

# Design for living

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## **As Hampstead Garden Suburb - home to film stars, financiers and royalty - marks its centenary, Clive Aslet wonders if it's time to revive the utopian dream**

Buds are opening. The sun is finding its way down hedge-lined alleyways and through garden gates. Children play on village greens. Dormer windows are open to the soft air. Spring has come to London NW11.

Hampstead Garden Suburb opens an eye and realises it is time to get up.

It is a child of the Heath, physically located on the rim of the North Circular Road, seven miles from the centre of London, but belonging emotionally to another world: an older, village England, half-remembering the fields out of which it was created, where Queen Anne architecturally joins hands with the Arts and Crafts Movement, a place of high ideals, now reserved for higher incomes. Where did we go wrong? House-building has gone downhill ever since.



**Hampstead Garden Suburb was begun 100 years ago next month**

Hampstead Garden Suburb, begun 100 years ago next month, knows it is special. King Constantine of Greece rubs shoulders with Jonathan Ross (who is joint president, with his wife, of the Suburb's Horticultural Society). Martin Bell's white suit vies for attention with Professor Robert Winston's moustache. Harold Wilson once lived here; Lady Wilson still does. Peter Mandelson has been a bird of passage. "I see it as an oasis," he says today. Although almost plutocratically comfortable (businessmen and financiers flock like starlings), the Suburb lists to the left, freighted with more liberal-minded intellectuals than you could shake a Hampstead Heath stick at. The fact that more than a third of the electoral ward is Jewish may have something to do with it.

Showbiz makes an appearance. It is here that Richard and Judy have parked their sofa. Sacha Baron Cohen, the creator of Borat, romped as a child in the "twittens", the suburb's strangely named alleyways. Film star Rachel Weisz was brought up with her brother at 6 Linnell Close. Dame Elizabeth Taylor cherishes memories of a house on Wildwood Road, where she spent her early years. "The happiest days of my youth were when my brother and I would run through the woods and feel quite safe," she says in a letter supporting next month's centenary celebrations. "It was heaven for this child and her brother."

But nowhere stays special without trying. I am out this spring morning with David B Lewis, chairman of the residents' association. He is showing me the charms of the place: brickwork sometimes laid with tile, hipped roofs, variety within order, streets that are balanced but not monotonous, the sheltered spot by the Great Wall along the side of the Suburb known as Sunshine Corner.

A framed drawing for his house, signed by the architect Horace Field, hangs in his hall. A retired financial journalist, he has an eye for detail. An out-of-date planning notice on a lamp post is pulled down. He fulminates against yellow lines, wrong litter bins, garage extensions.

A notice has been put up telling dog owners to clear up their pets' mess. "Somebody's annoyed," muses Lewis. "I should take it down actually. Yes, I think I will." Campaigns against dog mess may have their place in the scheme of things, but not on A4 paper attached to trees. Let the guard slip for a moment and the 21st century will come sneaking in.

The Garden Suburb was created in much this spirit. It stands in a tradition of model housing developments that goes back to Titus Salt's Saltaire in the 1850s. By the end of the 19th century, the urban planner Ebenezer Howard had formulated his vision for a community that would be free from the horrors of the industrial city, set amid fresh, healthful countryside while yet enjoying the benefits of the town.

This would be realised in Letchworth Garden City, shaped by the planner and architect Raymond Unwin.

Meanwhile, working in the slums of London's East End, Canon Samuel Barnett and his wife Henrietta had similar ideas. They imagined a community based on the neighbourliness of the English village or market town.

The impetus to take it forward came in 1896. The Northern Line of the London Underground was expected to head their way, with a station at Golders Green. The Barnetts foresaw that the Underground would trail bricks and mortar in its wake, despoiling what was then still farmland, north of Hampstead Heath. Henrietta set about preserving a northward extension of the Heath. This 80 acres of open ground would become the lung of a "garden suburb for all classes", built on the surrounding land. If north Hampstead had to be developed, she would see it was developed properly.

Part of the land in question was owned by Eton College, but the school wouldn't deal with a woman, so Henrietta put together a syndicate that included two earls and a bishop. Unwin was commissioned to draw plans. "We desire to do something to meet the housing problem, by putting within the reach of working people the opportunity of taking a cottage with a garden within a 2d fare of Central London, and at a moderate rent," announced the Hampstead Garden Suburb Committee in 1905. However, its members weren't stupid: philanthropy has to be paid for. And so room was found for the rich City types as well.

Or, as the committee phrased it, "to promote a better understanding between the members of the classes who form our nation", the best sites around the Heath would be occupied by homes of "wealthy persons who can afford to pay a large sum for their land and to have extensive gardens".

On May 2, 1907, the first sod was turned on what was conceived as the Artisans' Quarter. Henry Vivian of Hampstead Tenants Ltd reminded a meeting of the awful death toll taken when families were herded together into a single tenement room.

Rapturous applause greeted Mrs Barnett's appearance on the makeshift podium. "We have met together to make a bit of God's earth beautiful for generations ahead," she declared in words that underlined the Christian context of her mission, "to ensure that a piece of what Emerson calls 'the sunskirts of the Most High' should be around the homes of each one of His children."

A picture gallery, bandstand, refreshment rooms, ponds for paddling and sailing, barns for tools and tenements for the old - such facilities, marked on the map that Unwin drew for the new settlement, show the utopianism of the enterprise. Houses were placed so that none could spoil the outlook of the other. Plots were divided by hedges and trellises rather than walls. Old trees were preserved, along with the whole of two woods, Big Wood and Little Wood.

Progressive thinking went further. For example, Waterlow Court, a quadrangle designed by M H Baillie Scott in 1909, was conceived for single working women who weren't able to afford servants, allowing them to share the cost of living and enjoy companionship.



**Showbiz makes an appearance in the area**

Henrietta asked Edwin Lutyens to design the centrepiece of the Suburb, in the shape of two churches (Church of England and Free) and an Institute. For the story of English architecture, it was an inspired choice. "I cannot - at least have not yet - arrived at a church, which is depressing," Lutyens wrote in a letter to his wife the previous year. Now he had two on the go, located on a superb hilltop site - one (St Jude's) with an immense spire, the other domed. Neither, however, conformed to Henrietta's essentially village ideas and sparks flew.

Today, the public space around Lutyens's great architecture strikes the one false note in the Suburb. The planting of the flower beds is miserable and details such as dogs'-mess bins are provided with little thought for design.

David B Lewis makes no bones about it. "The biggest threat to the Suburb is the London borough of Barnet, which is a paradox, because it is partially charged with preserving it."

Lutyens eventually buried the hatchet with Henrietta by designing her memorial. It takes the form of a curved open frame, from the centre of which hung a lantern. But the lantern was stolen and Barnet Council surrounded the whole structure with a massive galvanised steel security fence. Enough said.

By contrast, the private realm continues to nourish its inhabitants and to be nourished by them in return. It may be that Hampstead Garden Suburb has changed socially from what the Barnetts had hoped for it.

On one visit, I was able to help out a woman whose large Mercedes had unaccountably stalled half way across the road. I am not sure that's the sort of social interaction the Barnetts had in mind when they planned the Suburb. Had Raymond Unwin foreseen how rates of car ownership would soar over the next century, he would no doubt have devised his own traffic-calming measures, rather than leaving the task to Barnet Council. Burglar alarms show that every paradise has its serpent. No doubt all those little lanes and alleys, so much part of the charm of the place, dismay the crime prevention officer.

Nor have all the social institutions survived the century in their original form. Children still play on greens and in the woods, and go to schools; but the Institute, intended to provide self-improvement for adults ("to help the poor out of poverty by education," as Henrietta put it) has taken off for other pastures, leaving the Lutyens building to function as a grammar school. To the irritation of some local parents, pupils come from all over Barnet, not just the Suburb.

The Club House, situated by the original Artisans' Quarter and intended to provide a social focus without alcohol, was bombed during the Second World War; its replacement is not a patch on the original. The Orchard, providing old people's accommodation, was replaced in the 1960s with a more humdrum affair.

In the great scheme of things, these are details. Visitors to the Suburb today cannot help but be impressed by the degree to which its sense of identity has survived the levelling tendency of the 20th century. The street signs are different from those elsewhere, made with the original serif lettering although now with "NW11" added. (Postcodes only came in after the First World War.) You hail the H2 bus when you see it - "Bus stops are ugly," explains Lewis.

There is still topiary and birdsong in the gardens, the sound of children playing and cyclists ringing bells. Its 13,000 residents seem more than happy.

"In 1974 a benign building society helped me buy a very large oak tree in Denman Drive with a very small cottage attached," Martin Bell recalls. "Moving to the Suburb was one of the best decisions I ever took." To Lord Winston, the Suburb is a "unique part of London that provides a peaceful and natural haven in our bustling and exciting city".

I must leave them to it, walking out of the defended precincts of the Suburb into a world of satellite dishes, design chaos, spreading ugliness and noticeably lower property prices. Isn't it time for Britain to revive the utopian dream?

### **Cross purposes**

Early in 1909, Edwin Lutyens was commissioned to build two churches on Hampstead Garden Suburb's Central Square. St Jude's, for C of E followers, was named after Canon Barnett's church in the East End. The Free Church provided a shared spiritual home for other denominations.

Flushed with his rediscovery of the formal values of the Wrenaissance (as Lutyens called the English

Renaissance of Sir Christopher Wren), the architect proposed two monumental designs, one with an immense, though not wholly Gothic spire, the other domed. Henrietta Barnett, the Canon's wife, wanted something more homely.

"A nice woman," Lutyens described her to his wife, "but proud of being a philistine - has no idea much beyond a window box full of geraniums, calceolarias and lobelias, over which you can see a goose on a green."

There was a showdown in April 1909. "Mrs Barnett was awfully upset about it. I want a certain height of building in a certain place for general effect. Mrs B. dead against this certain height on the ground of other houses being overshadowed."

Lutyens got his way, but with a compromise. "Mrs Barnett vanquished. Church, reduced, agreed to, but oh I do want more money for my church."

Lutyens was right: the immense, gaunt spire of St Jude's is visible from all parts of the Suburb, giving a visual cohesion. But to many residents the charm of the Suburb is that it retains, as Henrietta Barnett intended, many of the intimate qualities of a small town or village.

- The Suburb's centenary celebrations begin on May 2. See [www.hgs.org.uk/centenary](http://www.hgs.org.uk/centenary).
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