

H. G. WELLS AND 'THE HOUSING PROBLEM'

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Throughout his career, H. G. Wells interested himself in the challenges arising from the human need for shelter, and the complex social, political and economic questions that this entailed in the modern world. His interest was intellectual and practical, aesthetic and political, utopian and sociological. He expressed it in his realist novels, in his futurological and utopian projections, and (with the help of architects, builders and engineers) in bricks and mortar. This essay examines aspects of Wells's engagement with what one of the chapter headings of *Kipps* (1905) labels as 'The Housing Problem', arguing that this was not simply one problem amongst many that Wells explored and tried to solve, but was integral to his artistic and political thinking, from his early engagement with socialism, through his exploration of utopias, to his campaigning for the World State.¹ Moreover, Wells was entering a vigorous and significant debate: those seeking to address the problem of how to design and build a house, and in what shape and configuration with other houses, were confronting some of the most fundamental questions of human society and organisation.

Problems

Wells's fascination with – and anxiety about – housing and its effect on humanity was evident even in his emergence into consciousness, as represented in the second chapter of *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934): 'This brain of mine came into existence and began to acquire reflexes and register impressions in a needy shabby home in a little town called Bromley in Kent', 'one of a row of badly built houses upon a narrow section of the High Street'.² The domestic environment, he added, is significant not only from a 'biological' but also from a 'sociological' perspective, and its defects include a 'murderously narrow' staircase, inconveniently twisted, leading 'downstairs to a completely subterranean kitchen, lit by a window which derived its light from a grating on the street level, and a bricked scullery, which, since the house was poised on a bank, opened into the yard at the ground level below'. The coal cellar 'held about a ton of coal, and when the supply was renewed it had to be carried in sacks through the shop and "parlour" and down the staircase by men who were apt to be uncivil about the inconveniences of the task and still more apt to drop small particles of coal along the route.' There was 'an earth jakes over a cesspool' in the yard, and a water pump merely twenty feet away (38). In the yard – in which the infant Wells played and, like Artie Kipps, 'learnt its every

¹ H. G. Wells, *Kipps*, ed. Simon J. James (London: Penguin, 2005). Subsequent page references will be indicated in parentheses in the text.

² H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, (2 vols., London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 38.

detail' – was a gutter leading to a soak away, where it would mingle with the well water and 'the graver accumulations of the "closet"' (40).³ Several elements that reappear in Wells's writings were present in 47 High Street – constricted staircases, subterranean working areas, dirty fuel, and the absence of any system of sanitation. (Wells's expressions of horror at poor sanitation seems almost Orwellian in their intensity and frequency.) He observes similar features, for example, in the 'jerry-built unalterable homes' of London's Euston Road where he lodged:

Each had an ill-lit basement with kitchen, coal cellars and so forth, below the ground level. [...] No bathroom was provided and at first the plumbing was of a very primitive kind. Servants were expected to be cheap and servile and grateful, and most things, coal, slops, and so forth had to be carried by hand up and down the one staircase. (275)

47 High Street, Bromley thus gave Wells raw material for his imagination, and his first case study in biological and sociological studies that he would pursue throughout his life.

Wells emphasized what this house, and others, did to his mother. Sarah Wells was 'a distressed overworked little woman [...] engaged in a desperate single-handed battle with our gaunt and dismal home, to keep it clean, to keep her children clean, to get them clothed and fed and taught, to keep up appearances' (69). His conclusion that the nineteenth-century house created, sustained, and exacerbated unproductive and socially harmful gender roles is another feature repeated throughout his writings on the subject. This is at its clearest in the Kentish houses put up by speculative builders that Artie and Ann Kipps are taken to view by their house-agent:

And the plan was invariably inconvenient, invariably. All the houses they saw had a common quality for which she could find no word, but for which the proper word is 'incivility'. 'They build these 'ouses,' she said, 'as though girls wasn't 'uman beings.' Sid's social democracy had got into her blood, perhaps, and anyhow they went about discovering the most remarkable inconsiderateness in the contemporary house. 'There's kitching stairs to go up, Artie!' Ann would say. 'Some poor girl's got to go up and down, up and down, and be tired out, jest because they haven't the sense to leave enough space to give their steps a proper rise – and no water upstairs anywhere – every drop got to be carried! It's 'ouses like this wear girls out.' (281)

³ Kipps 'knew all the stones in the yard individually, the creeper in the corner, the dustbin and the mossy wall, better than many men know the faces of their wives' (8).

Ann draws the inevitable conclusion, that domestic architecture is simply another way of ensuring the continuance of gender hierarchies: "'It's 'aving 'ouses built by men, I believe, makes all the work and trouble".'

Connected with this was the need for servants to which Wells drew attention in his observations in the *Autobiography* on 'the London house' as exemplified by his lodging in Euston Road: 'that bed of Procrustes to which the main masses of the accumulating population of the most swiftly growing city in the world' (275). Wells, the son of two servants, could hardly have been more familiar with the social consequences of this dependence on a servant class, and again he identified architecture as a means of perpetuating the existing – uncivilised – order. A combination of oversight, intellectual laziness and sheer self-interested malice means that Britain is condemned to a social order dependent upon an army of servants carrying out tasks which, with a little planning and forethought, would be rendered unnecessary. The social consequences of such poor design have been catastrophic: 'It is only because the thing was spread over a hundred years and not concentrated into a few weeks that history fails to realise what sustained disaster, how much massacre, degeneration and disablement of lives, was due to the housing of London in the nineteenth century' (276). Being constructed from bricks and mortar, this harmful environment was persistent – 'Once they were erected there was no getting rid of these ugly dingy pretentious substitutes for civilised housing' (275). The economic and social structure that gave rise to it ('a regime of unrestricted private enterprise') was, Wells suggested, more resilient still, and continued even into the mid-twentieth century: 'It is only now, after a century, that the weathered and decaying lava of this mercenary eruption is being slowly replaced – by new feats of private enterprise almost as greedy and unforeseeing' (274-5). He made a related point in *Anticipations* (1901-02):

A servant is necessary in the small, modern house, partly to supplement the deficiencies of the wife, but mainly to supplement the deficiencies of the house. [...] But the great proportion of the servant's duties consists merely in drudgery that the stupidities of our present-day method of house construction entail, and which the more sanely constructed house of the future will avoid.⁴

The same is true in the town as in the city, as the Kippses discover when house-hunting in Folkestone and its environs. 'The new houses,' are, as in Wells's London, 'the product of speculative building', and are simply not built to a

⁴ H. G. Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1902), 106.

sufficient standard: they are, Ann observes, full of damp, 'and even the youngest of these that had been in use showed remarkable signs of a sickly constitution – the plaster flaked away, the floors gaped, the paper moulded and peeled, the doors dropped, the bricks were scaled, and the railings rusted' (282). The house they rent has:

a basement, no service lift, blackleading to do everywhere, no water upstairs, no bathroom, vast sash windows to be cleaned from the sill, stone steps with a twist and open to the rain, into the coal-cellar, insufficient cupboards, unpaved path to the dustbin, no fireplace to the servant's bedroom, no end of splintery wood to scrub – in fact, a very typical English middle-class house. (284)

It is typical in its inefficiency and hence the need for servants, and a typical Wells house in its stairs, its lack of systematic sanitation, its dirt. Even where the speculative jerry-builders have not been at work, domestic architecture remains a conspiracy to ensure the continuance of a servant class, as in the large houses they view in Folkestone:

They had huge windows that demanded vast curtains in mitigation, countless bedrooms, acreage of stone steps to be cleaned, kitchens that made Ann protest. She had come so far towards a proper conception of Kipps' social position as to admit the prospect of one servant. 'But lor!' she would say, 'you'd want a man-servant in this 'ouse.' (281-2).

This philosophy of design – unthinking to the point of malevolence – is also evident in the Bromstead in Kent of *The New Machiavelli* (1911), in which Remington recalls his father's inheritance of 'big clumsy residences in the earliest Victorian style, interminably high and with deep damp basements and downstairs coal-cellars and kitchens that suggested an architect vindictively devoted to the discomfort of the servant class'.⁵ For the Kippses, a reasonable expectation of efficiency and utility is met with a sarcastic response by their house-agent: "'You'll have to build a house," said the house-agent, sighing wearily, "if you want all that"' (283).

Kipps dramatises and analyses the problem through the planning and partial construction of the new house. Kipps and Ann start with the best of intentions – a small, efficient, functional house – but they are pulled off course by their architect who, for his own self-interested reasons, wants to build them a house that is far bigger than they need, based on a lazy amalgamation of three existing designs (287). The architect foists requirements on his clients, talks them into adding room

⁵ H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli*, ed. Simon J. James (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 21-2.

after room, and finally offers a choice of three designs. The first is large but in 'a plain style', the second has additional features (conservatory, bow windows, two gables, verandah), but the third – which the Kippses accept – is 'quite fungoid with External Features, and honeycombed with Internal ones':

It was, he said, 'practically a mansion,' and altogether a very noble fruit of the creative mind of man. It was, he admitted, perhaps almost too good for Hythe; his art had run away with him and produced a modern mansion in 'the best Folkestone style'; it had a central hall with a staircase, a Moorish gallery, and a Tudor stained-glass window, crenelated battlements to the leading over the portico, an octagonal bulge with octagonal bay windows, surmounted by an Oriental dome of metal, lines of yellow bricks to break up the red and many other richnesses and attractions. It was the sort of house, ornate and in its dignified way voluptuous, that a city magnate might build, but it seemed excessive to the Kippses. The first plan had seven bedrooms, the second eight, the third eleven; they had, the architect explained, 'worked in' as if they were pebbles in a mountaineer's boot. (290)

The problem, then, is that there are customs and vested interests that militate against functionality and efficiency. This is not merely a local problem, as the narrator makes clear with an apocalyptic image of 'a monster, a lumpish monster brooding over the Kippses: 'It is matter and darkness, it is the anti-soul, it is the ruling power of this land, Stupidity' (310). Stupidity, comprising thoughtlessness, lack of imagination and intellectual laziness, has dramatically adverse consequences for women, for servants, and for society as whole.

In the same year as the publication of *Kipps*, Wells considered these problems more didactically in a series of six articles commissioned by the *Daily Mail*.⁶ Significantly, this series went under the general title of 'Utopianisms', and it gave Wells plenty of scope to discuss the problems of housing. The country cottage, for example, was not the rural idyll, constructed by 'aesthetically-cultivated' city dweller who 'rides about the country on a bicycle or motor-car in fine weather', where 'the sun always shines, and nothing smells, and there are no bacteria, and no one is ever tired at all'. The 'ripe, sweet, detached cottages, as beautiful as the cottages of an appreciative water-colour' were, he insisted, 'an urban hallucination': the reality was dirt, disease, and illiteracy. These conditions of rural poverty were not accidental, but the inevitable consequence of the rural, social organization, which achieved 'the maximum of social isolation with the minimum of domestic economy.' Furthermore, as in the town and city, the poorly designed, socially isolated house or cottage depended upon a woman –

⁶ These were 'The Garden Cities', March 18 1905, issue 2784, 4; March 30 1905, 2794, 4; 'State Babies', April 20 1905, 2812, 4; 'Joint Households', June 1 1905, 2848, 6; 'A Woman's Day in Utopia', June 7 1905, 2853, 4; 'Doctors', October 7 1905, 2958.

overworked, brutalized by her environment, condemned to drudgery. Not only did this defeat her as an individual, it had a calamitous effect on posterity: 'There is no time for reading nor thought, no time for talk with the children, no time for their education.'

The nineteenth-century house, whether in the town, the city or the countryside, stands condemned in Wells's analysis. Poor design is more than inconvenient, or aesthetically displeasing: it forces women to be domestic slaves, while even those on middle incomes must employ drudges; it means that many children will grow up unloved and uneducated; and it isolates people despite their instincts to be sociable. In trying to make sense of these phenomena, Wells synthesised ideas from a tradition of radical, nineteenth-century thought, before developing his own ideas for a solution, and analysing (and for the most part rejecting) the ideas of others.

Diagnoses

As the Kippses return from honeymoon 'to find that nice *little* house, to realize that bright dream of a home they had first talked about in the grounds of the Crystal Palace' (279), the narrator points out that the condition of England can largely be judged by the condition of its houses: 'To go house-hunting is to spy out the nakedness of this pretentious world, to see what our civilization amounts to when you take away curtains and flounces and carpets, and all the fluster and distraction of people and fittings.' This disillusioned narrator concludes that Britain 'has very few nice little houses' because 'its houses are built on the ground of monstrously rich, shabbily extortionate landowners, by poor, parsimonious, greedy people in a mood of elbowing competition' (280-1). There is, then, a political and economic basis for the way we live now, and Wells's analysis – his diagnosis of the problem – began in his adolescence, in Midhurst.

He disclosed in the *Autobiography* that the two books which influenced him most in his early life were Plato's *Republic* and Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879) which he read in a 'sixpenny paper-covered edition' that sold an estimated 100,000 copies in Britain: 'These two books caught up and gave substance to a drift of dispositions and desires in my mind, that might otherwise have dispersed and left no trace' (177-8).⁷ George, an American economist, is almost unknown today but in progressive circles in late nineteenth-century Britain he was a celebrity. Fabians and anarchists alike were powerfully impressed by his message. For William Morris, *Progress and Poverty* was 'a new Gospel', while Bernard Shaw was 'thrust into the great socialist revival of 1883' and 'found that five-sixths of those who were swept in with me had been converted by Henry

⁷ For the popularity and significance of *Poverty and Progress*, see Stanley Buder, *Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 16.

George'.⁸ Among George's British converts to socialism we need to count Wells's Mr Lewisham, who, we are told, read *Progress and Poverty* alongside Morris's anarchist newspaper *Commonweal* (1885-94).⁹

George sought to answer a paradox of progress: why does poverty increase alongside prosperity? Part of his answer was the monopolisation of land by landlords. George had witnessed the acquisition of huge tracts of land in the United States by speculators, many of whom had become rich as the railroad then brought development to their real estate. He believed that these speculators had no right to the land, which in reality belonged to everyone, and that the rent derived purely from ownership was (using a phrase borrowed from John Stuart Mill) an 'unearned increment'. One of the consequences of this 'landlordism' was the enrichment of landlords and speculators at the expense of the landless (a theory modelled in the board game 'Monopoly' which ultimately derives from a game created by one of George's followers in 1904 to demonstrate 'landlordism'). George's solution was to restore land to its rightful owners, the people, through a confiscatory tax and compulsory-purchase system. Instead of rents and taxes, George advocated a single tax to be paid to the state in return for the collective management of the land.¹⁰

Wells recalled that *Progress and Poverty* 'came in like a laboratory demonstration to revivify a general theory, with his extremely simplified and plausible story of the progressive appropriation of land, his attack upon the unearned increment of private rents and his remedy of a single tax to make, in effect, rents a collective benefit'. Like many of his contemporaries, Wells at the time connected George's theory to other radical ideas, to create a more general socialist doctrine in opposition to the prevailing capitalist economy:

It was quite easy to pass from the insistence of Henry George upon the inalienable claim of the whole community to share in the benefit of land, to the simpler aspects of interest and monetary appreciation. I became what I may call a Socialist in the Resentful Phase, and what was happening to me was happening to millions of the new generation in Europe and America. Something – none of us knew how to define it but we called it generally the Capitalist System – a complex of traditional usage, uncontrolled acquisitive energy and perverted opportunities, was wasting life for us and we were beginning to realize as much. (179)

⁸ Buder, 16.

⁹ Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity, and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 93.

¹⁰ Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, 5th edn., (London: W. Reeves, 1884). A useful summary of George's life and work can be found in Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 182-90.

Although Wells presented this as merely a phase on his journey to multilateralism, it evidently left its mark on the narrator of *Kipps*, who positions the newly-weds' frustrations at lack of suitable housing in a 'Resentful Phase Socialist' frame: Britain's 'houses are built on the ground of monstrously rich, shabbily extortionate landowners, by poor, parsimonious, greedy people in a mood of elbowing competition' (280-1). The shade of Henry George is visible here: the appropriation of land is like original sin, from which develop the inequalities and spiritual costs of a brutally competitive economic activity. Similarly, in *A Modern Utopia* (1905), the influence of George's 'unearned increment' is evident in a comment on the reasons for Utopia outlawing usury: 'The idea of a man growing richer by mere inaction [...] is profoundly distasteful to Utopian ideas'.¹¹ We can also see a more generalised social criticism at work in *Tono-Bungay* (1909) with its condemnation of the 'eighteenth-century system' of land ownership which enables social control, exemplified in Bladesover and Eastry House, and their dependent villages and towns – a system that Teddy Ponderevo castigates as 'Cold Mutton Fat! – dead and stiff!', and which suffocates enterprise because 'our Capital' is 'oozing away – into Lord Eastry's pockets for rent' (68-9).¹² Evidently Teddy is, like Henry George, a critic of the unearned increment.

Tono-Bungay also identifies another problem of housing, which loomed large in late nineteenth-century thinking – rural depopulation and the consequent migration to cities. This issue enters the novel explicitly in George's recollection of Wimbleshurst:

I'm no believer in the English countryside under the Bladesover system as a breeding-ground for honourable men. One hears a frightful lot of nonsense about the Rural Exodus and the degeneration wrought by town life upon our population. To my mind, the English townsman even in the slums is infinitely better spiritually, more courageous, more imaginative and cleaner, than his agricultural cousin. [...] It is because I know this that I do not share in the common repinings because our countryside is being depopulated, because our population is passing through the furnace of the towns. They starve, they suffer no doubt, but they come out of it hardened, they come out of it with souls.... (72)

The received wisdom that George refutes here is a familiar one from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: that degeneration was not only occurring but was a specifically urban phenomenon. Wells had already drawn attention to the

¹¹ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (1905), ed. Gregory Claeys and Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin Book, 2005), 192.

¹² H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 67-9.

'centripetal' forces of urban attraction in *Anticipations*: 'Let us consider the broad features of the redistribution of the population that has characterized the nineteenth century. It may be summarized as an unusual growth of great cities and a slight tendency to depopulation in the country. The growth of the great cities is the essential phenomenon' (33). Perhaps surprisingly, he went on to characterise the effects of this redistribution as degenerative in a wider sense, entropic, and even apocalyptic: 'Well has Mr George Gissing named nineteenth-century London in one of his great novels the "Whirlpool", the very figure for the nineteenth-century Great City, attractive, tumultuous, and spinning down to death' (44).

The moral panic that fears of urban degeneration engendered was a significant contribution to the drive to arrest and reverse rural depopulation, but anxiety derived not only from perceived moral effects but also real economic ones: it resulted ultimately from a collapse in land values in the second half of the century, a topic of such national importance and anxiety that a Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression sat from 1894 to 1896, producing its final report in 1897.¹³ The social consequence of these economic effects feature strongly in George Ponderevo's thinking: for example, he identifies one symptom of the Bladesover system's collapse in the sale or rent of estates to the 'pseudomorphous' (and Jewish) *nouveau riche*: one has gone to a newspaper proprietor, another to a family of brewers, while Bladesover has been let to Sir Reuben Lichtenstein, presumably a Jewish financier.¹⁴ The Bladesover system was suppressive but at least it was a system that brought land and economy together: 'Bladesover, in absorbing the whole countryside, had not altogether missed greatness' by abolishing 'the peasant habit of mind' (25-6), providing at least some education, and preserving large areas of countryside from agricultural use. Whatever its rights and wrongs, it has been displaced: the countryside might look the same, but 'our fine foliage of pretences lie glowing in the mire' (15).

Tono-Bungay ambitiously seeks to anatomise the new Britain of urban, capitalist competition that is growing saprophytically on the dead matter of Bladesover and Eastry. The novel moves, therefore, from country to city, and back to country, as Teddy follows the *nouveau riche* example to become a country landowner – not, like Reuben Lichtenstein, taking on an estate as a tenant, but building one anew. Teddy's Crest Hill was based on Lea Park near Godalming in Surrey, the unfinished stately home built by the swindler Whitaker Wright – mentioned by George in passing (350). Wright was a mining engineer and

¹³ For the political and economic issues here, see Ian Packer, 'Unemployment, Taxation and Housing: The Urban Land Question in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Britain', in *The Land Question in Britain 1750-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 201-18.

¹⁴ The anti-Semitism of this passage is clear, especially in George's comment, 'They are a very clever people, the Jews, but not clever enough to suppress their cleverness' (16).

company promoter who built up a fraudulent financial empire based around the London and Globe Company, to construct what is now London's Bakerloo Line. This unravelled in 1900 when he was found to be moving money between his companies to give a false impression of solvency. Arrested, tried, and convicted, he poisoned himself in the Royal Courts of Justice before he could be taken to prison. The story, a sensation in its day, inspired not only Wells but also Conrad, whose swindler de Barral in *Chance* (1913) is partly based on Wright.¹⁵ Built on 1,400 acres, Lea Park had thirty-two bedrooms, eleven bathrooms, a theatre, an observatory, a velodrome, stabling for fifty horses, a private hospital, three artificial lakes (including a boathouse by Lutyens), an artificial island and, under one of the lakes, a ballroom and billiard room – a detail that appears in *Tono-Bungay*.¹⁶ In turning this icon of failed Edwardian capitalism into Crest Hill, the novel amplifies the house's political and sociological significance in George's narration:

For this the armies drilled, for this the Law was administered and the prisons did their duty, for this the millions toiled and perished in suffering, in order that a few of us should build palaces we never finished, make billiard-rooms under ponds, run imbecile walls round irrational estates, scorch about the world in motor-cars, devise flying-machines, play golf and a dozen such foolish games of ball, crowd into chattering dinner parties, gamble and make our lives one vast dismal spectacle of witless waste! This was Life! It came to me like a revelation, a revelation at once incredible and indisputable of the abysmal folly of our being. (347-8)

The Bladesover system has, then, given way to a non-system that has many of the old order's drawbacks with none of its benefits: vast inequality allied to property ownership remains, but ownership does not sustain a community or an environment. Indeed, Crest Hill is not a house in the way that Bladesover or 47 High Street or old Kipps's shop in New Romney are houses: its value to its owner is symbolic, not functional.

In *Tono-Bungay*, moreover, Wells appears to have gone beyond Henry George, who identified land ownership as a principal enabler for exploitation: the new dispensation sees the reverse, with the generation of excess profits through excess production being reified in bricks and mortar. The obvious influence here is Thorstein Veblen, whose *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) propounded his

¹⁵ For a summary of Wright's career, see Robert Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 121.

¹⁶ For Lea Park – later Witley Park – see the 'Lost Heritage' website, <http://www.lostheritage.org.uk/houses/lh_surrey_witleypark.html>, accessed 15 October 2013.

famous theory of conspicuous consumption.¹⁷ Veblen's sociological approach to economics identified emulation – echoed by Wells in his use of 'pseudomorphous' to describe the *nouveau riche*, as well as Kipps's concern in his house-building that he is 'not going to be looked down upon' (296) – and predation as characteristics of economic behaviour. The leisure class, which (following Henry George) he largely equated with landowners, have used their land first to enable their predatory activities, and then to display their success through consumption. Moreover, conspicuous consumption entails conspicuous waste, a point that *Tono-Bungay* considers repeatedly, including in the passage above. The important point here is that Crest Hill is a symptom not a cause – a symptom of a new kind of economy that appears systematic but, on close inspection, is chaotically inefficient, unstable, and heading towards disaster. As George puts it:

It is curious how many of these modern financiers of chance and bluff have ended their careers by building. It was not merely my uncle. Sooner or later they all seem to bring their luck to the test of realization, try to make their fluid opulence coagulate out as bricks and mortar, bring moonshine into relations with a weekly wages-sheet. Then the whole fabric of confidence and imagination totters - and down they come.... (272)

In *Tono-Bungay*, then, Wells identified a shift in rural landownership from the landed aristocracy to a new elite for whom land was simply a resource for conspicuous consumption. The collapse in rural land values and consequent depopulation also had a more obvious effect in over-crowding and land price-inflation in the cities. As the neo-classical economist Alfred Marshall put it in the *Contemporary Review* in 1884, 'Whatever reforms be introduced into the dwellings of the London poor, it will still remain true that the whole area of London is insufficient to supply its population with fresh air and the free space that is wanted for wholesome recreation. A remedy for the overcrowding of London will still be wanted.'¹⁸ It was this issue that dominated late-Victorian and Edwardian thinking on land reform and housing, and which gave rise to a contentious national discussion on what to do next – a discussion in which Wells participated, and which shaped significantly his own utopian thinking.

Solutions

Wells repeatedly drew attention to the perceived limits on humanity's capacity for change and innovation as being largely self-imposed. As George Ponderevo,

¹⁷ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, ed. Martha Banta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Heilbroner (2000) again has a useful summary (ch. viii).

¹⁸ Quoted in Ebenezer Howard, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898), original edition with commentary by Peter Hall, Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 31.

who sees beyond those limits, comments, 'the natural thing for any one in my circumstances to do' was to 'take my world for granted' (25). Housing was a case in point: to people of his generation, Wells said in the *Autobiography*, the 'jerry-built' London house 'seemed to be as much in the nature of things as rain in September and it is only with the wisdom of retrospect, that I realize the complete irrational scrambling planlessness of which all of us who had to live in London were the victims' (275). The key-word here is 'planlessness': from the vantage point of the *Autobiography*, with its teleological development towards the 'idea of a planned world', much of what was wrong with the world (including its houses) could be attributed to the absence of an organising brain. This was true, even, of the Normal School of Science, expanding and being absorbed by bigger but equally unplanned institutions: 'It is to-day, a huge fungoid assemblage of buildings and schools without visible centre, guiding purpose or directive brain. It has become a constituent of that still vaster, still more conspicuously acephalic monster, the University of London' (209). The absence of a brain produced, as in the 'fungoid' designs for Kipps's house, a growth, not a structure. Similarly, in *Anticipations*, Wells impatiently criticised the ancient technique of bricklaying, akin to the organic formation of a coral reef, barely changed since the construction of the pyramids (89-90). Wells put his case more prosaically in the *Autobiography* when looking back on his early, Henry George-inspired socialist phase: 'at that time in the whole world there was really no explicit realization that this was due not to a system but to an absence of system' (179). However, the existence of a plan or system was not enough: it had to be the right plan – scientific, considered, and technologically informed.

One of the most advanced theorists of a planned world in Wells's fiction is Masterman in *Kipps* – not in the published novel, in which his presence was drastically reduced, but in its draft versions, recovered by Harris Wilson in 1971.¹⁹ In the published novel, Masterman is a disillusioned analyst of society, at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from the 'Folkestone set' who have tried to mould Kipps after their own image. His criticisms of wealth and society are part of Kipps's haphazard emotional development but, as Wilson has shown, he disappears from the published novel. In the draft versions, he is seriously ill when he visits Kipps and Ann in Hythe, and while convalescing, outlines his ambition to leave his mark on the world before he dies, to produce something that will challenge the 'great floundering, self-righteous and sometimes angry and blood-stained stupidity' of the world; searching for a word to describe his project, he settles on 'civilization' or 'civility' – the antonym of the quality that, according to the published text, has produced such poor examples of domestic architecture. The

¹⁹ Harris Wilson, 'The Death of Masterman: A Repressed Episode in H. G. Wells's *Kipps*', *PMLA*, 86/1 (1971), 63-9.

link between civilization and housing then becomes, in Masterman's project, material as well as verbal, as he seizes on Kipps's and Ann's house-building project as a vehicle for his utopia. "It's in the household," he said as they stood together and watched the bricklayers raising the breast-high walls of the coming house, "that the world begins anew. Make a household Kipps, a home caulked and safe, like an Ark, and in that, bring up some children" (66). Although in the published novel the Kippses are defeated by custom and their architect, at this point in the draft version they plan a house, in which 'no-one need drudge', designed on a principle of efficiency as well as humanity. Masterman comments:

'That is a fine thing to do. It's a new start upon new ideas. Build a house that civilises all who come into it. Build a house so convenient, so designed, that toil is reduced to a minimum, have no cramped and shameful quarters for the servants, give the servants as good as the mistress; better, have no servants at all, have everything pretty and light and simple from roof tree to cellar, (Kipps said that was 'jest' what he was after), and the souls of your children will grow straighter and taller than you can foresee.' (66)

However, Kipps's house is unable to support Masterman's project as it is too near completion, so Masterman develops a vision of a perfect house, and then into a perfect community which he denotes 'Little Leaven':

It was to be simple, but beautifully simple, and clean and convenient. He drew their attention to a stream that had not been discussed, which flowed through the village and worked an electric plant to light and warm and ventilate, and with that they ceased to be on a peninsula, and found themselves in a seaward valley circled in by hills. He quoted Noyes to them and explained how Little Leaven must have some manufacture to sustain it – it must indulge in no folly of tilling a space of earth – and therewith a tramway came into being athwart the place, and plunged into a tunnel with a telephone wire or so down beside it to link them to the world. (66)

Shortly before his death, Masterman extends 'this Utopia' into 'the dimensions of a city':

Masterman sat lettering it blackly, "General Map of a Projected Latter-day City, to be called provisionally Leaven City Region." A mere village community, however large, cannot print books, cannot control its mind through its own newspapers, cannot carry its higher education beyond the point where specialization begins; it can have no theatre and none but the

smallest decorative art, and so his fifty families had become fifty score and then fifty hundred and now fifty thousand, and there were now to be thousands of square miles of territory and a law and a complete political organization; Leaven had grown to be a sovereign state. And there he sat, in the circle of the gaslight, intently planning it out, gravely, as though it were something more than an unsubstantial dream. (67)

What is remarkable about this passage is its attribution of 'Utopia' in its most negative sense of 'an unsubstantial dream' to a project that is clearly based on a real 'City Region' being constructed, at the time of writing, in Hertfordshire – and constructed with financial support from H. G. Wells. Letchworth Garden City was the first realization of a remarkably innovative answer to the related problems of urban overcrowding and rural depression and depopulation. Its inspiration was Ebenezer Howard, whose *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898) began with the identification of urban overcrowding as perhaps the only political question on which there was unanimous political agreement. Howard quoted Lord Rosebery, the former chairman of the London County Council, who used a notably Wellsian metaphor to describe London as a 'tumour, an elephantiasis sucking into its gorged system half the life and the blood and the bone of the rural districts'.²⁰ Howard's solution was to combine the advantages of urban and rural living – while eliminating the disadvantages of both – in a new type of community: 'Town-Country'. Howard claimed this was the solution not only to overcrowding and depopulation, but also to a myriad of modern difficulties:

Yes, the key to the problem how to restore the people to the land [...] is indeed a Master-Key, for it is the key to a portal through which, even when scarce ajar, will be seen to pour a flood of light on the problems of intemperance, of excessive toil, of restless anxiety, of grinding poverty – the true limits of Governmental interference, ay, and even the relations of man to the Supreme Power.²¹

Town-Country, or the 'Garden City', would be utopian in its ambition but practical in its planning and development, bringing together housing, agriculture, and industry in an efficient and beautiful design, with shops, amenities, workplaces and homes all within walking distance. The first Garden City would be an experiment: if successful, it would be repeated to create Social City, a network of Garden Cities connected by modern trams and light railways, thus depopulating the cities (which would, in time, be re-engineered into Garden Cities themselves).

²⁰ Howard, *To-morrow*, 1-2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Perhaps the most innovative feature of Howard's vision was its economic basis. Henry George and other socialist and proto-socialist thinkers (such as the eighteenth-century radical Thomas Spence who, like George, advocated communal ownership of the land), and Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1887), were all early influences on Howard, but he was also strongly influenced by his acquaintance Alfred Marshall, whose neoclassical economic theories ran counter to George's, and who promoted 'home colonies' as a means of relocating both work and workers outside the cities.²² What Howard came up with was a synthesis of socialist and neo-classical economic thinking in which Garden City's land would be owned by its citizens but would be purchased locally, rather than confiscated centrally. The beauty of Howard's solution was that it turned one of the biggest problems of rural repopulation and urban overcrowding – the disparity in land values – into an opportunity: the Garden City's land would be purchased at rural prices, but (following George's theory) as it was developed it would grow in value, and yield higher returns to the community. Howard therefore proposed to pay for the purchase through debentures, and (again following George's proposed single tax) to charge residents and businesses a 'rate-rent' to pay interest, contribute to a sinking fund to pay off the capital, and to fund services. While Letchworth ultimately failed to live up to the radicalism of Howard's ideas – the communism of its ownership and citizenship model never became a reality – it did show that new towns could be planned and developed on rational lines. As such, one of its principal legacies was the 1909 Town Planning Act for which the Garden City Association – renamed the Garden City and Town Planning Association in 1907 – had agitated.²³

Wells was one of 1,300 members of the Garden City Association and, in the first of his 'Utopianisms' articles for the *Daily Mail* (whose proprietor, Lord Northcliffe, was a prominent supporter of Howard's ideas) he described himself as a 'shareholder' in the Letchworth project.²⁴ He had also, in *Anticipations*, suggested that an experiment of this kind would be beneficial, if unlikely: 'The erection of a series of experimental labour-saving houses by some philanthropic person, for exhibition and discussion, would certainly bring about a very extraordinary advance in domestic comfort even in the immediate future, but the fashions in philanthropy do not trend in such practical directions' (110). It might therefore be surprising that in his first *Daily Mail* article explicitly – and implicitly in the cancelled chapters of *Kipps* – he was highly critical of Howard's ideas and their realisation at Letchworth, releasing, in the article, 'the accumulating scepticism of

²² Robert Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia: A Critical Biography of Ebenezer Howard* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988), 26.

²³ Beeverse, *Garden City Utopia*, 134.

²⁴ March 18 1905, 4.

some years'. He praised Howard's intellectual vision in overturning the assumption that 'cities "grew" – came anyhow, like the weather, and you made the best of what you got': the eye-catching geometry of Howard's designs 'came as a great light to many minds; it brought home to them that the way houses and roads and places are distributed is within the province of intention and design'. However, in this, and his second article on country cottages, he levelled three criticisms at Garden City's theory and practice. The first was the artificiality of the designs:

Mr Howard seems to have taken a pair of compasses and struck out a number of concentric circles, and these are marked from within outwardly, first, if I remember rightly, an open space in the position of the bull's eye, then a circle of public buildings, then a circle of homes and gardens, then a circle of factories, and finally a girdle railway.²⁵

Wells added sardonically that 'except in the case of mushrooms and toadstools, Nature distributes few of her products in rings'.

The second objection was that Howard had overlooked the impact of technology:

Mr Howard's book was written in the closing years of the nineteenth century – before the coming of electric trams and motor cars. [...] It has been shown pretty conclusively that communities living completely in such postage stamp areas as 4,000 acres and less (Garden City has 3,818) belong to the time when the simplest and smoothest mode of travel in life was the horse, and common men travelled on foot from the cradle to the grave. There is now no reason why people should live close to the scene of their industrial activities, and no end of reasons why they should not. For these Garden City promoters to sketch out factory sites within a mile of their city centre is an anachronism; so far from being a valuable experiment in realising Utopia, this proximity is one of the particular old-fashioned things all thorough-going reformers want to get rid of. [...] And it seems impossible to get it into the heads of people that, now that proximity is totally unnecessary, it is merely clumsy, cruel stupidity that keeps people living so.²⁶

As he had already declared in *Anticipations*, he believed transport technology was already leading to more effective outcomes than what Howard sought to achieve through planning and investment:

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

The city will diffuse itself until it has taken up considerable areas and many of the characteristics, the greenness, the fresh air, of what is now country, leads us to suppose also that the country will take to itself many of the qualities of the city. The old antithesis will indeed cease, the boundary lines will altogether disappear; it will become, indeed, merely a question of more or less populous. (63-4)

His third objection was Letchworth's favoured house design: 'I am sorry to find that the pretty detached cottage in its own garden seems to be the ruling idea among my fellow shareholders in Garden City. I don't believe for a moment that is the ideal – the Utopian arrangement.'²⁷ Wells appeared to overlook Howard's insistence that Garden City would be an experiment in communal living, and focused on Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin's Arts and Crafts-inspired designs at Letchworth which recreated a country-cottage idyll in the spirit of Morris. Ultimately, in Wells's analysis, Garden City risked repeating the mistakes of nineteenth-century housing in using bricks and mortar to enforce social isolation: 'The problem of housing a modern civilised population is not solved by tenements upon costly urban sites; everyone knows that. But neither is it to be solved by running light railways out to cheap land and dotting that with cheap and nasty cottages'. He added, 'the clerk's small house and the labourer's cottage that are the unusual, exceptional sort of homes in this country. [...] There was little or nothing of the dreadful isolations of modern life before the eighteenth century'.²⁸

Wells's counter-proposal was for communities like Letchworth to become dormitory towns, with industry located at some distance, and with the problem of social isolation solved by 'communal clubs'. In his fifth *Daily Mail* article, he outlined his own vision using the conceit of a friend who has just returned from visiting Utopia:

He tells me that housing is a business for private enterprise subject to the benevolent control of the universal landowner, the State; private companies build on lease for definite terms of years, and compete for and organise clubs of residents. Isolated single houses for poor people, he tells me, scarcely exist at all; the common form of residence is in a club building or college, and the rent paid covers not only the private apartments of the tenant, but the club subscription. [...] There was a sort of crèche for infants and a Kindergarten, a big play-room for older children, and, in addition, the recreation rooms, the club billiard-room and so forth [...]. The whole place formed one architectural scheme; it was done simply but very beautifully

²⁷ March 30 1905, 4.

²⁸ *ibid.*

with walls of white rough-cast and red tiled roofs. The main entrance was to the west, a simple, fine archway; it gave upon the electric tramway station that came from the work town, an iron smelting place, thirty minutes' ride away.²⁹

Wells added details of the kind that would have appealed to Kipps and Ann: no fireplace ('a great saving of women's labour'), central heating ('my friend said that in the newer colleges of Utopia the heating is done by electric radiators'), lavatories and bathrooms co-located with bedrooms (some even en-suite).

You will say so decent a life is impossible for common people. It is not impossible, it is only impossible because people cannot imagine it possible. There is in such a scheme nothing more than what we have in our present world – except a better arrangement. We have the hundred houses, but they are all wastefully scattered. We have the dining hall, the assembly rooms, the fine gardens, but divided and dispersed.³⁰

In our world, we have shops and services, but 'in a muddled, wasteful confusion'. Appealing once again to the power of the human imagination to think beyond existing and apparently insuperable constraints, Wells developed the line of thought he had originated in *Anticipations* to both project the future and to shape it through his advocacy of science, system, and efficiency.

Insights and Limitations

As Simon J. James has observed, Wells's 'very earliest utopian project was not textual but material,' and he suggests that it was no coincidence that he began his first futurological work, *Anticipations*, which he described with an architectural metaphor as 'the keystone to the main arch of my work', in Spade House.³¹ The house was designed in 1899-1900 by C.F.A. Voysey, one of the leading architects in the domestic genre in the early twentieth century, but Wells was evidently a collaborator in the project.³² As James correctly notes, some of the innovations highlighted in *Anticipations* became part of Spade House's design, notably en suite bathrooms, and the house stands as a material expression of Wells's agenda for instrumentality in art.

²⁹ June 7 1905.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ James, *Maps of Utopia*, 135-6.

³² Voysey was introduced to Wells by his doctor Henry Hick's wife, Voysey's sister-in-law; Wells convalesced in the Hicks' New Romney home after his collapse in 1898. While Wells clearly capitalised on the experience of house-building in Part Three of *Kipps*, we should beware of equating the novel's architect with Voysey, not least as the architectural evidence shows that the designs for Spade House became simpler and more economical, not more 'fungoid'. See Duncan Simpson, *C.F.A. Voysey: An Architect of Individuality* (London: Lund Humphries, 1979).

Moreover, the *Autobiography* underlines the connection between the present materiality of Spade House and Wells's thoughts of the future – including his own: 'The living-rooms were on one level with the bedrooms so that if presently I had to live in a wheeled chair I could be easily moved from room to room. But things did not turn out in that fashion' (639). It was the future of the world, however, that preoccupied him at the beginning of the twentieth century. Wells recalled increasing frustration with the narrow scope of the Labour Party's programme – 'the Socialism of the parish pump and not the Socialism of a comprehensible control of water supply between watershed and watershed' (256) – when Spade House suggested the answer:

I happened to choose a site upon the boundary line between the borough of Folkestone and the urban district of Sandgate, and the experiences I had in securing electricity for my house across that boundary worked upon certain notions I had picked up from Grant Allen about the sizes and the distances between villages and towns upon a countryside (which are determined originally by the length of an hour's journey by horse or foot) and started me off thinking in an extremely fruitful direction. [...] I began to work out the now universally recognized truth that one of the primary aspects of this period of change, is a change in facility and speed of communications, and that among other things this has made almost every existing boundary too small and too tight. [...] Before I had done with this idea it had led me to the realization of the inevitability of a comprehensive world-state, overriding the sovereign governments of the present time. (256-7)

The construction of Spade House, then, could hardly have been more significant in Wells's intellectual development, a material inspiration and primal scene for what became the mission of his life and work. However, Wells's account of Spade House, and his second house-building project in the French Riviera also suggest some limitations of utopianism and the World State, at least in terms of Wells's own predilections, and, perhaps, more fundamentally.

There is an intriguing connection between sex and houses in the *Autobiography*. When he and Jane realised they were about to achieve financial and physical security in Spade House, their thoughts turned to procreation: 'The house was still being built when it dawned upon us as a novel and delightful idea that we were now justified in starting a family' (638). However, as Wells's biographers have pointed out, Spade House also provided the scene for several of Wells's extra-marital affairs, and it is significant that in the *Autobiography* he records his decision to sell in 1910 in a chapter dedicated to his considerations of,

and writing on, sex and marriage.³³ Discussing *Love and Mr Lewisham* (1899), he wrote: 'I did not consciously apply the story of Mr Lewisham to my own circumstances, but down below the threshold of my consciousness the phobia must have been there. Later on, it had come to the surface and I sold Spade House deliberately, because I felt that otherwise it would become the final setting of my life' (468). Spade House was simultaneously a support and a constraint for his sexuality. Wells continued to explore the connections of sex and property, generalising beyond his own circumstances to the widest possible biological and anthropological considerations:

Continually civilisation had been developing, by buying off or generalizing, socializing and legalizing jealousy and possessiveness, in sex as in property. We were debarred from sexual ease, just as we were debarred from economic ease, by this excessive fostering in our institutions of the already sufficiently strong instinct of ownership. The Family, I declared, was the inseparable correlative of private proprietorship. It embodied jealousy in sexual life as private ownership embodied jealousy in economic life. (476)

Ownership, in marriage or property, was a necessary but transient stage. This suggests an intriguing context for his advocacy of communal living in his *Daily Mail* articles of 1905, as well as potentially an ideological dimension to his amorous exploits in the garden of Spade House with Violet Hunt and others.³⁴

More importantly, Wells's restlessness and sense of constraint in Spade House also suggest a flaw in his analysis that the world's problems could be solved by repeatedly extending boundaries, ultimately creating the World State. His feeling of constraint was not only spatial, but also temporal: he feared that Spade House would become his 'final setting'. He did not extend Spade House, or create a commune – he simply moved house. Although Wells's utopias often recognised that perfection is not only unattainable but also undesirable, and that they therefore needed to be in a state of constant development, Spade House shows that even when he had control over his environment he quickly became dissatisfied and sought to change it. The implications for the governance of Utopia are obvious: with constant pressures to change, to improve, from its citizens, the guiding brains of planners or Samurai would surely be overwhelmed.

Later in the *Autobiography*, he revealed that a similar restlessness caused 'Lou Pidou', the house he built at Lou Bastidon, to disappoint him:

³³ See for example Michael Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London: Peter Owen, 2010), 170-2.

³⁴ Hunt 'refused to be intimate with Wells except outdoors, apparently hoping [Dorothy] Richardson would catch sight of them rustling around in the bushes' (172).

I attempted to reproduce Lou Bastidon on a firmer foundation and behold! the foundation became a pitfall. I began to play with house-building and garden-planning. There is a vividness, an immediate gratification of the creative instinct in this amusement, which can distract the mind very readily from reality. Men and women take to building and gardening as they take to drink, in order to distract their minds from the whole round world and its claim upon them, and all the Riviera is littered with villas that testify to the frequency of this impulse.

Lou Pidou 'was an amateurish, pretty house with a peculiar charm of its own' but it also brought new and different problems from Spade House:

it insisted upon growing and complicating itself; it became less and less of a refuge and more and more of an irksome entanglement with its own baffling bothers and exactions. I worked there with dwindling zest and energy and stayed less and less willingly and for briefer periods, as those good long sunlit hours in which I could think became rare and ragged and the necessity for management and attention more clamorous, when I realized I could work there effectively no more. (740-1)

Wells's language here is significant, giving the house a life and perhaps an agency of its own, growing beyond the plan, conspiring to rob him of his time and patience – it is an organic growth, not a planned realisation.

Wells brilliantly identified and analysed problems that started with the house but ended with the world. These problems animated his fiction and stimulated his political thinking. He was, however, more convincing as an architectural and social critic than a social architect: where Ebenezer Howard's vision became a partial reality – and politicians of all persuasions are now ambitious to revive it – Wells could only criticise and suggest communes and commuter suburbs.³⁵ There is, finally, an irony in his confession of boredom with house-building appearing in a section of the *Autobiography* entitled 'The Idea of a Planned World'. A planned house became impossible to control, and tedious to administer. What hope for a World State, if a new house on 'some land with a pretty rock, vines, jasmin and a stream close by' could turn out to be so intractable?

³⁵ The former Housing Minister Grant Shapps proposed in 2011 to revive Garden Cities and praised Howard's vision, and the Labour Leader Ed Miliband announced in 2013 new towns and new Garden Cities. See Grant Shapps, 'Garden cities: reshaping the ideas of the past for the 21st century', *The Guardian* (online edition), 9 September 2011 (<<http://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2011/sep/19/garden-cities-grant-shapps-housing>>, accessed 15 October 2013).