

Press Release

Broadway Gallery announces an exhibition exploring the radical unknown stories behind the world's first Garden City

3 December 2016 – 19 February 2017



Broadway Gallery is pleased to announce 'Alternative Letchworth: Past and Present', an exhibition exploring radicalism in the world's first Garden City. Working in collaboration with the Garden City Collection, the exhibition will reveal Letchworth's bohemian and progressive past through a variety of unique objects that are rarely on public display, including photographs, banners, clothing, pamphlets, posters and household objects. By shedding new light on the history of Letchworth, the exhibition will challenge perceptions of the Garden City today.

The exhibition will trace the history of Letchworth Garden City, from its inception at the beginning of the 20th century to the present day, and will be the first exhibition at Broadway Gallery to examine the town's history since the gallery's opening in February 2016. It will also look at Letchworth today, and the extent of its connection to its radical past, through a series of special artist commissions. Early career artists with local ties to Letchworth will produce work exploring the little known past of their town.

Founded in 1903 by social visionary Ebenezer Howard, Letchworth Garden City aimed to harness the best of both town and country life and improve upon the poor state of late 19th century living conditions. Howard's groundbreaking book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* laid out his vision for 'Smokeless, Slumless Cities' – freeholds managed by charitable trusts rather than private landlords, allowing financial increments to be returned for good use in the community. The towns would be self-sufficient in food and energy and provide ample green space. Today 69% of commercial real estate in Letchworth is still held in trust for the community, funding, amongst other community endeavours, the opening of Broadway Gallery.

In its early years Letchworth attracted a heady mixture of socialists and 'simple lifers'. Radical beliefs and lifestyles, many of which became increasingly accepted and mainstream in the second half of the 20th century, such as vegetarianism, proliferated in Letchworth ahead of their time. The exhibition will expose the surprising commitment to socialist values that existed in Letchworth in its founding years. It will also explore the influence that Letchworth had upon wider political, philosophical and scientific conversations throughout the 20th century. George Orwell and George Bernard Shaw frequented the town, and there were strong links with both the Theosophical and the Suffrage movement, with visits from key speakers such as Laurence Housman and Christabel Pankhurst.

A central question raised by the exhibition will be what it meant to be a 'crank' in early Letchworth, a contemporary term for a 'simple lifer' or 'alternative' Edwardian. The brief flowering of earnest radicalism in Letchworth has been largely eclipsed by later movements, and the word 'crank' was refashioned more positively by the vegetarian restaurant chain in

the 1960s. The exhibition will investigate the many 'crankish' practices for which Letchworth became known. A number of early residents chose to live in huts or wooden sheds rather than the accommodating Arts and Crafts dwellings provided. Vegetarianism was prominent and butchers in the town were outnumbered 30 to 1 by self-improvement societies. A contemporary journalist remarked that, 'There are more ideas being brought into the organised life of the Garden City than in any other six square miles of the British Empire.' Many Letchworth residents were passionate about brown bread and proponents of a diet based on rice, fruit and vegetables, anticipating several later health food trends. Letchworth was also largely a temperance community; residents themselves voted out a licensed premises in the town. The Skittle's Inn served Bovril or Cydrax (alcohol-free cider) and the 'pub with no beer' became a meeting place for trade unionists and co-operators. The first licensed premises in the town centre did not appear until 1961, 58 years after the town's foundation, and the first pub did not appear until 1974. Residents of Letchworth were also early supporters of the universal language Esperanto.

Scandalous at the time, residents were often found wearing sandals or going barefoot in public, as well as not wearing hats and wearing short trousers. The exhibition will include contemporary commentary on apparel, as well as photographs of how people dressed, an original Hertfordshire Smock used by 'Simple Lifer' local architect Andrew Muir and a pair of sandals made from a local apprentice of the radical writer Edward Carpenter. These objects and many of the others that will go on display have never been seen before. They include a cartoon for a Labour Party banner, other rare Arts and Crafts textiles and portraits from the fine art collection depicting many of Letchworth's most influential residents.

The exhibition will also address the so-called cranks' position as a minority and how far the comparatively small community of radicals influenced the overall character of the town. The town's situation on the Great Northern Railway line, cheap electricity and philanthropic industrialists soon bought factories to the new town and with them came the arrival of 'ordinary folk', most often attracted by the clean-living lifestyle offered by the town, but far from being of radical social or political persuasion.

The local artists who will provide a contemporary artistic response to the exhibition's themes will be Sean Pearce, Richard Seaholme, Chantelle Stephenson and John Vincent. Following a phase of research with the Garden City Collection, during which they were given access to the archive and curatorial support, they will each produce individual works interpreting the idea of the alternative Garden City. The works will span photography, video and sculpture and explore subjects and sites as diverse as the Cloisters, the Jackmans Housing Estate and early 'simple life' characters and influential individuals. The Cloisters is a landmark Letchworth building, designed by architect William Harrison Cowlshaw and originally built as an open-air psychology school. By contrast, the Jackmans Estate, to the south east of Letchworth, was built in 1961 as municipal social housing to accommodate a greater number of people moving out of London to the town. The new works will also consider more recent histories and the contemporary experience of Letchworth.

The exhibition will be co-curated by Vicky Axell, Curator of the Garden City Collection and Laura Dennis, Visual Arts Curator, Broadway Gallery.

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Notes to Editors

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'Alternative Letchworth: Past and Present' is at Broadway Gallery, Letchworth Garden City from 3 December 2016 – 19 February 2017.

For more information about the Garden City Collection visit www.gardencitycollection.com

About Letchworth Garden City

Letchworth is the world's first Garden City, created to overcome Victorian poverty and squalor by harnessing the best of town and country life. Letchworth Garden City was founded in 1903 by Ebenezer Howard, a visionary social reformer who suggested an alternative way of life in his 1898 book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path To Real Reform*, later reissued as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. The Garden City Movement he inspired has influenced the design of cities around the world, from China to Brazil. Today it is at the heart of discussions about how to manage urban growth. Famous for its beautiful leafy avenues and distinct Arts and Crafts style homes, the town is run in a unique way, with the land held in trust for the good of the community.

About Broadway Gallery

Broadway Gallery is a charitable service of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, a self-funding charitable organisation which invests profits from its property portfolio to maintain and enhance the world's first Garden City for the long-term benefit of local communities. The Gallery, which is housed in a covered shopping arcade dating from 1922, presents exhibitions spanning the visual arts, craft and design, displaying work by internationally acclaimed practitioners as well as local and emerging talent. The gallery opened in February 2016 and the inaugural exhibition focused on the work of British Pop artist Richard Smith, who was born and grew up in Letchworth Garden City.

Broadway Gallery, 2 The Arcade, Letchworth Garden City SG6 3EW www.broadway-leitchworth.com

Opening hours: Wednesday – Saturday 10 am – 5 pm, Sunday 10 am – 4 pm

Admission free

Image credit: Leaflet advertising the Garden City Pantomime, featuring a cartoon of Letchworth resident Percy Gossop dressed as 'Little Bo Peep', c. 1910, Courtesy and © Garden City Collection