

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2015

Purpose Built Villages

In January, Trevor Ottelewski made a return visit to the Wargrave Local History Society, to show his audio-visual presentation about Purpose Built Villages.

In the 19th century many town and city workers were housed in squalid and insanitary tenement buildings. These were often back to back blocks with no running water, no lighting, no main drainage, where maybe as many as 100 people might share use of a single toilet. Some people of influence, however, began to realise that good living conditions were not just for the privileged classes, and that by creating healthy conditions for employees, the workforce would be more productive. Trevor illustrated this with examples of 4 such villages created by wealthy philanthropists.

The first was one of the earliest villages created for a specific purpose - at Styal, near Manchester. Quarry Bank Mill was a water powered cotton mill built in 1784. The owner, Samuel Greg, decided that his workers would be stronger and healthier if they lived in better conditions. Many of the 400 people he employed were children, and the first building he provided, in 1792, was an Apprentice House. This housed boys on one floor, girls on the other, and included a school room. Many of the children came from workhouses - not just around Manchester, but from as far as Berkshire. Despite the improved conditions, life expectancy was not great, so the age at which girls could legally marry was 12, and for boys 14. Greg went on to build a complete village of attractive cottages, each with its own privy, a back yard, an individual front door, allotment, etc. A village shop, a school and a chapel were all added to provide for the needs of the residents. Indoors the cottages were dark, using a candle or the open fire as a source of light - the fire also being used for cooking or boiling water. Although not to modern standards, by 1837 these were described as "in every respect superior to town houses".

The next example was on the banks of the River Mersey, where in 1853 Price's Candle Company set up Price's Village at Bromborough. Each house had its own front door, and the terraces were 'clean and respectable. St Matthew's church and the school were built of local red sandstone. Although the works closed some time ago, the village survives as an 'oasis surrounded by industry' - many of the village buildings being Grade II listed.

Although most purpose built housing was for industrial workers, there were others, such as Holly Village, built for estate workers. It was founded by Baroness Burdett-Coutts (of the banking family), who lived at Holly Lodge in Highgate, north London in 1865, and built by Cubitts to the designs of Henry Darbishire. The twelve houses are 'inspired by medieval Gothic with a vengeance', resulting in almost fantasy fairy castle like buildings with decorative metal spires on the finials, ornate patterned brickwork, lattice shaped bargeboards etc. The best materials were used, the external woodwork being of best Burmese teak (only needing cleaning and teak oil applying for restoration), whilst the roofs were boarded, then covered with patent felt, overlaid by Cumberland slate. One novel feature was a dust-chute that took dust directly into the cellar of each house. The estate workers only occupied the houses for a fairly short while, however, as from 1871 the houses were rented to private families. There were (and are) strict rules for the tenants, who were not allowed put in walls, fence posts etc to mark boundaries, or to make external alterations (so there are no satellite dishes!), or do 'anything that might annoy neighbours'. It is now a private gated estate, and not accessible for the public to view.

The Town Planning Act of 1909 set out to limit the density of housing, and banned back to back blocks - the old tenement blocks being places where both fire and disease could spread rapidly. Despite the Act,

many unsatisfactory buildings were erected, and it took industrialists with vision to provide good housing for their workers.

One such was William Hesketh Lever, born in 1851, the son of a Bolton grocer. Trade increased, and in 1884 he began to specialise in the manufacture of soap, initially made by others to his recipe, called Sunlight. In 1886 he took over manufacture, and then moved to a new site of 130 acres of marshy, poor quality, land on the Mersey near Birkenhead, crossed by muddy creeks that was used to build both the factory and housing for the workers, called Port Sunlight. Lever wanted to build semi-detached houses with gardens front and back for the workers' families. Various other buildings were provided for community use, such as the Gladstone Hall (opened by William Gladstone in 1891), a church (made of local Helsby sandstone), a school, and the Lever Art Gallery. There was a variety of architectural styles, some reflecting the old Cheshire timber framed houses, others having Dutch style gables and turret style rooms, and decorative styles of brickwork. A Belgian House was built - using bricks imported from Belgium to aid its appearance. Although a few buildings were lost due to war time bombing, 900 homes remain, and the entire village is now a conservation area, with many of the buildings 'listed', and minimal traffic.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, February 10th, when Peter Hearn will tell us about Hennerton from Eggs to Golf Balls - how their family business diversified from farming to golfing. On Tuesday March 10th the Society will hold its Annual General Meeting, when details of the coming year's programme will be revealed.