

A Century of Creative Learning: Letchworth Settlement 1920 – 2020.

By Kate Thompson.

Hertfordshire Publications: Hatfield. 2020.

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This book was published as part of the centenary celebrations for Letchworth Settlement. It will be of interest to historians of education particularly as a case study of the Settlement movement in Britain and also because of Letchworth's position as the world's first garden city. Kate Thompson, local historian and archivist, has produced an accessible, readable and engaging historical account. The book is well-illustrated, with both colour and black and white photographs, and yet modestly priced. It is arranged broadly chronologically with further thematic chapters pursuing particular topics of interest. The early years of the Settlement are covered in some detail, the last 50 years relatively briefly. The sources used include minute books and annual reports, interviews with key figures associated with the Settlement, supplemented by material from local newspapers and other sources.

The vision of Ebenezer Howard, pioneer of the Garden City movement, was for towns combining healthy and pleasant living and working conditions far removed from the smoke and slums of industrial cities. Letchworth, founded in 1903, was the first place where this ideal of the garden city was put into practice. As the town took shape so educational and cultural institutions were formed there. Adult education classes were being held at various locations from 1905 onwards including at the Skittles Inn, Letchworth's famous 'pub with no beer', for the town was a stronghold of the temperance movement. Out of this *ad hoc* provision the idea of Letchworth Settlement developed. The Settlement registered its first students in July 1920. People were expected to become subscribers, entitling them to join classes. It was funded entirely by subscriptions and donations at first and classes took place in various locations around the town. Figures for the growth of student enrolments from about 120 in the first year to over 600 by its seventh year show the extent of demand for adult education in Letchworth. In 1924 the Skittles Inn moved to a new location and the building on Nevells Road in Letchworth which it had previously occupied was purchased by the Settlement for £2,000 using a mortgage – giving it a more permanent home.

Letchworth Settlement soon joined the Educational Settlements Association (ESA) and the book therefore has an introductory chapter outlining the history of the settlement movement generally. As is well known the settlement movement started at Toynbee Hall in east London in the 1880s. Some of the early settlements were residential, some not (Letchworth was not). The settlement movement was

important in the history of adult education in Britain. The term settlement, perhaps because of its paternalistic or religious associations, eventually proved problematic and the ESA became the Educational Centres Association in 1946.

Writing of the first years of Letchworth Settlement in her memoirs, one working class student claimed that the 'the bulk of the early members seemed to be educated people; school teachers featured largely; it was more a club for the intelligentsia'. This seems to have been a sensitive issue in the inter-war years particularly. The chairman of the Settlement, in a 1931 newspaper article, was keen to refute any notion that substantial fees were deterring students, stating that people attending mainly 'belonged to the wage-earning class and it was not correct to say that the majority of the students were middle-class people who had ample income.' Data for the mid-1930s confirm that students were relatively young, with about 50 per cent under the age of 35, in contrast to more recent times.

A key question of interest is clearly what was taught at the Settlement and the book describes both provision in the early years and how it changed with the times. The first annual report reveals seven courses of 20 or more lectures on subjects including modern history, geology, chemistry, music appreciation and economics. There were also short courses on topics such as English literature and a class on industrial history run by the WEA. In addition, there was a programme of single lectures on a wide variety of topics from relativity to art education.

By the 1960s it was reported that interest in political and economic subjects had reduced somewhat. Nevertheless, at that time courses on topical subjects such as immigration were available as was a class on industrial sociology, covering trade unions, the development of the welfare state and social stratification. This was alongside lighter subjects such as arts and crafts, literature and so on. While in the inter-war years classes had been mainly in the evenings there was a gradual change towards more daytime provision. This was in response to changes in the student base, notably the increasing numbers of retired people.

Adult education in Britain has always been sparsely funded and financial matters therefore play a substantial role in the history of Letchworth Settlement. The financial situation was of concern through the inter-war years, in particular ensuring sufficient income to cover the mortgage payments on the building. A range of methods was used to gain funding – from appeals to local employers and other benefactors, various money-raising social events and the running of a canteen at the Settlement as an additional source of income. Financial difficulties 'continued to dog the Settlement' even as it celebrated its golden jubilee in 1970. The subsequent pattern through the 1980s and 1990s was of cuts to central government funding and a switch away from support from adult education generally towards vocational

training which disadvantaged the community education programmes run by the Settlement. The financial constraints led to the replacement of the full-time warden at the Settlement with a part-time manager/administrator. By the early 1990s there were deep concerns about the state of the building but a lack of surplus funds to tackle the issue. Financial concerns were eased somewhat in 1995 when arrangements were made for Letchworth Garden City Corporation, which held the ground lease, to take over the building as a gift and then lease it back to the Settlement.

Its sheer longevity is the most remarkable feature of the Settlement. In this book it is suggested that, although the number of settlements has declined ‘those settlements that have survived, like Letchworth, have done so because they have been able to adapt and to provide a range of classes and other activities that are popular and relevant.’ Having a fixed home from the mid-1920s onwards also probably helped. Many organisations used the premises of the Settlement for their activities, including amateur dramatic societies, music clubs, sports clubs, art societies and many others.

Having reached its centenary (and as this book went to press) Letchworth Settlement was hit by the greatest crisis in its history – in the form of the coronavirus pandemic. The local newspaper, the *North Herts Comet*, reported in June 2020 that, due to the inability to run classes during lockdown, the Settlement would shut at the end of July, with all staff to be made redundant. According to the report ‘Letchworth residents were left stunned by the announcement, and many are now calling on the Heritage Foundation and others to rescue the organisation and its historic Grade II listed building’. But good news was soon to follow. By August 2020 the Settlement had been saved from imminent closure by an emergency funding appeal which received an overwhelming response. At the time of writing (September 2021) the Settlement is once more able to run courses and its future appears secure. The speed and strength of the response from local people when the Settlement came under threat is the clearest testament to what an essential part of the educational and cultural landscape of Letchworth Garden City it had become.