

What does history teach us about... eco-towns?

Continuing the History and Policy series, **Chris Bowlby** interviews **Professor Alastair Bonnett** on the Government's new proposals for model 'green' communities, and investigates the historical precedents

ILLUSTRATION BY JONTY CLARK

THE CLAIM is striking. The Government plans to build a wave of new communities around Britain that will "revolutionise the way people live".

That is what former housing minister Caroline Flint has promised in the proposal to build ten new 'eco-towns' by 2020. They are supposed to have between five and twenty thousand homes each, with a range of housing to encourage a social mix, and will be designed to promote 'green', environmentally friendly living. Proposed locations for these pioneering new settlements include Hampshire, Oxfordshire, Essex, Cornwall and South Yorkshire.

Eco-towns are an attempt to reconcile several tricky parts of the policy agenda – the pressure on housing in some of the most popular regions of the country, the demand for more affordable homes, and the need to combat global warming. At the same time, the Government is trying to offer a

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Alastair Bonnett is professor of social geography at Newcastle University. He is author of *What Is Geography?* (Sage, 2008)

sense of tradition and continuity, suggesting eco-towns will follow in the footsteps of earlier initiatives such as Ebenezer Howard's garden cities of the early 20th century (see box right).

We might think of all our towns and cities as places that have evolved haphazardly from centuries of gradual settlement and individual human initiative. But there have always been moments too when governments have attempted to create their own 'model' communities, and shape most directly where and how their citizens live.

Professor Alastair Bonnett, a historical geographer at Newcastle University, has been following closely the eco-towns debate, and its relationship with what has gone before.

Why is the Government so keen to build eco-towns – and why is it raising the issue now?

Alastair Bonnett: The Government wants to build three million new homes by 2020. It is also planning to cut carbon emissions by around 30 per cent by the same date. These are two very different problems. But could part of the answer to both of them be eco-towns?

The idea that people will flock to a new generation of high-tech eco-friendly new towns built in the countryside also reflects a rather worrying fact. For all the exaggerated

claims made about Britain's vibrant, fun-loving cities, a poll conducted in 2008 for *Country Life* indicated that 80 per cent of Britons would rather live in the countryside.

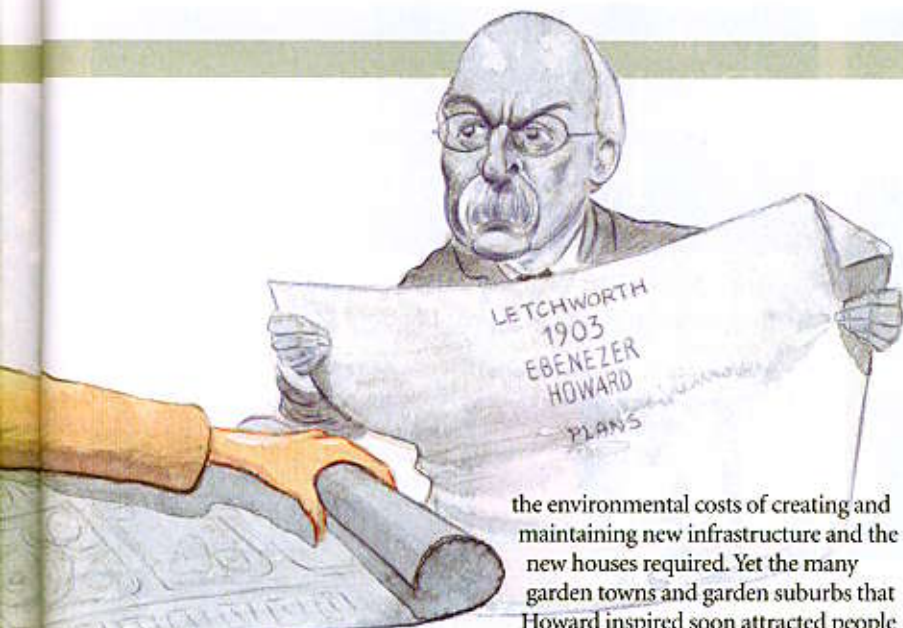
People want to live somewhere safe, clean and attractive. And that place isn't called London or Birmingham or Leeds. The stark fact is that the regeneration of Britain's cities has failed to turn them into places where the majority of people would choose to live.

Are there any historical precedents for this kind of government initiative?

AB: New towns are an ancient idea. The Roman Empire was spread, in part, by building new towns (or 'colonies'). Their design reflected the Roman view of the perfect community. These early attempts to impose proportion, beauty and harmony on the landscape were also about imposing imperial will and military control.

There have been periods when the creation of new towns was more





the environmental costs of creating and maintaining new infrastructure and the new houses required. Yet the many garden towns and garden suburbs that Howard inspired soon attracted people who were enthusiastic about his wider vision. From the 1940s came the new towns, which constituted a kind of nationalisation of the garden city.

What lessons might be learned from past experience for today's policy makers?

AB: Given that the vast majority of Britain's new towns were built after the Second World War, the fact that the Government's *Eco-towns Prospectus* doesn't mention them is both significant and depressing.

In short, the Government is tacitly acknowledging that places like Stevenage (the first postwar new town, begun in 1947), Harlow or later places like Milton Keynes and Washington New Town are failed experiments.

It may be said that the new towns suffered from top-down decision making, bleak road systems and ugly modernist buildings. But at the root of the problem is the fact that the new towns were technological fixes dreamt up by policy wonks.

Can eco-towns avoid this fate? Real places, places with real communities and real identities, need to emerge from enthusiasm, from a vision of human community and from local people acting together. People actually like beauty and tradition.

More fundamentally, new town planning, both ancient and modern, has always assumed that land is an infinite resource – that people should go forth and colonise the empty places of the world. We will not create a sustainable planet with this now-badly dated vision. The Government should support movements to make our cities better places and give up on the fantasy of 'ideal' new towns. **■**

Pundit from the past: Ebenezer Howard

What would one of the past's most eminent planners make of the eco-towns idea?

THE GOVERNMENT'S *Eco-towns Prospectus* (July 2007) claims "Ebenezer Howard's vision of garden cities" as an inspiration. He was by far the most important and influential of Britain's new town visionaries. His book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* came out in 1898, and inspired planners across the world (especially after it was re-issued in 1902 as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*). Policy makers from the USA to the Soviet Union looked to Howard's ideas as a way of creating sustainable towns that combined the dynamism of city life with the beauty and healthiness of the countryside.

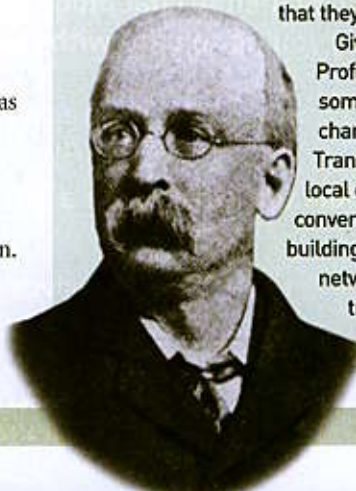
But would Howard (pictured below) choose to create completely new communities in new places in the 21st century? If he had known about threats such as climate change, argues Professor Bonnett, "I cannot see him even contemplating building new towns in the countryside". He would also perhaps be sceptical about central government taking such a strong initiative. "Howard was a socialist and looked forward to a time

when the state could take a lead in the building of new towns", says Professor Bonnett. "Yet Howard's socialism was heavily influenced by the localist radicalism

of William Morris. The idea that central government would push through privately built and privately owned new towns, ignoring local opposition, would have appalled him."

Howard, who worked as a parliamentary shorthand writer, knew his politics close-up. But Professor Bonnett cannot imagine him as an eager junior minister or civil servant advocating eco-towns in their modern form. "I think what he would really miss from the Government's eco-towns proposals is a sense of care, respect and love for people and nature. Where is the vision of a better world? His garden cities were designed to change the world; New Labour's eco-towns seem purpose-built to allow us to continue living in the much the same way as we do now." He also notes that Howard lived in garden cities himself – he died in Welwyn in 1928 – whereas it seems unlikely that today's ministers or officials will be moving to the eco-towns that they're so eager to build.

Given today's circumstances, Professor Bonnett sees Howard as someone who would have championed groups like the Transition Town movement. Run by local enthusiasts, this works to convert existing settlements and buildings, creating food and transport networks with the aim of transforming the places in which we already live.



common, such as the century or so after 1066 in England and Wales, and in Europe from the 16th century. Medieval new towns were often based around trade and commerce rather than notions of an 'ideal community'.

But two aspects – aesthetic and authoritarian – have always been present. New towns are meant to be better places to live, perfect places, but they also represent the vision of a powerful state or individual that claims to know what is best for people. There are plenty of examples in Britain, such as New Lanark, which were both utopian and authoritarian. In the late 19th century, Port Sunlight (1888) and Bournville (1895) also provided model industrial communities.

And the idea of more sustainable communities is not new either. Ebenezer Howard, inventor of 'garden cities' like Letchworth (1903) and Welwyn Garden City (1919), strove to create self-contained and co-operative settlements. Land was to be owned collectively, food would be produced locally and people would live, work and find entertainment and education within the town.

In some ways the garden cities were far from green. Little regard was paid to