**1. TITLE SLIDE**

Ebenezer Howard’s book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1898)[[1]](#footnote-1) contained what might be seen as a questionable reference, in terms of the contemporary political situation. Regarding the origins of the garden city concept, he noted that it was only **[SLIDE 2]:**  ‘by a hair’s breadth…[that] Kropotkin, Morris and Ruskin failed to give expression to the garden city idea themselves’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The statement made *homage* to three writers whose ideas were indicated as being particularly significant to Howard’s invention. [SLIDE 3] Two of these were well-known British cultural figures, William Morris and John Ruskin, both of whom in different ways were critical of the nature of the current political economy, which they viewed as divorcing labour from creativity.[[3]](#footnote-3) **[SLIDE 4]** The potential odd-one-out in Howard’s list, however, was the Russian Prince, Peter Kropotkin, who was **a major** **Russian revolutionary socialist and theorist of anarchism, and consequently an opponent of contemporary capitalism, and the idea of a centralised state government.** Kropotkinlived in Britain between late 1886 and February 1917, mainly because he had been systematically banned from permanent residence in Russia and almost anywhere else in Europe, for being a politically dangerous person!

**[SLIDE 5]** In the era that Howard’s book was first published, anarchism was a hot news topic, largely associated with assassinations of heads of state in the USA, France, Italy and Russia, as well as reportage of real or alleged terrorist plots, out of which this cartoon trope of the bomb-bearing anarchist ultimately developed.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This brief paper asks three questions. Firstly: Why should Ebenezer Howard reference the ideas of a Russian anarchist, in relation to the utopian ideal of the Garden City as a possible element of a **capitalist** economic structure? In answer to this question, I am ultimately going to suggest that the reference may have had much to do with how Kropotkin was perceived in Britain at the time by many people – as a serious scientific, academic writer, rather than a dangerous anarchist. My second question is: was Kropotkin reciprocally interested in Letchworth? The answer to this will be, yes, there is some evidence that he was. So following on from this, the third question is: did Kropotkin ever visit Letchworth? Here I will argue speculatively that he probably visited Letchworth more than once, but little concrete evidence of such visits has yet come to light.

**[SLIDE 6]** Q.1: Why should Ebenezer Howard reference the ideas of the Russian anarchist Prince, in relation to the utopian ideal of the Garden City as a possible element of a **capitalist** economic structure?

Howard’s idea of the Garden City set out to address aspects of a known set of social problems relating to the working classes in urban environments – notably: poverty, disease, squalor, poor sanitation, overcrowding, poor working conditions, and low wages. These had been increasingly flagged up in a number of prominent publications during the latter half of the C19th by various social critics,[[5]](#footnote-5) perhaps most significantly in Charles Booth’s survey of the London poor, 1886-1903.[[6]](#footnote-6) Increased awareness of these issues, fuelled both a burgeoning of reformist and revolutionary socialist organisations in Britain, [[7]](#footnote-7) and a growth of militancy in British trade unions from the 1880s onwards.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Another thread in contemporary discourse that Howard implicitly addressed, was the nascent, pseudo-science of eugenics, so named by Charles Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton, in his book *Hereditary Genius*, published in 1869. Galton had used Darwin’s idea of the ‘struggle for existence’ – discussed in *Origin of Species* as the driver of ‘natural selection’- to propose a possible solution to the problems of urban poverty in his theory of eugenics. Here he suggested that Darwin’s theory of ‘natural selection’/ or ‘survival of the fittest’ [a phrase derived from Herbert Spencer], implied that there was no place in society for the physically or socially ‘unfit’. This trajectory of thought was derived – as was Darwin’s notion of the ‘struggle for existence’ - from the ideas of Thomas Malthus, which suggested that that unproductive members of the lower classes should, effectively, be left to starve and expire, so that they were not a burden on the economy. By the 1880s, eugenics had emerged internationally as an identifiable but multifaceted discourse involving not only racists and critics of the working classes, but also medical practitioners, social theorists and writers such as George Bernard Shaw.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**[SLIDE 7]** Kropotkin’s take on eugenics was that, in order to develop as a scientific discourse it should concentrate on studying the underlying causes of ‘unfitness’ in the population, the psychological, physical and health issues that could potentially be cured by better education, better diet, healthier living conditions, and the eradication of poverty.[[10]](#footnote-10) Like many contemporary Russian Darwinists, particularly those of a socialist persuasion, he inclined to the Lamarckian idea of the inheritability of acquired characteristics, and believed that a change of social organisation and environment would lead to genetic change [and improvement] in humankind.[[11]](#footnote-11) Kropotkin envisaged this new society as based on rural co-operatives with elements of industry - ‘industrial villages’- [[12]](#footnote-12) that used intensive farming and horticultural methods along with the latest technologies, to create self-sufficient communities with communally owned land and other property. The working day, he theorised, would be short – a mere five hours - and involve a blend of healthy outdoor physical labour, industrial and ‘brain work’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Kropotkin had developed this idea through extensive sociological studies of a number of communities practicing intensive food production in various countries, including France and Jersey. **[SLIDE 8]** These studies were first published as three long articles in the respectable British journal, *The Nineteenth Century* in 1888,[[14]](#footnote-14) and had a strong influence on the Utopian vision of a different mode of life presented in the story, *News from Nowhere*, published in 1890 by his friend, the socialist and member of the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris.[[15]](#footnote-15) The ideas in Kropotkin’s articles and their reflection in Morris’s book, also clearly impacted on upon Ebenezer Howard’s idea of the Garden City, as was acknowledged in his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Both Morris and Kropotkin contemporarily were known to be socialists, and Howard’s book was careful to distance his construct of the Garden City from ‘socialist experiments’ – clearly he did not want to frighten off potential [capitalist] investors from his project. [[17]](#footnote-17) Nevertheless, it did contain Kropotkinian elements, such as community ownership of land, notions of self-sufficient agricultural, horticultural and industrial production, public-spirited co-operation by individuals, and a healthier way of life.

The public acceptability of referencing Kropotkin’s [albeit anarchist] theories by Howard’s book – in a period where people were terrified by the threat of anarchist violence - seem to have relied on a failure to identify Kropotkin overtly with the popular model of anarchism by the British intelligentsia and general public. Rather, as Kropotkin’s authoritative biographers, Woodcock and Avacumovic have argued, he was primarily perceived in Britain as a scholar and academic, on the strength of his geographical, sociological and popular science articles, from which he made a large part of his living. Indeed in 1894, the *Contemporary Review* hailed him as ‘our most distinguished refugee’.[[18]](#footnote-18) **[SLIDE 9]** Moreover, while Kropotkin remained a believer in revolution, during the years spent in Britain he became increasingly averse to the sorts of violent terrorism that had been advocated particularly by the other great Russian theorist of anarchism, Mikhail Bakunin. Kropotkin may not have thought of himself as an Utopian theorist, but in the British context of the 1880s-1890s, that was how he was effectively positioned. In this sense, contextually, there was no problem with Howard’s reference to Kropotkin. [[19]](#footnote-19)

Q.2 Was Kropotkin reciprocally interested in Letchworth?

Given the areas of potential convergence of ideas between Howard and Kropotkin, Letchworth, albeit emphatically defined by Howard as not a ‘socialist experiment’,[[20]](#footnote-20) was at least marginally interesting to Kropotkin. For instance, in 1901, the re-vamped title of the revised second edition of Kroptkin’s book *Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow*, appears implicitly to reference the ‘Tomorrow’ keyword in the titles of the first and second editions of Howard’s book, and there is also a passing mention of the Garden City idea. But, as Volker Welter has argued, Kropotkin did not indicate whether he favoured this project.[[21]](#footnote-21) I suspect not, because as Welter has also suggested, Kropotkin’s preferred models of co-operation and ‘mutual aid’ were of small-scale rural communes or medieval cities,[[22]](#footnote-22) rather than the larger-scale communities that Howard had in mind. In *Fields, Factories and Workshops* Kropotkin speculatively discussed the viability of a commune with 400 acres and 200 families, where some of the land could be used for ‘manufacturies’, as well as public parks and leisure facilities, while the rest could be used for intensive farming and horticulture. [[23]](#footnote-23) By contrast, the Letchworth estate was 6,000 acres, 1,000 of which were earmarked for housing and a central park and the rest was apportioned to industry, agriculture, smallholdings, allotments and arboriculture, with a population limit of 32,000.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Q.3: Did Kropotkin ever visit Letchworth?

Given the intimation of Kropotkin’s interest in Letchworth, the question arises as to whether he actually visited it. Unfortunately, no clear documentary evidence has yet come to light to confirm that he did so, which is not to say that such evidence may not exist in the Letchworth Heritage Collection archive, and/or elsewhere.

There is, however, a significant piece of circumstantial historical evidence that suggests that Kropotkin probably did visit Letchworth. [SLIDE 10] From the early days of the Garden City’s existence, it was the dwelling place of Fanny Stepniak,[[25]](#footnote-25) who may have lived at no.85 Norton Road in a ‘cottage’ named ‘Oblomova’.[[26]](#footnote-26) **[SLIDE 11]** Fanny was the widow of the Ukrainian Nihilist, Sergei Stepniak (aka Sergei Kravchinskii) who had fled Russia in 1878 after assassinating Nikolai Mezentsov, the head of the tsarist secret police, in retribution for the execution of the revolutionary I.M. Koval’skii.[[27]](#footnote-27) The Stepniaks arrived in England in 1884, where Sergei made a living from writing fictionalised accounts of revolutionaries and revolutionary activities. [[28]](#footnote-28) Both Fanny and her husband had been great friends with the Kropotkins. Indeed, when the Kropotkins arrived in England in 1886, they stayed with the Stepniaks in St John’s Wood, while looking for a house to rent.[[29]](#footnote-29) Then, after Stepniak was run over by a train at a level crossing in Chiswick in 1896, Kropotkin gave a profoundly moving funeral speech about his friend and was apparently very saddened for a long while afterwards.[[30]](#footnote-30) Because of Kropotkin’s fondness for the Stepniaks, it seems inconceivable that he would not have visited Fanny after she had moved to Letchworth, at least once, but probably several times before he left Britain for ever in 1917.[[31]](#footnote-31) [[32]](#footnote-32) [[33]](#footnote-33)

**[SLIDE 13] Conclusion**

To conclude briefly, what is important to understand, regarding Howard’s idea that the Russian anarchist Prince Peter Kropotkin – rather than himself – could have been the founder of the Garden City idea, is that, at the time Kropotkin was perceived in Britain as a scholarly, scientific and Utopian writer., rather than being identified with the currently mediated notion of the anarchist as terrorist. Kropotkin was clearly interested to some extent in the Letchworth Garden City experiment, because, while not a ‘socialist’ enterprise, it did incorporate some of the ideas central to his anarchist, utopian concerns, albeit on a larger scale and within a capitalist economic structure.[[34]](#footnote-34) Whether Kropotkin actually visited Letchworth is as yet unknown, but seems highly likely, given the cordial relationship with Fanny and Sergei Stepniak, and Fanny’s move to Letchworth after Sergei’s death.

The outcome of this paper suggests that there are potentially, historically significant, but as yet unresolved issues around the relationship/s between Howard’s ideal of the Garden City, its operation in the 1900s, and Kropotkin’s ideas. These issues might fruitfully form the basis of a future PhD project based on the Letchworth Heritage Collection, which I would be absolutely delighted to co-supervise!

1. Ebenezer Howard, as is well known, was the founder of the Garden City movement and the driving force behind the creation of Letchworth Garden City. The book was first published as: *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, also published in 1898. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, 1898. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On Morris see for example: William Morris, *News From Nowhere: Or an Epoch of Rest (1890)*, <http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/newstext.html> , and *Art and Socialism: A Lecture Delivered to the Secular Society of Leicester* (1884), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/as/as.htm>’ , accessed 22/10/15. On Ruskin see for example: P.D. Anthony, *John Ruskin’s Labour: A Study of Ruskin’s Social Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; Gill Cockran, *Ruskin and Social Reform: Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007; Colin Skelly, ‘John Ruskin 1819-1900: A Socialist Perspective’, *Socialist Standard*, no.1150, June 2000, Socialist Party of Great Britain website, <http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/2000s/2000/no-1150-june-2000/john-ruskin-1819-1900-socialist-perspective> , accessed 22/10/15 . [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It was a context that would also form the basis of Joseph Conrad’s novel, *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907. Tom Reiss, ‘The True Classic of Terrorism’, review of Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, [1907], New York Times, September 11, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/books/review/the-true-classic-of-terrorism.html?_r=0> . Reiss intimates that between 1881 and 1901 there were a lot of prominent assassinations of heads of state done by anarchists, including 2 USA Presidents, Garfield and McInley, the French President Carnot, Empress Elizabeth of Austria; the Italian King Umberto I; and Tsar Alexandr II of Russia. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Including Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour* and *London Poor* [1851/1861]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The first publication relating to this survey was Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People*, 2 vols, London:?, 1889. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Woodcock and Avakumic, pp.202, 214-217, 224-226. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Exemplified in London by the Match Girls’ Strike in 1888 and the Docker’s Strike in 1889. Ibid., pp.231-232. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Philippa Levine and Alison Bashford, ‘Introduction: Eugenics and the Modern World’, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, New York: Oxford University Press, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Prince Kropotkin, ‘Report of the Proceedings. Section III. – Sociology and Eugenics’*, Proceedings of the 1st International Eugenics Congress*, 1912, London: Charles Knight & Co. 1912, pp.50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Pat Simpson, ‘Imagining Post-Revolutionary Evolution’, in Barbara Larson and Fae Brauer, eds, *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms and Visual Culture*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2009, pp.226-261. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Fields Factories and Workshops*, Ch. 3, ‘Small Industries and Industrial Villages’. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The subtitle of *Fields, Factories and Workshops* was*, Or, Industry combined with Agriculture and Brain Work with Manual Work.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Woodcock and Avakumovic, p.230 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. William Morris, *News From Nowhere: Or an Epoch of Rest (1890)*, <http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/newstext.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Woodcock and Avakumic, p.241 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ebenezer Howard, *Tomorrow. A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, (London: Swann Sonnenschein, 1898, p. 97), facsimile with commentary by Peter Hall, Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward, London: Routledge, 2003, p.124. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Volker M. Welter, *Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life*, Cambridge, Mass and London: MIT Press, 2002, p.58 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Peter Kropotkin, *Fields Factories and Workshops*, London: Swann and Sonnenschein, 1902, pp.123-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902) reprinted with a Preface by F.J. Osborn and Introduction by Lewis Mumford, London: Faber and Faber, 1946, pp.50-57, 138-147, <http://urbanplanning.library.cornell.edu/DOCS/howard.htm> , accessed 25/10/15. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. A.W. Brunt, *Pageant of Letchworth 1903-1914*, Letchworth: Letchworth Printers, 1942, p.132. NB. Here Fanny is listed under ‘Good Citizens of Letchworth’ and Stepniak is euphemistically described as the ‘Russian reformer’. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Pamela Shields, *Hertfordshire Secrets and Spies*, Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2013, (no pp. nos.) chapter 17 ‘John Buchan’ – NB. This is, however, a potentially dodgy source. Not only does it have no page numbers, but it has no source references or bibliography either. A number of assertions of fact are just incorrect. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ‘Mezentsov, Nikolai Vladimirovich’, *The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, 3rd edition, 1970-1979, [http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Nikolai+Mezentsov](http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Nikolai%2BMezentsov) , accessed 22/10/15. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Alfred E. Senn, ‘The Russian Revolutionary Movement of the Nineteenth Century as Contemporary History’, *Kennan Institute for Advance Russian Studies, Occasional Papers*, 1993, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/op250_russian_revolutionay_movement_senn_1993.pdf> , p.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince: A Biographical Study*, New York: Schocken Books, p.204. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. p.255. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Paul Avrich, ‘Peter Alekseyevich Kropotkin: Russian Revolutionary’, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Peter-Alekseyevich-Kropotkin> , accessed 22/10/15. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. If he did so, he might also have been interested in some [manifestations](ar) of practices and activities in the early days of Letchworth that had connections with his own and William Morris’s notions of the ideal social organisation. Meals were provided, but the residents were free to help themselves to whatever was in the pantry, which has a faint echo of Kropotkin’s ideas of the communality of property and produce. The curriculum included: dancing, swimming in the outdoor pool, craft work, digging in the gardens, and intellectual discussions.

[SLIDE 12] There was, for instance, the combination of intellectual, creative and physical exercise at the residential ‘Summer Schools’ held at ‘The Cloisters’. This was an educational institution in Barningham Road, Letchworth, built in 1907 and presided over by the formidable Miss Annie Jane Lawrence, a daughter of one of the investors in the Garden City. V. Miles,*The Cloisters, Letchworth*, revised by C.R. Graham, Letchworth: Cloisters Trust 1996-2007, p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. According to the curator of the Letchworth Heritage Collection, Vicky Axell, one of these discussions in 1907 even concerned Kropotkin’s ideas on double-digging with manure, as a means to increase soil productivity in the Cloisters’ gardens. This vignette provides yet another deliciously tenuous connection between Kropotkin and Letchworth.Conversation with Vicky Axell at the Letchworth Heritage Collection archive, 20/10/15. It would be great to know whether he was aware of this event, or even whether he was present… [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. These included: healthy communal living; communal ownership of land and other property; the integration of physical agricultural labour, recreational activities, mental/creative work, and industrial production, all of which could be facilitated and enhanced by scientific farming techniques and technological advances such as electric power. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)