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Letchworth Garden City

‘... an insignificant little man’

It could so easily have been Staffordshire rather than Hertfordshire where the first attempt to give tangible expression to Ebenezer Howard’s peaceful path was played out. In June 1902 the Garden City Association launched a Pioneer Garden City Company, tasked with seeking a site on which the garden city might be built.¹ Ralph Neville was its Chairman and other prominent Board members were Thomas Idris and Edward Cadbury. Most Board members were also the main investors, the other principal funders being Lever, George Cadbury and Alfred Harmsworth. Howard became Managing Director, a role which quickly showed the limits of his abilities to those around him.²

In one sense the Company’s task was an easy one. By then, agriculture had recovered a little from its very depressed state in the late nineteenth century, but the multiple effects of cheap food imports, successive bad harvests and animal diseases had taken their toll, and many landowners were eager to divest themselves of farmland giving little return. The result was that a large amount of rural land throughout England was either actively available for sale or certainly up for offers. After discreetly approaching land agents and solicitors around the country, the site sub-committee of the Company found itself sifting through a bewildering number of possibilities.³

The Company wanted a freehold block of rural land of between 4,000 and 6,000 acres (1,619 and 2,429 hectares), with a mainline railway through or adjacent to it. Ideally there would also be means of moving goods by river or canal. The chosen site would have to be capable of being economically drained and must have a good supply of potable water. Finally, it should be near to London or some other large centre of labour. Many sites brought to the sub-committee’s attention were simply too small, but, by October 1902, an 8,000-acre (3,239-hectare) estate at Chartley, a few miles north-east of Stafford, had emerged as the front runner.⁴ Mainly used for dairying and sporting purposes, it contained several villages, the owning family’s mansion and a ruined castle.

Otherwise it comprised gently undulating countryside. And, very importantly, its aristocratic owner was badly in debt and eager for a sale.

In almost all respects it was the perfect site, with most expert opinions sought by the Company being favourable. Yet the location, remote from the nearest big industrial centres of Birmingham, the Black Country or the Potteries, was risky. Stafford was around eight miles from the centre of the estate but was still only a modest country town, though one beginning to attract new industries. There was also some dispute about the site itself, with one expert report doubting that it had a suitable area for a town centre. Despite this, however, Howard continued serious negotiations during spring 1903 and provisional agreement about buying Chartley seemed close.

But by July it was all off, as the Company had another site, Letchworth Manor in Hertfordshire. It had not been an early front runner because, at only 1,014 acres (410 hectares), it was too small. Yet it was very well placed: 35 miles north of Kings Cross on the Cambridge branch of the Great Northern Railway, very close to the mainline connection at Hitchin and on the Great North Road. Howard mentioned the idea to Reginald Hine, then a young solicitor's clerk who became a prominent local figure in Hitchin. Hine thought him an 'insignificant little man', patently lacking the personal wealth and standing to bring off such an ambitious project.⁵

The site was, however, sufficiently tempting to encourage the Board to explore whether further land might be available,⁶ and it did not have to rely on Howard to make it happen. The Company's own solicitor, Herbert Warren, had from the start championed this location. His country practice was in this area and he and his colleagues had excellent local knowledge. Within a few weeks they had successfully approached 15 owners and managed to assemble a potential consolidated site that, at 3,818 acres (1,546 hectares), was just about the right size. After several months of muddling through, all had now fallen into place and the purchases occurred in quick succession (Figure 2.1). Most were undertaken in the names of nominees, disguising the Company's involvement and the true purpose of these ostensibly quite separate transactions.

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The average cost per acre of about £42 (£105 per hectare) was more costly, acre for acre, than Chartley would have been (although, because the whole estate was smaller, the total cost was lower). Edward Cadbury still felt that they were paying too much and that the site was too close to Hitchin to be a true test of Howard's vision.⁷ But, against this, the likelihood of attracting industry was rated very