

Ninety Years of Standing Up for Hertfordshire's Countryside: the History of CPRE Hertfordshire

2. London and Hertfordshire in the early 20th century

The London County Council (LCC) started to build estates to house slum dwellers early in the 20th century on the outer edges of urbanised London. Here there was also huge growth in private estates of small houses, sometimes in areas where larger houses had been demolished.

Immediately after the First World War there was a major effort to build new houses under the 'Homes for Heroes' campaign. In 1918 the radius of London was approximately six miles; by 1939 it was variously seven to 11 miles, and further still along the principal transport routes. Between the wars London's urban area quadrupled, with 700,000 houses built in outer London, although the population increased only by 10% since densities in the new estates were much lower, and many people had moved beyond the LCC area. At the same time the population of the inner London boroughs declined, as offices and shops replaced houses, and slums were demolished. This 'doughnut' effect was only reversed in the 1980s.

After 1919 the shape of London became circular, as land between the fingers of development along the radial railway and road routes was also developed. North of the Thames the most dramatic growth between the wars was in Middlesex, much of it promoted by the expansion of the underground railway system. Edgware was a rural village in Middlesex in 1921, until the (now) Northern line was extended out from Hampstead and Golders Green in 1923-4. By the late 1930s Edgware's population had increased tenfold, and that of nearby Hendon rose by 90,000 between 1921 and 1939.



Edgware and Hendon in 1920 (above) and 1945 (below)



In Hertfordshire the rate of suburbanisation in the south of the county, which took off after 1870, increased after 1900, due to the ever-growing number of London commuters coming to live here. The larger towns developed economically as well: St Albans, Watford and Hemel Hempstead more or less doubled in size between 1860 and 1914. Villages like Radlett, Bushey and Borehamwood also grew. All had railway stations, which at this time were the foci of growth. There were areas of nearly identical terraces as well larger detached and semi-detached houses in more spacious streets, before 1914 mainly in developments of under 50 acres.

There was no what we now call planning, and areas were simply bought by speculative builders. The roads were usually adopted by local councils once built. Councils also had to expand local sewerage networks, with disastrous effects on local rivers such as the Colne. Water and gas supplies were laid on in a very ad hoc basis with no overall planning. Electricity, first supplied in the county from 1900, was only widespread in urban and suburban areas after 1920. The process of laying services, seen below in Kent in the 1930s, must have been hugely disruptive to local communities. Very rural areas had to wait for both piped water and electricity until after 1945.



Chipping Barnet and East Barnet, then in Hertfordshire, have the dubious claim to fame as the first settlements in the county to be connected to London, as early as 1900, along the principal roads. This was due in part to the electric tramway which connected Barnet to Highgate. London's furthest tentacle into Hertfordshire before 1914 spread up the Lea Valley in an almost continuous line of development all the way to Hoddesdon.

The Metropolitan railway line first reached Hertfordshire in the 1880s, but its progressive electrification after 1905 provided a huge stimulus to development along the line - creating what was later dubbed 'Metroland' - although much of it was built before 1914 in places like Chorleywood. The Met was extended to Watford in 1926 and stimulated further growth in west Watford.

The exception to this haphazard process was Letchworth, where 23,000 acres had been purchased by the First Garden City Company in 1902 in the parishes of Letchworth, Willian and Norton (combined population 566). The original plan was to build on 1,250 acres and retain a protective belt of 2,500 acres of farmland. Spacious roads were planned and electricity and water supplied by the Company. Rents from leased houses partly funded community facilities.

The resulting pattern of winding streets, open grass, gardens, variety of designs, retention of mature trees, and provision of community facilities and factory buildings became the norm for later town planning.

The county's population was just over 258,000 at the 1901 census. In the ten years after 1901 the county's population grew by another 20%, only slowing due to the impact of the war years, and by 1921 it reached 333,000.

The impact of car ownership

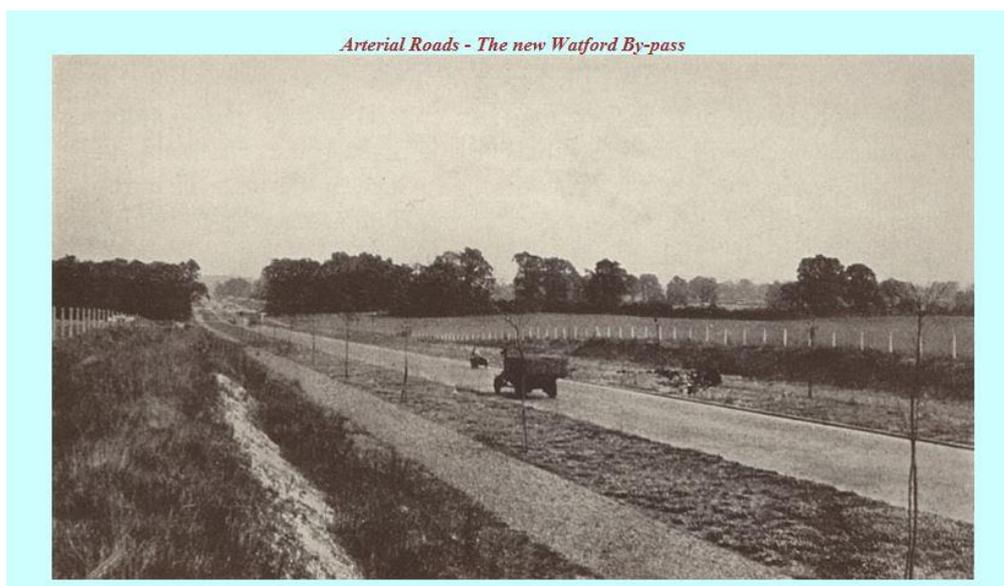
Although at the start of the 20th century the age of the internal combustion engine had already begun, the first petrol stations only arrived in 1920, thereafter facilitating a huge increase in vehicle numbers. The rapid spread of car ownership and electricity supplies made it possible for many more people to live beyond the network of public transport for the first time. This freedom to live in more rural locations had a significant impact in the county. There was a rapid expansion of housing into rural areas, many within woodland. Former landed estates sold to pay death duties, or because the First World War deprived the families of heirs, supplied some of this land, for example at Ashridge and Panshanger. The latter helped to establish Welwyn Garden City. Elsewhere many landowners sold portions of their land for housing.

Owners of land fronting roads of all types sold off individual plots of land for houses all over the county, a process which became known as ribbon development. This was popular not least because the landowners did not have the expense of providing access roads. By the 1920s the impact of ribbon development was becoming a national scandal, and was one of the driving forces behind the foundation of CPRE in 1926. Look at any map of Hertfordshire, and you will see lines of houses running along roads leading away from railway stations, in the Gade Valley between Watford and Hemel Hempstead for example.

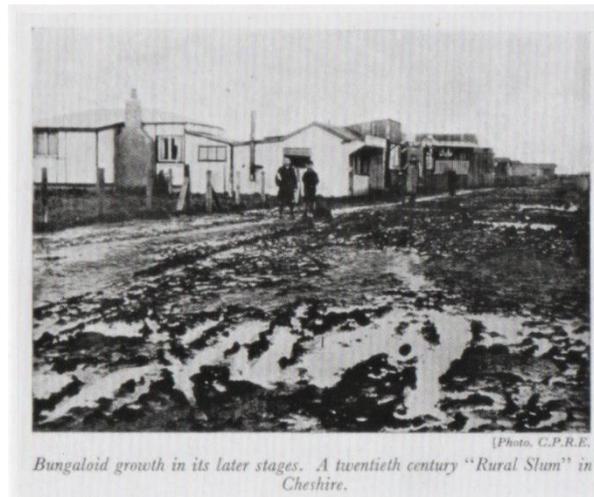
Substantial estates with roads and services were laid out in many Hertfordshire towns between the wars: in particular large new estates on the northern edge of Watford and in St Albans. A growing network of bus services served these areas.

The acceleration of urbanisation of Hertfordshire after the First World War was mirrored throughout England. It is estimated that one third of all the modern English housing stock was built between 1919 and 1939.

As well as housing, the county's farmland was lost to industry, parks and playing fields, and new roads. By-passes around Watford and Barnet were built in the 1920s, and the North Orbital road was begun in the 1930s but never completed. New roads and buildings demanded a great deal of concrete and other aggregate-based material, which was extracted from the Lea and Colne valleys, quarrying deposits laid down by an earlier course of the river Thames and by the Anglian ice-sheet. The photo below was published in the Regional Planning Report for Hertfordshire in 1927.



Another interwar phenomenon was the plotlands - agricultural land and woodland bought cheaply by speculators and sold off in small plots, often with no services or surfaced roads, which became filled with a ramshackle collection of dwellings. Such areas were common in the Chilterns. The example below is in Cheshire.



While in the inter-war period much development was, like that before 1914, haphazard if larger in scale than earlier building, Welwyn Garden City was planned, as its predecessor at Letchworth had been. Built after 1919 on 1,690 acres from the Panshanger Estate and a further 689 acres brought from Lord Salisbury, it was designed by Louis de Soissons, a Canadian-born architect.

This is an early version of the plan for the new settlement.



By the mid 1920s the level of alarm about the loss of countryside in Hertfordshire and elsewhere was increasing, but at that time there was little which could be done to stem the seemingly unstoppable tide of development. The next article looks at the start of the countryside protection movement and the birth of CPRE, nationally and in Hertfordshire.

