly, though, some initiatives were unique to the place as a Garden City. A New Town Trust was formed by a Quaker group whose aim was to 'create somewhere a small town or village based on agricultural pursuits, run as a social experiment and not for profit'.⁷ That trust company initially leased 500 acres of land and formed the New Town Agricultural Guild, 'with a view to supplying the town with produce, starting with the milk supply... Welwyn Stores delivered the milk, but due to its high cost, not enough could be sold to make the scheme work despite concerted efforts with marketing it.'⁷

These co-operative food production initiatives did not become a significant feature of Welwyn's ongoing food system. Rather, in so far as the Garden City principles were given their spatial expression in relation to food, this occurred through other aspects of de Soissons' masterplan, as well as by way of

designs for the town centre and plans for groups of dwellings, individual houses and food industry buildings drawn up by various architects. The masterplan shows the town laid out with tree-lined boulevards, including the Parkway that runs through the town on a formal axis from north to south, off which are a series of smaller curvilinear linking roads from which branch various kinds of culs-de-sac, closes, and quadrangles. Open space is sprinkled through these largely residential areas but not indicated explicitly as to be used for food growing.

At the same time, there is considerable food-growing potential built into the plan, both for middle-class and for more working-class residential space. The masterplan, through its road layout and plot structure, offers extremely generous private garden and public space provision for food growing throughout the town, and contemporaneous accounts by early residents report home vegetable growing taking place. Some Welwyn architects also explicitly advocated substantial space for food growing as part of Welwyn's subdivision design: 'these spaces have very many uses, serving for... communal gardens or allotments, being particularly suitable in the last-named instance because screened from the road and with ready access from the surrounding houses.'⁸ Social norms about hiding vegetable growing from public view, with the front garden meant for ornamental planting display, still operated here.

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At a more modest housing provision level, early houses in a district council scheme for Elm Gardens/Applecroft Road reproduced in *The Building of Satellite Towns*³ show a series of maisonettes and short rows of terrace houses, which even in this public scheme for small houses all have very generous garden space to the rear and thus potentially food-growing space. To a less formalised extent, compared with Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin's masterplan for Letchworth, food growing was integrated into the Welwyn masterplan. In Letchworth, shared food-growing spaces had been designed in between small groups of houses, and orchards and dairying space were planned in for 'meanwhile' and peri-urban spaces. Food space is in the Welwyn plan but does not seem to feature so clearly and explicitly in the masterplan as it had at Letchworth.

Turning to food consumption, most of the food-shopping space in Welwyn was originally grouped in

the town centre, with one centrally located co-operative society, Welwyn Stores, given control in May 1921 over shopping sites mostly along either side of Howardsgate, which runs east-west towards the town's train station, but also on some smaller sites in the residential areas of the town.

At this stage there was a stress on walkability in the plan, and it can be speculated that this related to access to food as well as other goods. Shops included the Welwyn Garden City Dairy and the Welwyn Stores themselves, opened in 1921, rehoused in 1939 and eventually replaced in 1984 by the co-operatively based John Lewis Partnership store. Other early food-related land uses included the Cherry Tree restaurant, constructed temporarily in woods opposite the town's station, and the Shredded Wheat factory in the industry zone close to the town centre, to the east of the north-south rail line. Purdom's account of the Shredded Wheat building highlights the interconnected food, hygiene, nationalistic and architectural concerns of early Modernism at play in Welwyn:

*'The Shredded Wheat factory under construction (1924) promises to provide an interesting feature of the industrial activities of the town. It is a large building of white cement and tile, furnished with every modern equipment to ensure cleanliness and sanitation, and with dining, rest, and recreation rooms for employees. It is planned to use British labour and British wheat. Farmers will be encouraged to grow a good quality of white winter wheat; they will be assisted in getting proper seed, and their crops purchased for cash.'*⁹

Another food-related aspect of Welwyn's development that perhaps deserves attention relates to the design of the houses themselves. The domestic architecture of Welwyn – often in Neo-Georgian style – was created at time when kitchen design 'rationalisation' according to so-called scientific methods was occurring more generally.¹⁰

In Raymond Unwin's housing designs for small dwellings at Letchworth, for example, we can see a particular version of this played out and invoked as part of the Garden City approach in relation to sociability. Unwin's designs shrunk the kitchen and tied it to a pantry, scullery and laundry room as a utilitarian ensemble of work rooms.¹¹ Social life along Garden City lines would instead occur in a living room 'house place' that celebrated family life. This could include some cooking-related elements, like a cooking stove, dressers and cupboards, but, as Jackson explains,¹¹ the house place at the heart of family life would not include washing up and food storage. These were 'dirty' work tasks to be undertaken in a rational, efficient kitchen that had to be separated out from 'clean' social activities.

These assumptions about domestic food space can also be seen in dwellings designed for Welwyn such as at Dellcott Close, plans for which are reproduced in *Small Houses for the Community* by CH James and FR Yerbury,⁸ with small kitchens, larders and fuel store ensembles separated from dining and living space.

For Howard and some other Garden City proponents the ideal would be to move to a more fully collective housekeeping model of domestic space for food production and consumption in quadrangle-based dwellings.¹² Howard had already been instrumental in developing two examples of housing with communal dining and effectively 'kitchenless' flats in Letchworth: Homesgarth and Meadow Way Green cottages (although for two rather different housing markets). There was at least one example of housing with communal dining developed in Welwyn: Guessens Court, built by Welwyn's New Town Trust as a co-operative housing scheme. Over two stories it had 40 self-contained flats of various sizes, organised in a quadrangle and sharing a communal dining room in which residents were required to spend a minimum amount each week.³

Aalen explains, though,¹³ that, except in retail through the Welwyn Stores, 'contrary to Howard's hopes and expectations co-operative activity like this made little headway in Letchworth and Welwyn. The modest initiatives in co-operative agriculture and housing were short-lived.' The food promise of radical communal cooking and dining ideas had to wait for other places and contexts, such as Moisei Ginzburg's Constructivist Narkomfin building in Moscow, the kibbutzim of Israel, and negatively in forced rural food collectivisation schemes in various places.

Today, all over Britain and indeed globally we urgently require a positive reintegration of the food system with the planning, design, architecture, governance and stewardship of place in order to create resilient, healthy urbanism in the face of climate change. The Garden City, at least in principle, has led the way in positively making these connections, although overall the picture in Welwyn today is of a Garden City experiencing many of the food issues more broadly challenging our resilience capacity. A car-dependent and high-carbon-producing modern food system has largely incorporated Welwyn, despite its radical roots.

So, where to now for a more positive interplay between food and the Garden City? Readers could do worse than explore the recent guidance produced by the TCPA on the theme of *Edible Garden Cities*,¹⁴ in which the 'how to' on such food reintegration is explored in a highly practical way. Welwyn showed in its antecedents and early development principles much potential for food-centred urbanism. That social prescription for edible Garden Cities is ever more necessary for resilience in future.

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Notes

- 1 E Howard: *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Swan Sonnenschein, 1898
- 2 The full set of the TCPA's Garden City Principles are set out at www.tcpa.org.uk/garden-city-principles
- 3 'Part II – Welwyn Garden City, the First Satellite Town. Chapter I. Its establishment and growth'. In CB Purdom: *The Building of Satellite Towns*. JM Dent, 1925 – see Alan Cash's 'The Building of Satellite Towns' webpage, at <https://cashewnut.me.uk/WGCbooks/web-WGC-books-1925-1.php>
- 4 See the Welwyn Garden City Centenary Foundation's 'Welwyn Garden City's Famous Town Plan' webpage, at www.wgc100.org/news/welwyn-garden-citys-famous-town-plan/
- 5 CB Purdom 'An introductory chapter'. In CB Purdom (Ed.) *Town Theory and Practice*. Benn Brothers, 1921 – see Alan Cash's 'Town Theory and Practice' webpage, at <http://cashewnut.me.uk/WGCbooks/web-WGC-books-1921-1.php>
- 6 M Miller: 'The origins of the garden city residential neighbourhood'. In KC Parsons and D Schuyler (Eds): *From Garden City to Green City. The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002
- 7 'Part II – Welwyn Garden City, the First Satellite Town. Chapter VI. Agriculture'. In CB Purdom: *The Building of Satellite Towns*. JM Dent, 1925 – see Alan Cash's 'The Building of Satellite Towns' webpage, at <https://cashewnut.me.uk/WGCbooks/web-WGC-books-1925-1.php>
- 8 CH James and FR Yerbury: *Small Houses for the Community*. Technical Press, 1928 – see Alan Cash's 'Small Houses for the Community' webpage, at <https://cashewnut.me.uk/WGCbooks/web-WGC-books-1928-1.php>
- 9 'Part II – Welwyn Garden City, the First Satellite Town. Chapter IV. Industries'. In CB Purdom: *The Building of Satellite Towns*. JM Dent, 1925 – see Alan Cash's 'The Building of Satellite Towns' webpage, at <https://cashewnut.me.uk/WGCbooks/web-WGC-books-1925-1.php>
- 10 S Parham: *Food and Urbanism. The Convivial City and a Sustainable Future*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, p.32
- 11 F Jackson: *Sir Raymond Unwin: Architect, Planner and Visionary*. Zwemmer, 1985, p.131
- 12 See A Ravetz: 'A view from the interior'. In J Attfield and P Kirkham (Eds): *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*. The Women's Press, 1989; and P Davey: 'Hearth and home: food preparation locations in changing times'. In PH Hodgson and R Toyka (Eds): *The Architect, the Cook, and Good Taste*. Birkhauser, 2007
- 13 F Aalen: 'English origins'. In S Ward (Ed.): *The Garden City: Past, Present and Future*. Spun Press, 1992
- 14 *Guide 10: Edible Garden Cities*. Practical Guide for Creating Successful New Communities. TCPA, Aug. 2019. www.tcpa.org.uk/tcpa-pgs-guide-10-ediblegc-download