

PORT SUNLIGHT

Exploring the garden village of Port Sunlight, and its museum, will provide a unique historical insight into both the working and personal life of the Sunlight Soap Factory employees, and their families. The standard of living in the village, for even the most humble of residents, far exceeded the social squalor and inequality normally associated with the industrial worker. Therefore, it has to be remembered that the picture you see before you, is not a true representation of social standards among the working classes during (and even after) the Victorian era – Port Sunlight was the exception, not the norm.

It is difficult to explore Port Sunlight garden village without wanting to scrutinise its creator, Lord William Hesketh Leverhulme. However, for this article we will acknowledge that the entrepreneurial genius of an academic non-achiever, from a relatively low middle-class background, was able to amass a fortune through soap manufacturing to provide the funding, and vision, that created the idyllic domesticated landscape of Port Sunlight. Some may advocate that Lord Leverhulme's attempt to address the inequality, or treat the working classes with some humanity and dignity, is the foundation for Port Sunlight's prominence and popularity. It is not just a quaint English village landscape, it is a historic record and statement to the need for social reform.

Port Sunlight took its name from the Lever Brothers most popular product, Sunlight Soap, which was the world's first packaged and branded soap. Growing demand for the Lever



Sundial in the Diamond Garden

Brother products required expansion from their leased factory in Warrington. Marsh land at Bromborough Pool, adjacent to Bebington on the Wirral Peninsula, was identified as an ideal location to sustain Lever Brother's vision to meet future growth for both factory production and a planned workers village. In addition to the scale of the area, the site was in close proximity to the River Mersey and adjacent to road and rail transport links. All of which would aid the supply of manufacturing ingredients and the efficient global distribution of finished soap products. Apart from a few slum dwellings and the remains of an old cement works, the site was relatively sparse. But the marsh and ravines would prove challenging to the architects and builders. By final completion approximately 25 acres of tidal ravines and gutters had to be filled to a height above high tide of the River Mersey. Once dried out the ravines would eventually be utilised for the village recreation and park grounds, including an open air theatre and swimming pool.



Hulme Hall

A ceremonial cutting of the turf was undertaken by Elizabeth Lever (William's wife) on the 3rd March 1888 and signified the first phase of construction works. The initial purchase of 56 acres had cost William £200 per acre with 24 acres allocated for business and the remaining 32 for the village. By the time of its completion in 1914 Port Sunlight estate would eventually increase to 230 acres, of which 140 were dedicated to the village. William had a keen interest in architecture and is quoted as saying "I have always wished that I had been an architect". This aspiration to design and build was reinforced by his meticulous supervision of every design aspect of both factory and village. Warrington based architect William Owen was a personal friend of Lord Leverhulme and was responsible (overseen by Lord Leverhulme) for the first phase of construction. By the close of 1889 the factory and 28 dwellings were complete and occupied. On the 28th November 1891, the first public building to be completed was Gladstone Hall and was



Dell Bridge and Lyceum

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opened by its namesake, the then British Prime Minister, William Gladstone.

Although William Owen, and his son Segar, would have further design influence in the village (including the Lady Lever Art Gallery) other famous names including Sir Edwin Lutyens and John Douglas, would add individuality to civic buildings and groups of cottages. By the time of its total completion over 30 architects would have been employed in the design of Port Sunlight. Extravagant structural features and contrasting architectural styles ensured picturesque cohesion, but avoided any monotonous uniformity.

Regardless of the architect, all blocks of cottages were constructed to ensure that only the front façade would be visible from the road, and the rear courtyard of each property was hidden from view. Most groups of houses radiated outwards from an allotment garden area, also hidden from general view.



Colourful view of Lower Road

These garden plots were popular with the residents and encouraged the keeping of poultry and growing vegetables. Each cottage was fronted by a garden all of which (at a cost of 3d per week) were maintained by the Lever estate. The garden maintenance programme was introduced after some residents failed to keep their gardens in a manner that befitted the atheistic vista of the village. This maintenance policy aptly illustrates the importance that Lord Leverhulme had placed on visual perfection. Views of the actual factory walls were also subtly softened with shrubs and tree lined avenues.

With the exception of some larger houses, there were predominantly two types of dwellings; the parlour and cottage. The cottage dwelling had three bedrooms upstairs, while downstairs contained a kitchen, bathroom, scullery, living room and larder. A parlour house was slightly larger with an extra bedroom upstairs and a parlour room downstairs. By modern domestic expectations this internal layout may seem very basic, but by Victorian standards this was luxury. Especially unusual for the era, is that every house had an indoor bathroom and running water. On average rents were charged at between one fifth and one quarter of each tenant's weekly wage, which included rates, taxes, repairs and maintenance. Building costs for each type of property increased over the 26 year



Spring View of Wood Street

construction project, with the cottage type house initially costing £200 and rising to £350, whilst the cottage style property started at £350 with the last of these houses costing £550. A village hospital, shops, school, church, theatre, gymnasium, outdoor swimming pool, recreational sports facilities, parks, tearooms and adult learning institutions ensured a self-contained, harmonious and very contented village community.

In all, the total cost of the 140 acre village site, including roads, houses, parks, civic institutions etc. is estimated to have cost Lord Lever over £350,000. Which, at today's value is approximately £35 million.

Since its completion in 1914 the village has witnessed a limited number of alterations, most of which have been dictated through changing social trends and improved living standards. Many of the public buildings have now changed use, with some being converted to residential accommodation. The outdoor swimming pool and auditorium have long gone as have the, so called, Shake-



Spring Time at Causeway Garden

speare Cottages. Major village additions since 1914 include the Lady Lever Art Gallery, raised rose garden at the south end of the Diamond garden (which contains a commemoration to the 1989 Hillsborough Disaster), the garden centre (which is situated on the site of the former outdoor swimming pool), the Leverhulme Memorial and the Sir William Goscombe John designed war memorial – the latter of which is Grade I listed.



Village Monuments & Sculptures



As part of a 1960's and 70's improvement plan the internal layout and facilities of each house were modernised, during which most of the garden allotments were converted to rear gardens and garages. In 1965 the Department for Media Sport & Culture declared that practically all of Port Sunlight houses, civic buildings and public structures are Grade II listed, whilst in 1978 the local council designated the village as a conservation area.

Very few Port Sunlight factory employees now live in the village and over half the housing stock has been sold to private tenants, with strict legal covenants. In 1999 the management of the village was passed to the Port Sunlight Village Trust, whose primary objective is to "preserve the land and buildings within the Port Sunlight Conservation Area".

Whilst each village dwelling, public structure and monument have an individual tale to tell, it is the village of Port Sunlight in its entirety that has an important and fascinating historical story to divulge.

As you explore the village it is easy to envisage a harmonious community of bygone days, whose residents were protected from the domestic squalor associated with the Victorian industrial era. You may also feel (as I did) slightly envious of those who currently reside in this gently modernised version of a picturesque garden village. It still seems that the village boundaries are, perhaps unwittingly, still protecting its inhabitants from the social issues that blight many UK housing estates. In a historical context, Port Sunlight may have demonstrated to other industrialists, land owners and government how workers should be treated and communities provided for, perhaps it still is.