

Now We Must Rebuild: The Greater London Plan, 1944.

The significance of the Greater London Plan, 1944 cannot be underestimated. Frederick J. Osborn was a colleague of Ebenezer Howard's and worked upon both Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City. He became closely involved with Howard's successor organisation, The Town and Country Planning Association, from the mid-1930s onwards and was himself to play an instrumental part at the heart of government in instigating the New Towns plans. In a way of passing on the lineage he spoke highly of Patrick Abercrombie's ability:

'I have for years worked very closely with Patrick Abercrombie, and it was largely through him that we were able to get the Barlow Royal Commission to come down on the side of decentralisation, limitation of city growth, and the national control of the location of industry. Abercrombie is the only philosophic or sociological planner in the country; and he is also the recognised head of the profession, his prestige has, with the new fashion for planning, risen to great heights.'(1)

In 1941 the Minister of Works and Buildings asked the LCC to prepare a plan which became the County of London Plan, 1943 – the proto report for the later Greater London Plan, 1944 which was commissioned by the same Ministry in 1942.



It was a bold plan, the first attempt since the Industrial Revolution to fundamentally get to grips with London's inordinate problems, and, what's more, to bring all aspects of society – housing, transport and industry – under the one roof of a single strategy. The need for such an endeavour was unarguable. Whole swathes of London, and in particular the dock areas such as West Ham and Canning Town, had received substantial bomb damage. The East End of London was labelled by the Luftwaffe as Target A – its main focus of bombing campaigns because of the strategic value of its industry.

The first bombing raid happened on September 7, 1940, while the last Vergeltungswaffen-1 – or ‘doodlebug’ – fell on March 27, 1945. Inbetween, this area of London took a pounding that’s only positive aspect was the resulting slum clearance.

The greatest intensity took place at the beginning of hostilities, and in latter years the bulk of the attack was concentrated on other towns such as Coventry and York. Even so, it has been calculated that between the first and last wartime incident the air raid sirens wailed 1,224 times. That is, Londoners faced an aerial attack once every thirty-six hours over a five year period.



But from the wreckage sprang real hope, as the Liberal Viscount Samuel noted: ‘The destruction of parts of our cities brings with it some compensation in the opportunities opened. It is obvious that a sudden change back from war to peace will threaten an economic crisis. Immediate employment on a vast scale in re-planning and building to make good the destruction, to catch up arrears of normal building, and to effect the improvements so plainly necessary – would offer the best means of meeting it.’(2) Every political persuasion saw the necessity of rebuilding, and which left an opening for somebody such as Patrick Abercrombie to fill.

The key to the Greater London Plan, 1944 was the movement of people away from the central London areas, chiefly under the control of the London County Council, and into the newly built areas, which were called the New Towns. The London of tomorrow was divided into four rings: Inner, Suburban, Green Belt and Outer Country. These stretched from the centre of London out to Brentwood and Billericay in Essex, Luton in Bedford, High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, Sevenoaks in Kent and Farnham in Surrey. At its furthest parameters were included the New Town developments of Basildon and Harlow.

The movement of people was to be massive: 618,000 from the LCC controlled area, and a further 415,000 in areas adjacent. A total of 1,033,000 moving away from the centre of London and into the brave new world of post-war planning.

London has always had a transient population, and by the outbreak of war it was estimated that 60 percent of residents had been born elsewhere, with most coming from the north of England, Ireland and eastern Europe. The population between 1919 and 1936 grew from 4,034,900 to 6,117,300: an increase of over two million.

At the same time the inner-London area covered by the LCC shrank in size by 502,000 persons. The new areas of residential growth were in the suburbs, which in Essex was the massive Becontree estate, and the rapid expansion of Hornchurch and Upminster from villages to well-populated extensions of the commuter belt.

The 1944 plan gives little charity to the pre-war housing expansion, either private or local authority: 'the Outer London built between the wars was in the main a terrifying waste of unsocial dwellings.'⁽³⁾ Which in the case of Hornchurch and Upminster meant 'examples of much that is the worst that can be carried out under pre-war statutory planning powers.'⁽⁴⁾ While as for Becontree in Dagenham its 'sociological problems'⁽⁵⁾ were only mentioned in passing.

The New Towns were to be a maximum of 60,000 inhabitants, and these were to be divided into Neighbourhoods ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 each. They were to be established in the Outer Country ring, and identified in the Plan as being at White Waltham in Berkshire, Chipping Ongar, Harlow and Margarett in Essex, Stevenage, Stapleford and near Redbourn in Hertfordshire, near Meopham in Kent and Crowhurst and near Holmwood in Surrey. But with these would be a dispersal of population to already existing towns such as another 30,000 to Ashford in Kent and 20,000 to Chelmsford and Witham in Essex.

The density of population of central London would in the process be reduced to 136 persons per acre – down from the then current high point of 200 persons per acre.

The Green Belt ring – which Romford was situated in – was to be left as much untouched as possible in order to leave land both for the recreational use of town dwellers and for agricultural purposes, but they were to be the subject of some new developments, or as the 1944 Plan called them 'moon satellites' or 'quasi-satellites'. It was a necessity to host these new residential areas in the Green Belt ring so that there could be an immediate short-term relief on the dire housing shortage in the Inner ring. It was these areas, housing no more than a total of 125,000 people, which were to be built first. One earmarked site was mentioned in the Plan:

'Harold Wood, largely in Hornchurch U.D., is a suburb consisting mainly of small houses based on the station with a small shopping centre. It is now virtually joined on to Romford. East of Harold Wood there is a pleasant belt of open hilly country. One of the projected quasi-satellites will be situated near Dagnam Park, part of which should be kept as Green Belt; it will be separated from the station by the main Roman Road, which should be partially sunk in a cutting to allow for easy passage for local traffic over the top of it by bridges to connect with the new satellite.'⁽⁶⁾

This is the paragraph from which Harold Hill sprung.

The new Neighbourhoods were to be the subject of careful detail. Taking as 10,000 people the optimum number (Harold Hill was to become 30,000 strong and three Neighbourhoods), there was to be provided 'social, educational, administrative and other public buildings; hospitals and clinics; facilities for leisure and recreation (indoor and out); provision for shopping and marketing, warehousing and storage; and special equipment concerned with transport, services, and other utilities.'

For every Neighbourhood of 10,000 people there was to be 100 acres of open space; which would include 20 football pitches of various sizes, 10 acres of cricket, athletics and lawn tennis courts, half an acre for a bowling green, 18 hard tennis courts, and 12 hard netball courts.

Space was the key to design. While the Inner ring of old had up to 200 persons per acre, the Green Belt areas would have a proposed 28 persons per acre. So for every 50 acres of housing there would be a corresponding 7 acres for primary school buildings, 7 acres for shops, 5 acres for community buildings, 3 acres for public buildings, 5 acres for industry and 23 acres for main roads and parking.

There was to be one shop for every 75 persons, or 200 shops per Neighbourhood; Churches would be provided for 10 percent of the population, or 2 per Neighbourhood; there would be four nursery schools, two infant schools and two junior schools, with two 10,000-strong Neighbourhood units there would be allocated a Secondary Boy's Modern and a Secondary Girl's Modern school. For the layout, there was the utmost attention given to green space which would network the new residential areas 'into a continuous system by footpaths, park strips, riverside walks, bridle-walks and green lanes.'⁽⁷⁾ The building within the boundaries of the natural environment was heavily emphasised, so existing features such as ponds and parks should be built around rather than bulldozed over, making the layout complement rather than overshadow nature.

As Lewis Mumford, the highly regarded author of *Culture of Cities*, later wrote: 'I don't know which to admire more about Abercrombie's work: it's intellectual penetration, its political skill, its beauty of presentation, or its all-round comprehension of the planners and the citizen's job.'⁽⁸⁾

It sparked a wider debate of which Frederick Osborn noted: 'The broad principle of the Plan is what we have been fighting for all these years... 'Everybody' is talking Dispersal, Satellite Towns, Green Belts, Location of Industry, ect.'⁽⁹⁾

Patrick Abercrombie, knighted in 1945, passed away in 1957 but not before, at the invitation of the British government, redesigning Hong Kong; while in 1956, at the invitation of Emperor Haile Selassie, he drew up plans for the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.

(1) F.J. Osborn, letter to Lewis Mumford, 7 December 1943.

(2) Introduction to F.J. Osborn, *Overture to Planning*.

(3) *Greater London Plan*, 1944 p.17

(4) *Greater London Plan*, 1944. p.134

(5) *Greater London Plan*, 1944. p.133

(6) *Greater London Plan*, 1944. p.135

(7) *Greater London Plan*, 1944. p.11

(8) Lewis Mumford, letter to F.J. Osborn, 11 December 1946.

(9) F.J. Osborn, letter to Lewis Mumford, 3 September 1945.