

LETCHEMOUTH*

3020

INTRODUCTION

Letchworth, to nearly all those who know the name in Britain and abroad, means a garden city, in fact the first garden city ever built. The adventure began in 1903, several years before the Hampstead Garden Suburb and seventeen before Welwyn. The idea of the garden city came from Ebenezer Howard's book of 1898.‡ To translate the idea into visual terms *Barry Parker & Raymond Unwin*, who won the competition for the plan,§ 'had to make an organism out of a diagram'. In this they succeeded. The site consisted of c.3,800 acres, crossed by the railway and with a number of roads running parallel to it (Hitchin Road, Norton Road, Icknield Way). Making use of these existing features they planned a large town square on a level plateau s of the railway. This was intended to be surrounded by important buildings. From the square other roads radiated. The major axis runs N-S, and continues N of the railway across Norton Common as an avenue of trees. To the s lay the old village of Letchworth, outside the garden city, and it seems a pity that the Parker/Unwin plan did not choose to make use of the church and hall as a centre or sub-centre. It would have meant a welcome break in the architectural uniformity of the small-scale housing. Parker and Unwin remained consultants to the Garden City Company (Unwin until 1914, Parker until 1943). The consistent development of the town during its first years owes much to their influence. Their principles are made even clearer at Hampstead Garden Suburb, begun in 1906, for Letchworth, as the first exploratory pioneer job, suffered from some initial faults which it has never quite overcome. The principle of the garden city is one of controlled social and architectural structure and controlled growth. Number of inhabitants, type and location of houses, type and location of factories have to be kept in a certain relation to each other, with the result that the town should be an independent and self-sufficient unit. At Letchworth it

*This revised entry is based very largely on research by Mr J. Moss Eccardt of the Letchworth Museum, and by Mr Mervyn Miller. Mr Miller has written a more detailed account of the buildings of Letchworth which he kindly allowed us to make use of here (BC).

‡*Tomorrow: the Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, republished as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*.

§The plan was adopted in 1904. Entries were also submitted by *Lethaby, Halsey Ricardo, Geoffrey Lucas*, and *Sidney Cranfield*.