'An essay in civilisation'? - Stevenage and the post-war New Towns programme

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Introduction

1   When, in November 1946, the small country town of Stevenage in Hertfordshire, England, was formally designated as the first of the government's New Towns, it marked the launch of the United Kingdom's most ambitious ever urban planning programme. Eventually 32 New Towns were designated and developed during the 'active' phase of the programme, from 1946-96. Together they now house approximately 2.8 million people, or around 4.4% of the UK population. The first New Towns were to be 'self-contained and balanced communities for work and living' developed as part of policy of 'planned decentralisation from congested urban areas' (Reith Committee 1946: 2). Launched by the post-war Labour Government, they were intended as a signal of new hope for a country exhausted by war, harbingers of a better world that transcended the urban squalor and old divisions of social class. In the words of the government committee that defined how they were to be realised, it was 'not enough...to avoid the mistakes and omissions of the past. Our responsibility...is rather to conduct an essay in civilisation by seizing an opportunity to design, evolve and carry into execution...the means for a happy and gracious way of life' (Reith Committee 1946: 4).

2   How far then can the New Towns, particularly the first ones and especially Stevenage, be said to have fulfilled the high hopes that accompanied their birth? Inevitably, a government programme of such high ambition and expansive scale delivered over such a long period has attracted diverse judgements. For those who had long favoured building garden cities as a way to mitigate the problems of the big concentrated cities, the New Towns became its fulfilment. In 1969, one careful researcher on their

development was so moved to describe those around London as 'the brightest stars in the firmament of British planning' (Thomas 1969: 1). The New Towns (and not just around the capital) soon became international showpieces, visited and studied by planners, governments, developers, business people and others from around the world.

3 Yet within the UK there was always some opposition to the New Towns. At the local level, farmers usually contested the loss of land and existing residents often regretted, with varying degrees of vehemence, what was going to be lost in their realisation. At both local and national levels there were also political criticisms of the heavy-handed 'top-down' statism that delivered them and professional criticisms of the frequently monolithic nature of what resulted (Alexander 2009: 109-30). Some criticisms could be addressed but, over time, the counter arguments became less easy to dismiss. By the later 1970s the New Towns were widely being seen as less relevant to the inner metropolitan core cities, whose decline had become a serious problem (Aldridge 1979: 146-56). The shift in policy emphasis away from the New Towns towards the inner cities became even more marked in the 1980s (Ward 2016: 316-8). The programme's heavy reliance on public spending and big government increasingly clashed with the new political zeitgeist of Thatcherism. It was this combination of planning and political realities that ultimately brought the demise of the New Towns programme.

4 Evaluating the success of what was promised in 1946 must therefore be a nuanced process. Many of the foundational assumptions, about how people lived, earn their living, moved around and what they wanted for the future, as well as about what the role of the state should be, shifted over time. The nature of the UK economy also changed, experiencing major manufacturing decline and reorientation towards service employment. The position of women also changed permanently, no longer set in the largely domestic roles that post-war policymakers had presumed. Any assessment has therefore to recognise that a single judgement made three quarters of a century after their beginnings would inevitably be a simplistic one. This paper uses the example of the first New Town at Stevenage (with occasional glances at others), conceived and delivered when the original vision was at its purest, to consider the programme's success over time in the light of changing political, economic and social circumstances.

A New Town (and a programme) is conceived

5 Yet contemplating how Stevenage's life as a New Town began, 'success' is certainly not the term to use. It began with a public relations disaster so serious that it might easily have sabotaged the whole programme. The new planned era ought perhaps to have opened more smoothly. Patrick Abercrombie's widely endorsed *Greater London Plan* of 1944 had proposed eight new satellite towns be developed around London and suggested ten possible sites from which these might be selected (Abercrombie 1944: 14-5). Such planned decentralisation would allow reduced population densities in the capital's congested inner districts. Meanwhile the outward march of inter-war style contiguous suburbs would be halted by a strengthened metropolitan green belt. Only two specific locations identified in the Abercrombie plan were subsequently developed as actual New Towns, one at Stevenage and, by autumn 1944, it was frontrunner to be the first built (Cullingworth 1979: 27-31). With a population just over 6,000, the existing settlement comprised a small country town and surrounding rural area. Most employment was local and, apart from some recently-built factories, confined to

agriculture and local services, though there was some out-commuting, mainly to London. But it was a town with growth ambitions and the Urban District's local plan already anticipated a fivefold population increase.

6   Immediately after the General Election in July 1945 and the resultant landslide majority for Labour, a Ministry of Town and Country Planning team began preparing a more ambitious master plan. This was well before the New Towns Act actually became law but pre-war legislation gave sufficient interim authority to the new Minister, Lewis Silkin, who was impatient to get moving. Following Abercrombie, planned growth to 60,000 inhabitants was anticipated at Stevenage, nearly double that envisaged by the local council. The planning team was led by Gordon Stephenson, head of the Ministry's Planning Technique section, assisted by Peter Shepheard, Terry Kennedy, Tom Coote and Eric Claxton (Ward 2012). Several had been in Abercrombie's *Greater London Plan* team. Shepheard had prepared the influential indicative outline plan for the (never built) satellite town of Ongar featured in the Abercrombie plan. Stephenson had developed general planning principles for neighbourhood units and community services. With Coote, he had also selected Stevenage as an appropriate location for a new satellite town.

7   Like the Ongar example, the 1946 master plan (see Figure 1) prepared by Stephenson's team envisaged six residential neighbourhood units, each of 10,000 inhabitants (MTCP 1946). The main railway line separated industrial (to the west) and residential zones to the east. An entirely

Figure 1: 1946 Stevenage New Town Plan prepared by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning team led by Gordon Stephenson.
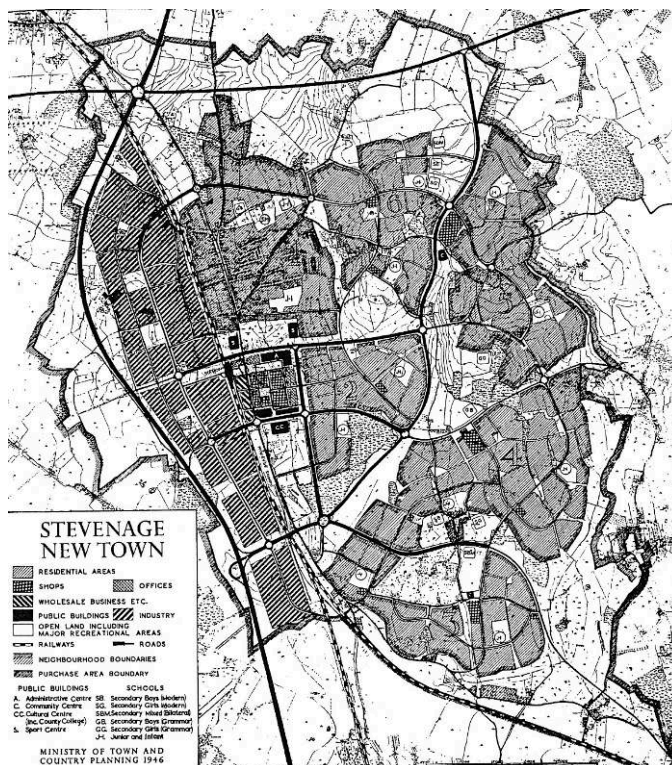
Picture credit: Author's collection.

8   new town centre was planned, also to the east, lying between residential and industrial areas. The old town of Stevenage was incorporated into neighbourhood 1, north of the new centre, allowing retention of its historic qualities. The Great North Road which bisected the old town would be bypassed west of the New Town, removing through traffic and giving easy access to the industrial area. Good standard primary distributor roads without frontage development of buildings were also planned. Yet it was not the motor vehicle-oriented plan that it now seems. Very high cycle use was expected and it was suggested that a cycleway system might be provided. Significant numbers were also expected to walk to the new town centre which the team suggested might be pedestrianized (another idea from the Ongar plan).

9   Overall, this conception of a new Stevenage encapsulated, almost perfectly, most of the new orthodoxies of early post-war planning. It was presented as an ideal setting for living in the new Britain, a promise of what would increasingly become available to all. Yet the appropriateness of this conception was increasingly tested through the following decades as wider changes brought real shifts in social, economic and political realities and expectations. There were also real doubts, even at the outset, about how appropriate the vision really was. Almost immediately, the very concept of such a large New Town in this location was increasingly challenged, along with several detailed aspects of the plan. Judgements of Stevenage's 'success' must therefore begin even before the formal designation was confirmed.

Opposition to the New Town

10   In contrast to this expert planning process quietly taking place within the Ministry, local anxieties had been growing since the Abercrombie plan's first intimation of a satellite town (Cullingworth 1979: 27-31). The awareness from late 1945 that Abercrombie's proposals were beginning to be acted upon heightened the unease. The Stephenson plan was not, of course, prepared in secret. A few team members had visited the area and there had been meetings with local officials but no formal contact with either the community or elected members of Stevenage Urban District Council. Meanwhile events moved on and opinions hardened. By February 1946, local development applications were being refused because they contravened the still undisclosed New Town plan. Then, in April, the famous novelist E. M. Forster condemned on radio the new 'meteorite town' set to land on Stevenage, where his novel *Howard's End* had been set (Forster 1965: 68).

11   Only when the plan was virtually complete, later in April, did the planners and Ministry officials finally meet local councillors to explain it (TNA, HLG 91/74. Beaufoy, Memo, 27.4.1946). But already compulsory purchase notices were landing on Stevenage doormats. Most affected houses were only recently built but located within what would be the northern part of the proposed industrial zone. It meant, bizarrely, that the first specific thing local people learned about the New Town was that, despite a severe national housing shortage, perfectly fit houses would be demolished. (Over time, the industrial zone was reduced in size and these same houses are still there today.) The meeting with the council occurred in an atmosphere of what a ministry official optimistically termed 'polite antagonism'. A few days later, on 6th May, all hell broke loose (TNA, HLG 91/77). During that day Lewis Silkin visited the town, meeting local people, the council and finally addressing an evening public meeting. Seemingly

oblivious of what was brewing, the Minister confidently expected to carry the day. He had already arranged a triumphant news story 'A New Town is Born' to be circulated to the world's press. Others had more accurately foreseen events. On 30th April, the London *Evening News* led with the headline 'Doomtown Protest Rising'. The following day the Stevenage Residents' Protection Association was formed and its membership and funding quickly grew.

12   At the public meeting (see Figure 2) over 350 people filled Stevenage Town Hall with (in some reports) about half the local population outside, listening on loudspeakers. The strongest objections came from farmers and residents set to lose their livelihoods or homes. There were also many general concerns: that Stevenage was the victim of a national experiment, that history was being uprooted and everything was being done in dictatorial fashion. Despite some cheers, the meeting did not go well for the Minister, his speech frequently being interrupted. He appealed to the audience's highest instincts and invoked the wartime spirit. Yet such arguments did not assuage protesters who thought him profoundly anti-democratic, with cries of 'hark, hark, the dictator' and 'Gestapo'. Nevertheless, Silkin assured incredulous listeners that soon '[p]eople from all over the world will come to Stevenage to see how we here in this country are building for the new way of life.' He left the hall to find a tyre of his official car had been deflated and (it was suspected) sugar put in the petrol tank.

Figure 2: Lewis Silkin, Minister of Town and Country Planning, speaking at the public meeting held in Stevenage in May 1946 when he encountered strong local opposition.

Picture credit: Stevenage Museum, Image P2635.

Designating the New Town

13   For several years, the deflated tyre and disabled engine were more apt as metaphors for Stevenage's fortunes than Silkin's expressed hopes (Orlans 1952). The New Towns Bill did not become law until August 1946, finally giving Silkin the means of taking decisive action. Generally, beyond Stevenage, there was much political and popular support for the measure (Cullingworth 1979: 15-26). This was despite the fact that it relied on a very statist form of planning. It gave the Minister power to appoint unelected state bodies called development corporations which, by compulsion or negotiation, could acquire all the land needed to develop a New Town. Yet, despite such sweeping powers, the Bill's passage through Parliament was almost entirely unopposed. This was not simply because, following the 1945 Election, the Conservative party was a much-enfeebled Parliamentary counter-voice. In fact, virtually all Conservative MPs who spoke actually supported the planned decentralization of Greater London to new satellite towns that the Abercrombie plan had proposed. The single dissenting parliamentary voice was that of Tory right-winger, Viscount Hinchingbrooke. Noting events in Stevenage, he argued that the measure was 'frankly totalitarian' and would produce 'havoc, bitterness and grave social damage' (cited Cullingworth 1979: 25). For Silkin, the Act's virtually unanimous approval and smooth passage was a great early personal success, though its implementation soon became mired in difficulties and delays. Never again did Silkin enjoy the high political standing he gained at this time.

14   Meanwhile events were also unfolding at Stevenage where Silkin had been pressing forward under the existing rather limited powers and meeting major local opposition. Even before his hand was further strengthened by the new Act, however, the local opposition was not numerically as strong as might be thought. A Council poll of local electors conducted later in May 1946 (on a 52 per cent vote) showed 1316 entirely opposed, 913 in favour and 282 giving qualified support (TNA HLG 91/74. Letter G. V. Berry - Permanent Secretary, 22.5.1946). Yet it was the vehemence of opposition rather than just its scale that was important. The Residents' Protection Association had more than 1,100 members by the summer. Criticisms grew further when the Advisory Committee formed in August 1946 to oversee early progress included only one Stevenage councillor.

15   In October 1946 a public inquiry considered the town's formal designation as a New Town under the new Act (TNA, HLG 91/74. Report of Public Inquiry, 25.10.1946). The extraordinary brevity of this procedure by today's standards strongly suggests how accustomed ministers had become during the war to enforcing their will in quite peremptory fashion. In just three days, the inquiry examined the detailed planning arguments for and against and the actual boundaries of the designated area. Silkin's contradictory legal position as both promoter and judge of the proposal limited how far his Ministry could simultaneously argue in its favour. Even so, the Ministry case was poorly represented, with no positive advocacy or cross examination of objectors. A notable opposing expert witness, appearing for the Stevenage Urban District Council, was Ewart G. Culpin. From 1906-1919 Culpin had been Secretary of the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association (Ward 2015: xxiv). As such he might reasonably have been expected to favour the principle of planned decentralization. He had also been a Labour colleague of Silkin on the London County Council between the wars. Yet, like Forster, Culpin was deeply attached to the old Stevenage (where he had been born). He

feared building a New Town would encourage a large urban agglomeration throughout Hertfordshire.

16   The inspector's confidential report to Silkin accepted the validity of some of these counter-arguments and there were other misgivings expressed (TNA, HLG 91/74. Report of Public Inquiry...., 25.10.1946: 8-9). This were certainly not what Silkin wanted to hear. With Cabinet backing, he addressed the technical weaknesses but otherwise pressed on regardless. The designation order was confirmed in early November 1946, further hardening local opposition. The Development Corporation was formally created a few weeks later. The Chairman of the Advisory Committee, well-known left-leaning architect Clough Williams-Ellis, continued as Chairman of the new body.

17   Shortly after formal designation, two local residents set to lose their properties and some friends surreptitiously erected painted signs bearing the name 'Silkingrad' at Stevenage railway station (Ashby and Hills 2010: 58-9). In the first snow of the worst winter of living memory this new name consciously evoked Soviet totalitarianism (see Figure 3). It seemed to the opposition movement perfectly to express how local interests were being disregarded in dictatorial fashion. The action was widely publicised, attracting funds for a legal challenge that, days later, was lodged in the High Court. The Residents' Protection Association and the National Farmers' Union wanted the designation order quashed.

Figure 3: The "Silkingrad" protest at Stevenage railway station, December 1946. It attracted wide attention and helped to swell the funds available to the opposition to mount a legal challenge.

Picture credit: Stevenage Museum, Image P9316.

18   They argued that Silkin's advocacy at the public meeting in May was proof of bias and should disqualify him from a quasi-judicial role (Orlans 1952: 67-70). The High Court upheld this view in February 1947. Silkin quickly decided he had to contest this

judgement to prevent the whole programme being sabotaged (TNA, HLG 91/542. L. Silkin, Memorandum on the Stevenage decision, undated). He triumphed in the Appeal Court in March 1947, whereupon the Protection Association carried the battle to the House of Lords. Eventually, in July, the Law Lords ruled in favour so it seemed that the Development Corporation could finally do its job.

19 Or at least it could try to (Balchin 1980: especially 15-24). The dollar crisis of 1947 put great pressure on public spending and all New Towns suffered curtailment. Yet legal delays had swallowed up Stevenage's initial time advantage so it was already in a worse position than the other London New Towns that had by then been designated (Crawley, Hemel Hempstead and Harlow). In November 1947, Williams-Ellis resigned in frustration, opening a phase of great discontinuity in Stevenage's leadership. His successor as Chairman served for only a year and *his* successor, the Reverend Charles Jenkinson, socialist leader of Leeds city council, died after a few months.

20 Then came the most disastrous appointment of all, Monica Felton (Clapson 2015). A member of the Reith Committee that in 1945-6 had defined basic guidelines for New Town development, she subsequently became Deputy-Chairman to Williams-Ellis at Stevenage. Silkin (with whom she was personally very close) then appointed her Chair of Peterlee New Town before making her Chair of Stevenage in August 1949. Like many politically associated with the early New Towns programme, she had strong left-wing sympathies. But she combined these with astonishingly poor judgement. In June 1951, instead of reporting Stevenage's progress to a Parliamentary Committee, she was absent on a Soviet-organised six-week trip to North Korea. This was at the height of the Korean War in a period of great paranoia about the Soviet Union. Having got herself into this predicament, Silkin's successor, Hugh Dalton, dismissed her. She was the only New Town Chair ever to be sacked and there were later calls for her to be indicted for treason.

21 These early difficulties made it difficult to attract and keep good quality professional staff. The first General Manager of the Development Corporation, Major-General Alan Duff, had not been first choice and did not prove a natural leader in a civilian context. Apart from the internal problems, he remained aloof from the new residents' organisations, making the Corporation seem particularly remote and unresponsive (Balchin 1980: 31-2). Meanwhile Stephenson himself declined the post of Chief Architect and Planner in July 1947 (Ward 2012). Shepheard was to have been his deputy and briefly held this post but could not work with Clifford Holliday, appointed instead of Stephenson, who initially wanted to revamp the original master plan. The only one who stayed was Claxton who made his career at Stevenage and did much to deliver the 1946 plan.

22 Gradually though, the Development Corporation learned from the early mistakes. The 1949 official New Town plan (which kept most aspects of the 1946 plan) was better handled locally. The Marshall Plan and a massive American loan eased the overall financial constraints. Even then however problems of labour and material shortages persisted for several years. The upshot was that early housing output (only 28 permanent dwellings completed by 31st March 1951) remained derisory, far worse than in any other London New Town.

Building the New Town

23   Yet, following its painfully protracted gestation, birth and early infancy, Stevenage experienced sturdy, at times prodigious, growth over the 1950s and, despite fluctuations, the 1960s (See Figure 4). The Felton fiasco finally brought much better leadership to the Development Corporation (Balchin 1980, 21-40). As this more effective organisation gradually evolved, so its operations moved into higher gear. First the process of buying the farmland needed for development began to accelerate. The Corporation had powers to acquire, by agreement or compulsion, all 6,156 acres (2,491 hectares) of the designated area at its pre-New Town value (Balchin 1980: 109-11). Yet it still required central government approval and money on a year-by-year basis in order to do it. By 1952 about a third of the designated area had been bought and roughly half by 1960. By 1980 when the Development Corporation was wound up, it owned about four-fifths of the designated area. Housing completions also accordingly rose significantly so that, from the mid-1950s, Stevenage averaged about 1,000 house completions a year. By 1960, 8,783 houses had been built by the Development Corporation (Balchin 1980: 153). The New Town proper was well underway, no longer a mere vision. The first entirely new neighbourhood units began to take shape with developments in neighbourhood 2 (Bedwell), neighbourhood 3 (Broadwater) and neighbourhood 4 (Shephall). Neighbourhood 5 (Chells) was also begun by the end of the 1950s.

Figure 4: The first Development Corporation houses completed (in 1951) at Old Town (Neighbourhood 1) Stevenage.

Picture credit: Author photograph

24   Building was not simply a governmental process but involved private building firms undertaking the various Development Corporation contracts. A major problem in the early post-war years was getting sufficient building materials when the big cities were

also tackling their own massive housing needs and other New Towns were being built. Where possible, local builders were used but they could not handle really big contracts. As a result, national contractors soon dominated, especially Terson, Carlton, Wimpey and (later) Mowlem (Mullan 1980: 332). Between them these firms constructed about three quarters of over 20,000 dwellings built for the Development Corporation between 1950 and 1980. In general, big contractors also tended to be winners in securing scarce building materials (TNA HLG 91/427. Memo G.R. Coles, 26.9.1952). As a consequence, Stevenage actually did better than most other New Towns, particularly those which used more and smaller building firms.

25 Big contractors (especially Wimpey and later Mowlem) were also more able to handle new construction methods that could offset building material and labour skill shortages (George Wimpey and Company. c1954: 18-19; Cresswell Film Unit and Stevenage Development Corporation 1964) (see Figures 5 and 6). Despite these expedients, labour supply was a continuing problem. It was very difficult in the New Towns because they were undertaking building programmes so far in excess of their existing populations, especially so in Stevenage. (New Towns with larger pre-designation populations such as Hemel Hempstead, were better placed in this respect). Many efforts were consequently made to attract and keep construction workforces (Wall, Clarke, McGuire and Brockmann 2011). Fleets of contractors' buses daily ferried building workers from London to Stevenage. The Development Corporation also provided hostel accommodation but the real incentive was the promise, after about six months working in Stevenage, of the tenancy of a good quality new house with a garden. Many building workers (like thousands of others) were living in cramped, inadequate accommodation in London, often sharing basic domestic amenities. So the prospect of decent housing far sooner than would be possible in London was a very real draw.

Figure 5: Foreground shows Wimpey 'no-fines' system-built P77-type housing in the Broadwater area of Stevenage (Neighbourhood 3), developed from 1953. Behind can be seen flat roofed housing of the Development Corporation's C23-type built shortly afterwards.

Picture credit: Author photograph.

26 This did not mean that workers simply complied with everything building contractors wanted. Working on large sites also facilitated large-scale labour organisation. Many London building workers already understood the value of collective action, an attitude quickly strengthened by very effective local leadership of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers. Inevitably, though, the early months of working on-site in Stevenage had to be ones of relative acquiescence. But once more workers had secured their precious home, it was increasingly possible for union leaders to seek improvements to often primitive working conditions, poor wages and threat of arbitrary dismissal. Stevenage became the most highly organised location for New Town building labour. Local union leaders estimated that around 90 per cent of Development Corporation housing was built on unionised sites. There were many short-term disputes.

Figure 6: Mowlem system-built housing at Pin Green (Neighbourhood 6), built in approximately 1965. The area was laid out on the "Radburn" principle, with complete separation of vehicular and pedestrian circulation systems. This image shows the pedestrian-side.

Picture credit: Author photograph.

27 So, on top of its early problems, Stevenage also gained reputation for labour militancy. Yet the fluctuations over time in dwelling completions were not because of labour disruptions. The reality was that the building workers brought much that was positive to the emergent New Town. They and their families, many of Irish origin, dominated the first wave of New Towners (Irish Network Stevenage, ed. Barnes 2013). By building the places that they, their workmates and their families would call home, they had a real stake in maintaining both housing output and quality. Increasingly, they also provided important social and political leadership within the wider New Town community.

Attracting Jobs

28 Although building provided most of Stevenage's early employment growth, continued expansion depended on gaining manufacturing jobs. These accounted for most local employment until the very late 1960s, after which service jobs became more numerous. As for building workers, having a job in Stevenage was key to getting a Development Corporation house. Only in this way could the central ideal of self-containment, of people living and working in the same town be fulfilled. Fortunately, Stevenage was a place with clear potential for industrial growth. There were already several factories there in 1946, providing jobs for most of the existing working population (MTCP 1946: 13-4; TNA HLG 91/80. Note by J Campbell, 9.2.1945). Local industrialists, eager to expand, were important supporters of the New Town.

29 As noted, the master plan made (excessively) generous provision for new factory development in the future industrial estate. The more effective Development Corporation leadership after 1951 pressed advance construction of factory buildings and roads as a catalyst. Along with some astute negotiation with potential employers and central government, the effect was truly remarkable. The first new factories began production in 1953 and a spate of new employers followed within a few years (Balchin 1980: 183-91). Almost from the outset military aerospace became the dominant manufacturing sector in Stevenage. It comprised just two companies: Hawker Siddeley Dynamics, which arrived in 1953, and, much the largest in Stevenage, the British Aircraft Corporation, in 1955 (Adams 1976: 58). By 1961 they were already employing around 5,800 workers between them, 26 per cent of all Stevenage jobs and 38 per cent of those in manufacturing (Mullan 1980: 222-34). No other sectors came close but several other factories were employing 500-2,000 workers during the 1960s. They spanned general engineering, photography, plastics, computing, instrumentation, packaging, educational supplies and pens and pencils. Some of them undertook sub-contracting work for the aerospace firms.

30 These industries did not come simply because of Stevenage's locational advantages, the persuasiveness of the Development Corporation and industrialist preferences. Following the 1945 Distribution of Industry Act, factory location was heavily affected by central government (Cullingworth 1979: 543-63). The Board of Trade could determine where new factory developments could or could not occur. The broad policy was that designated development areas with unemployment persistently higher than the national average, largely in the north, Wales and Scotland, would be most favoured. The Greater London New Towns were a secondary priority, for example where firms were leaving London itself or needed to stay in the region. The 1950s were boom years for factory development in all the Greater London New Towns (Balchin 1980: 188-90). It helped in getting Board of Trade permission if other central ministries were supportive. This usually meant that national strategic importance (such as defence equipment or advanced technology) and/or export potential were involved. These factors were key to understanding why military aerospace became entrenched in Stevenage. But this dominance did not go unchallenged, with local protests from trades unions and anti-nuclear organisations (Ashby and Hills 2010: 153-4, 309). Changes in government thinking could also adversely affect local job numbers, particularly when missile projects were cancelled in the early 1960s. Yet most other factories in Stevenage had comparable vulnerabilities, partly because they were branch plants of larger firms.

31   Like most London New Towns in the 1960s, Stevenage's working population mainly comprised male workers doing manual jobs, most typically skilled or, to a lesser extent, semi-skilled (Aldridge 1978: 117-24; Mullan 1980: 26-30). Fewer than the national or regional average were unskilled. Professional and semi-professional occupations were noticeably overrepresented, reflecting the higher expertise required in several industries. Employers, managers and the self-employed were underrepresented among Stevenage workers. This again reflected the dominance of a few large, mainly branch firms (with managers living outside the New Town) and the more general lack of a small-business 'culture'. As Stevenage started to mature as a fully-fledged town during the 1960s, service employment steadily rose and had overtaken manufacturing by the 1970s. This was when major retailing, more public services and many office-based activities became established. These brought gave diversity and resilience to the employment base.

32   The range of labour needed consequently widened, with more professional and other non-manual jobs and growing numbers of jobs for women and juveniles. Much growth in service employment mirrored the existing picture, with the non-manual equivalents of skilled and semi-skilled jobs predominating. This encouraged children to leave full-time education during secondary level, many before the age of 18, and enter employment in which they could then often build up their skills. In this, Stevenage was similar to many other places although recent employment growth had made it more fortunate than most. Later, however, this lack of post-16 and even post-18 education would begin to matter for Stevenage's school leavers. In the heyday of the post-war boom, however, it was availability of jobs and absence of unemployment that were important.

How self-contained?

33   The early 1970s, roughly a quarter of a century after Stevenage was designated, is perhaps the most appropriate period to consider its success in meeting the original objectives of the New Towns programme. The critical aspect of the 'happy and gracious way of life' that was promised in 1946 was 'self-contained and balanced communities for work and living'. On employment self-containment, perhaps the most central tenet of New Town policy, the achievement was very impressive (Champion, 2021). As the in-commuting building workers got their houses and the new factories came during the 1950s, the degree of employment self-containment rose (Ogilvy 1968; Ogilvy 1971). By 1966, 76 per cent of jobs in Stevenage were filled by its own resident workers. Most of the rest came from nearby districts. Just 15 per cent of Stevenage resident workers commuted out, the lowest proportion of any of the Greater London New Towns (which all performed well in this respect compared to most 'normal' towns of similar size in the outer south-east region).

34   Much of the high job: home connection in New Towns depended on housing being rented from the development corporation or the local council. Such a close link would never have arisen if homes had been rented from private landlords or, still less, in the process of becoming owner-occupied. A further key factor that virtually guaranteed this proximity of work to home was that, to get a Development Corporation house in Stevenage, it was almost essential to have a local job there or employment skills relevant to local labour market needs. By 1978, job-related categories had accounted

for 74 per cent of all housing allocations, and in the earlier years that dominance had been near-total. Most new arrivals were directly nominated for housing by an employer (Balchin 1980: 174-5). There was also a central government scheme named variously over time as the Linkage Scheme, the Industrial Selection Scheme and finally as the New and Expanded Towns Scheme (NETS) (Aldridge 1978: 108-13; Cullingworth 1979: 399-415). These identified suitably skilled workers from London who could be matched with available New Town jobs. (In practice, however, these schemes were cumbersome and unpopular with employers.)

35   Self-containment could also be understood in other ways, such as proximity to a full range of public and private services (Balchin 1980: 213-33). In providing most of these, Stevenage performed well. In the early years, the old town of Stevenage was able to provide for the growing population but from 1958 the first shops, other services and amenities began to open in the newly built pedestrianised town centre. At the more local level, the services within neighbourhood units appeared, broadly in step (if usually with a slight time lag) with the growth of housing and population. In Broadwater (neighbourhood 3), for example, the most distant from the existing old town, the first housing appeared in 1953, the church in 1955, the new neighbourhood shopping parade in 1957 and the local public house the same year. Temporary local shops were provided in the interim. The record on schools and health facilities was though a little more mixed. These were provided by public authorities that covered a wider area than the New Town, mainly the county council. These were inevitably less responsive to Stevenage's particular needs than the Development Corporation or the district council. There was much improvisation in creating local school accommodation, so that long term intentions for local neighbourhood schools took some time to be realised. As in most New Towns, health and especially hospital services proved the most difficult to provide in step with growth. The Lister Hospital in Stevenage was only opened in 1972 and, even then, lacking the full range of services.

A balanced community?

36   The issue of what the term 'balanced communities' should mean was much less clear-cut. If it implied that New Towns should have a similar social mix to the population as a whole, then the success of Stevenage was at best a qualified one. In particular, the main ways in which Stevenage's residents were selected had important exclusionary social consequences, especially during the 1950s and 1960s (Aldridge 1978: 122-3). Thus there was a much lower proportion of unskilled workers in Stevenage (and its fellow New Towns) than the congested urban areas from which they came and whose multiple problems the New Towns were intended to ease. There were simply far fewer unskilled jobs in the new industries found in Stevenage than in the more congested parts of Greater London.

37   The overwhelming emphasis in housing allocation, especially in the early years, was also on male employment. The prevailing assumption was that men would be the breadwinners who would then support their wives (and children) (Moss 1968). So the ability to get a house largely reflected the man's job. Only slowly was the reality of women working outside the home and being important contributors to household income recognised. This emphasis on employment had other important consequences for the social balance of New Towns like Stevenage because it inherently discouraged

retired or disabled migrants moving to them, again contrasting with the older urban areas. Over time, however, this was eased to allow older or more dependent relatives to join their extended families, often when directly work-related housing demands were lower. In Stevenage, however, this only began to occur to any extent in the 1970s, so that its age structure by 1980 was becoming more 'normal'. By 1978, for example, 8 per cent of Stevenage Development Corporation's total housing allocations had been to parents of New Town residents (Balchin 1980: 174-5).

38   Finally, the system was also racially exclusive, with persistent underrepresentation of non-white ethnic minorities in the New Towns. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, many Commonwealth immigrants either lacked or were not recognised as having skills suitable for most New Town jobs. This did, however, contrast with the Irish building workers, including many unskilled, who moved to Stevenage to work and for some, to settle (Irish Network Stevenage, 2013). In contrast to Irish immigrants, typically longer settled in British cities, the more recent immigrants from the Commonwealth, mainly the West Indies, India and Pakistan (then also including what is now Bangladesh) were disadvantaged by local housing policies in the 'exporting' areas of London. These based entitlement to council housing partly on length of residence in that area, something which was then reproduced in New Town housing allocations. Over time, however, this has changed, especially since the 1970s. Yet, even in 1991, just 3.8 per cent of Stevenage's population were non-white (Wrench, Brar and Martin 1993: 146). In 2011, the figure stood at 12.3 per cent non-white, still below, if closer to the 14 per cent in England and Wales as a whole (https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/microsites/herts-insight/). It was, however, much lower than the 28 per cent non-white in Watford, the most metropolitan part of Hertfordshire.

39   It is, of course, arguable that these social characteristics would have arisen anyway. Young, upper working-class families were more ambitious to improve their lives than the less skilled. Even as more women became employed, men's income typically remained higher so family housing decisions would tend to have been based largely on that. Historically, the old and disabled have rarely led migration flows. And there were (for several reasons) strong clustering tendencies amongst recent Commonwealth migrants, affecting their willingness to disperse from metropolitan areas. But the system by which Stevenage and other New Towns were populated *reinforced* all these factors. By the 1970s criticisms were growing that the New Towns had 'creamed off' more able and ambitious working-class populations from the big cities, leaving an increasingly dependent and problem-prone population behind (Aldridge 1978: 146-56). The more extreme argument was that the New Towns had created the newly recognised 'inner city problem'. Yet this was much exaggerated: most jobs in the New Towns had not resulted from factory relocations out of the congested inner urban areas and most people who left these areas did not actually end up in New Towns. But perhaps the New Towns were not, any longer, the solution to the (changing) problems of the big cities that Abercrombie had envisaged.

40   New Towns such as Stevenage were also socially exclusionary in another way. Almost from the outset it became clear that the hopes that higher socio-economic groups such as managers and higher professionals would live there to create a genuine social class mix would not be realised. Part of the reason, as noted, was the 'branch plant' nature of many early New Town economies which meant there were fewer of such groups working there. Yet overwhelming preponderance of public rental housing was also a

deterrent to such groups. This issue became a much wider one when home ownership became an increasingly popular aspiration during the 1960s. Now it was feared that the more affluent working class that predominated in Stevenage society would follow suit if they could not buy housing in Stevenage (and most other New Towns).

41   There was a national policy recognition of this and in 1966 government policy shifted to favour a 50:50 housing tenure balance in all New Towns, similar to the national average at that time (Aldridge 1978: 92-102). More encouragement of private house-building in New Towns followed. Yet major housing developers were not easily persuaded that building-for-sale markets in places like Stevenage were going to be sufficiently strong, particularly in the early years. The easier option was to sell development corporation housing to tenants. This consequently began to be encouraged in New Towns (well before the Thatcher Government's general 'right-to-buy' policy was introduced in 1980). After some initial hesitancy, the effect in Stevenage during the 1970s was spectacular. In 1972 just 16.1 per cent of the town's households were owner occupiers. By 1978 it was 37.8 per cent. This was the most dramatic rise in any New Town (though still below the national average at the time). Since then, sales of both former rented housing and new privately-built housing have grown much more, though without owner-occupation in Stevenage ever quite reaching the national average.

The 'afterlife' of Stevenage New Town

42   By the time the Stevenage Development Corporation was abolished in 1980, the ownership of New Town assets and much of the initiative for change and development were already moving to other hands. Thus the creation of a major new park for the New Town at Fairlands Valley, opened in 1972, was left entirely to the local council (https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/leisure-culture-and-wellbeing/parks-and-open-spaces/fairlands-valley-park/history-of-fairlands-valley-park). A more direct example of shifting authority had affected the rental housing stock. Alongside continuing house sales to sitting tenants, all the Development Corporation's remaining rental housing, then amounting to some 15,000 dwellings, was transferred to Stevenage Borough Council in 1978-80 (Balchin 1980: 323-30). This new body had been formed in 1973 to supersede the former urban district council, although with the same tightly drawn boundaries, limited to the New Town itself. By 1978 it served a population close to 75,000 people and has continued to grow so that the mid-year estimated population in 2020 was approximately 88,000.

43   The actual winding up of the Development Corporation in July 1980 would hitherto have normally involved a straightforward transfer of remaining assets, mainly of industrial and commercial properties and any undeveloped land, to the successor Commission for the New Towns (Balchin 1980: 331-44). However, because the winding up had been delayed, it actually came after the new Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher was elected, which had important consequences. The new government determined that this transfer would require these assets be sold to generate funds to accelerate completion of the rest of the New Towns programme. Although the Development Corporation and the Borough Council tried to fight this by promoting a local Act of Parliament, this proved unsuccessful and the new government essentially prevailed (Ashby and Hills 2010: 205-16). In contrast to its original style of

operation, like a lower key version of the development corporations, the Commission for the New Towns was now turned into an asset disposal body.

44   Despite this enforced shift late in its life towards Thatcherite market liberalism, Stevenage's previous history from 1946 could not be undone. Its identity as the first New Town remains strong and one that is proudly embraced by the community, rather more than in most other former New Towns, especially its near neighbours in Hertfordshire (Hatfield, Welwyn Garden City and Hemel Hempstead). Unlike those towns, on which other powerful formative factors had already exerted their influence, it remains a place shaped by the experience of being a New Town. In social and economic terms, this has left it with some problems but the legacy overall is a mixed one.

45   Much stemmed from the reality that its economic base had been built on post-war manufacturing growth, much of it in branch plants, which continued to be more manufacturing-oriented than the national average. This made it vulnerable to late twentieth-century deindustrialisation and what had been its biggest firms almost completely disappeared as major manufacturing entities. Some of them, however, have been metamorphosed into much leaner research and development-oriented entities (Ward 2016: 345-6). Aerospace, for example is now represented by MBDA and Astrium, both French-headquartered, essentially European entities that are focused respectively on missile and satellite development and technology. A similar link with the former strong computing presence in Stevenage is the data services campus of the Japanese multi-national company Fujitsu. The research centre of GlaxoSmithKline, opened in 1995, is a new arrival for Stevenage itself, though partly reflects the long-established pharmaceuticals industry in Hertfordshire.

46   There are therefore a significant number of good knowledge-oriented jobs in Stevenage. However, these do not match local labour skills in the neat dove-tailed way that was possible in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these new jobs involve significant in-commuting, mainly from surrounding areas, which Stevenage's excellent wider rail and road links have facilitated (NL & P 2015: 36-8; Champion 2021: 124-7). These, along with a slightly greater growth of out-commuting, mainly to adjoining areas and Greater London, are further eroding the old 1946 model of the self-contained New Town. Similarly, those employed households now able to buy their homes in Stevenage do not necessarily work there. The growth of the local service sector has provided many jobs but often not particularly skilled or high paying ones. Certainly, resident workers in some of the first new neighbourhoods of the New Town, particularly those where public (now council) rental housing remains dominant, have become more dependent on lower skill jobs and generally more vulnerable to social problems. Although certainly changing, the traditional lack of emphasis on receiving (or providing) post-16 and post-18 education in Stevenage that dates from its time of manufacturing prosperity continues to resonate in such areas.

Conclusion

47   In the early 21st century, New Towns like Stevenage have been primarily remembered in the UK, rightly or wrongly, as expensive and overly planned, 'top-down' exercises in urban development. This is beginning to change as more of them have celebrated significant birthdays with public events that have showcased their histories and

achievements. Yet scarcely anyone would now see them as exact models for future development. In the changed times since 1980, the relevance of the original concept of the New Town and its objectives were increasingly questioned. This came on top of the earlier weaknesses and limitations that have here been identified. Yet it would be harsh, on this basis, to regard them, and especially Stevenage, as unsuccessful. For all the present mismatches between local jobs and skills, it has a robust local economy and a resident population that generally value it as a place to live. Its housing stock is largely of good quality and modestly priced by regional standards.

48   Behind this there is also a bigger point, that the first New Towns such as Stevenage were testaments to a truly noble and, at the time, widely accepted early post-war belief. They demonstrated that it was possible and worthwhile to give ordinary (if not all) working people a decent home and setting for their lives that did not simply depend on their individual abilities to compete in the market. In large numbers, they grasped that opportunity and made new lives for themselves and their families. They were part of a profound post-war social change that was occurring across Britain and whose full significance we have barely begun to grasp (Clapson 1998). Faced in the UK today with a massive crisis of housing availability and affordability, we can still be inspired today by the idealism that gave rise to them, even while recognising that a different way to mobilise that idealism would be needed to address the problems of today (cf. Colenutt 2021: especially 44).

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ABSTRACTS

After some wartime planning, the British New Towns were launched in 1945-6 by the post-war Labour government. The New Towns were essentially statist, top-down initiatives to relieve the problems of congested urban areas and intended as self-contained and balanced communities for work and living. This paper critically examines the experience of Stevenage, the first New Town (designated November 1946), in light of changing political, economic and social circumstances at local and national levels. Its early years were very unsuccessful in fulfilling the foundational aims of the programme. This reflected a combination of strong local opposition, excessive government impatience and clumsy management so that, before 1951, it had a very poor record of housing completions. The 1950s and 1960s were highly successful for Stevenage's growth and, to a large extent, in meeting the foundational aims of New Towns. It was outstandingly successful in becoming self-contained as regards employment. There were however limitations in the extent to which it was a socially balanced community that was truly relieving the problems of Greater London, whence most of its new arrivals had come. Because new residents gained house tenancies in Stevenage on the basis of the main breadwinner's job, there was soon an upper working-class/lower middle-class predominance. The unskilled working class, ethnic minorities and older people were markedly underrepresented, present in much lower proportions than in congested inner London. There was also underrepresentation of managers, higher professional groups or the self-employed, reflecting both residential choices and the branch plant nature of its manufacturing economy. Several of these aspects became more problematic during the 1970s and 1980s, as the weaknesses of inner metropolitan areas grew. There were efforts henceforth to make housing tenancies less directly related to jobs. However, in 1980 the Stevenage Development Corporation was wound up and, during its final years, initiative had already been passing to other hands. Its rental housing stock was transferred to the local council while home ownership also grew markedly during the 1970s. The shift to private initiative went further when the Conservative Government after 1979 insisted that industrial and commercial assets soon be sold to help finance the remaining New Towns in the programme. These important and continuing changes, together with wider shifts such as manufacturing job decline, rise of service employment, growing car-based mobility and growing place of women in employment had

further impacts for Stevenage. They raised further questions about how far it fulfilled the original New Town conception and whether that conception was even any longer relevant. The last section shows that Stevenage, although continuing to be an attractive location for employers, is now a much less self-contained and balanced community than in earlier decades.

Le programme des villes nouvelles britanniques a été lancé en 1945-46 par le gouvernement travailliste sur la base de rapports publiés pendant la guerre. Ces villes nouvelles étaient de initiatives étatistes, hiérarchiques, menées afin de soulager les problèmes de surpeuplement des villes britanniques ; elles étaient censées devenir des cités autonomes et indépendantes des grandes zones urbaines.
Cet article examine l'expérience conduite à Stevenage, la première ville nouvelle (décidée en 1946) à la lumière de changements contextuels aux niveaux national et local dans les domaines politique, économique et social. Il cherche à évaluer dans quelle mesure le développement de la ville a répondu aux ambitions du projet initial dans le domaine du logement, de la mixité sociale et de l'emploi. Il vise aussi à mesurer l'impact de l'abolition de la *development corporation* dans les années 1980 sur l'évolution de la ville et avance un bilan au début des années 2020.

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