

'FREEDOM NOT R LIBERALISM, GARDEN CITIES

The end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the next saw the emergence in Britain of a pioneering version of town planning. This took the form largely of varying attempts to build garden cities, and later the introduction of the first town planning legislation. The stamp of Liberal thinking on this process is unmistakable, although it was by no means uncontested political ground. In this article by **Professor Dennis Hardy**, the story is told of key individuals and actions in a formative period for Britain's cities and countryside.



'REGIMENTATION' AND EARLY TOWN PLANNING

Garden cities, garden suburbs and early town planning were shaped to a remarkable degree by Liberal ideas and activists. First among them was Ebenezer Howard.

Howard's way

It is deeply to be deplored that the people should continue to stream into the already overcrowded cities, and should thus further deplete the country districts.¹

In the opening pages of Ebenezer Howard's seminal book, *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, published in 1898, the author spoke of congested cities and an impoverished countryside as two sides of the same coin. All political parties, he claimed, were agreed that this related problem had to be solved, but how was it to be done? At one political extreme the answer lay in an enhanced role for the state, and at the other a solution would emerge from the interplay of free market forces. Howard himself (a member of the National Liberal Club) was not driven by party politics but his commitment to charting a middle course, avoiding the perceived regimentation of socialism and the self-interests of capitalism, was

in line with Liberal thinking. In a draft of his book he penned the phrase 'freedom not regimentation' (amending this later, in an attempt to remove possible offence to potential socialist supporters, to 'freedom and cooperation').

Howard in his time dabbled with various inventions (including a machine for shorthand typing) and it was as an invention that he saw the garden city, the subject of his book. He is often dismissed as politically naïve – George Bernard Shaw dubbed him 'an heroic simpleton' – but nothing could be further from the truth. In successive drafts of *To-Morrow*, he went to great lengths to avoid political contention. Before he alighted on the name of garden city he was thinking in terms of 'Unionville', eventually rejecting it because it sounded too strident; he thought that, in contrast, 'garden city' would lure supporters with its evocative imagery. Howard's ideas were forming at least a decade before his book was published, as evidenced by his reaction to *Looking Backward*, the work of the American socialist, Edward Bellamy. In response to the latter's portrayal of the ideal city of the future, Howard was at first enthused but then saw that beneath the utopian veneer was a hard core of authoritarianism. There had to be a better approach.

His answer was the garden city. At first glance this was seen by many at the time as just another utopian scheme with no chance of realisation; the antagonistic Fabians (preferring to put their own trust in the state) were quick to make this very point. But there was more to the garden city than at first met the eye. At one level, it was a plan for a model settlement, containing the best features of both town and country while discarding the worst. Each garden city would have a limited population, with most living in the main settlement and the rest in a surrounding agricultural belt. They would be cities of gardens – with wide boulevards, parks and individual gardens – as well as cities within a garden, with the encircling farmland a foretaste of the modern green belt. When the population target was reached a new garden city would be formed; in his diagram of a constellation of garden cities, in view of his Liberal sympathies, it is surely no coincidence that he names one of them 'Gladstone'.

Dig to the next layer and things were not quite so simple. Howard had been tussling for years with the problem of how to find a way to share wealth within the community and yet attract a broad level of political support. His approach was likened to that of charting 'a course between the Scylla of anarchy

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and the Charybdis of despotism'.² He also coined the term 'social individualism' (elsewhere referred to as 'associated individualism') to describe his middle way. In practical terms, he proposed the formation of a trust to purchase and then maintain, on behalf of the community, the land and buildings. The freehold would remain with the trust so that the community would enjoy the benefits resulting over time from rising land and rental values. All of this, of course, depended on finding sufficient capital in the first place to buy and develop suitable land.

Howard himself rather skated over the problems of attracting investors, his sights being set more on what would happen next. He believed that once the first garden city was formed, people would see the advantages and further experiments would soon follow. There was no limit to what might then happen. Landlords in the cities charging extortionate rents would be forced out of business as people chose to go and live in garden cities; over a period, the entire conurbation would gradually disintegrate as individuals and firms left for pastures new. Moreover, within garden cities there would be opportunities for cooperative schemes of housing and profit-sharing in the workplace so that, little by little, the whole system of capitalism would be transformed: hence the sub-title, *A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Three years after his initial publication, a second edition of his book was renamed, less contentiously, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*.

Having presented his ideas, the challenge was then to put them into practice. He was not alone in his efforts; in the year following the publication of *To-Morrow*, the Garden City Association was formed to spread the word and to initiate the world's first garden city. A number of individuals with valuable business experience and contacts were drawn to the cause

– people who knew more about the world of finance and property than Howard himself. The first Chairman was T. H. W. Idris, manufacturer of mineral waters and a Liberal member of the London County Council. He was succeeded by Ralph Neville, an experienced barrister and former Liberal MP in Liverpool from 1887 to 1895, who was to become a leading light in the garden city movement.³ As well as the Chairmanship of the Garden City Association he also led the companies formed to buy a suitable site and then to build the first garden city. Directors on the Board of the first of these companies, the Garden City Pioneer Company, included influential and wealthy Liberals like Aneurin Williams and T. H. W. Idris.

The first Secretary of the Garden City Association, Thomas Adams, was also a committed Liberal. Before coming to London to take up his new post, he had been active in Liberal politics in Edinburgh, at one time Secretary of his local association and then party agent in the 1900 general election. He claims to have been drawn to Howard's ideas less by the garden city as such and more by the underlying philosophy of social individualism.

As well as Neville and Adams, the idea of the garden city attracted others with Liberal sympathies, such as Lord Grey, the MP for South Northumberland from 1880 to 1885 and Tyneside from 1885 to 1896; something of a maverick in his parliamentary career, he later stood as a Liberal Unionist but was defeated. Grey chaired an early and influential meeting of the Garden City Association at Bournville and offered his help in various ways to promote the campaign. Between 1904 and 1911 he was Governor-General of Canada, and in that post invited garden city evangelists from Britain to come and spread the message in that young nation. On the domestic front, two Liberal MPs who played a

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valuable role were Henry Vivian (Birkenhead, 1906–10, and Totnes, 1923–24), who straddled the related movements of garden cities and co-partnership, and Aneurin Williams (Plymouth, 1910; North West Durham, 1914–18; and Consett, 1918–22), a founding director of the First Garden City Company and later its Chairman. In 1906, of the thirty-seven MPs who were members of the Association or shareholders in the First Garden City Company, thirty-three were Liberals and the other four Conservatives.

At a more local level, in Letchworth before 1914, amongst the more influential Liberals active in the town was one of the garden city's two master planners, Barry Parker; the editor of the local newspaper, W. H. Knight; the unsuccessful candidate in the Hitchin ward in the 1906 general election, T. T. Gregg; and a stalwart garden city campaigner and later the Chairman of Letchworth Urban District Council, Dr Norman MacFadyen.⁴

Co-partnership in the suburbs

... he was sane enough after a fashion, I knew the type. Vegetarianism, simple life, poetry, nature-worship, roll in the dew before breakfast. I'd met a few of them years ago in Ealing.⁵

Ridicule, as George Orwell (in the above quote) well knew, is an easy way to dismiss a social experiment that is alien to one's own political beliefs. In this vein, garden cities and related schemes – which often attracted the kind of social progressive who could easily be labelled eccentric – offered a ready target for a sharp tongue.

External critics were one thing but garden city enthusiasts often added to their own difficulties. Garden cities were evangelised by their founders as the only true gospel, and fellow reformers were warned of diluted versions, such as garden suburbs.

(Right): Ebenezer Howard, and plans for garden cities



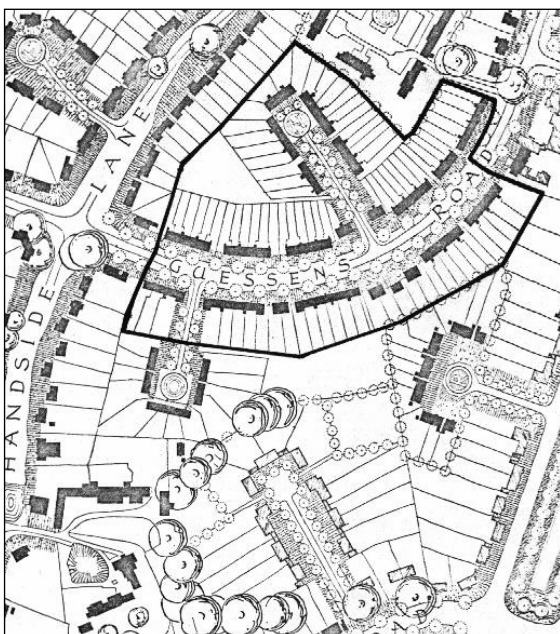
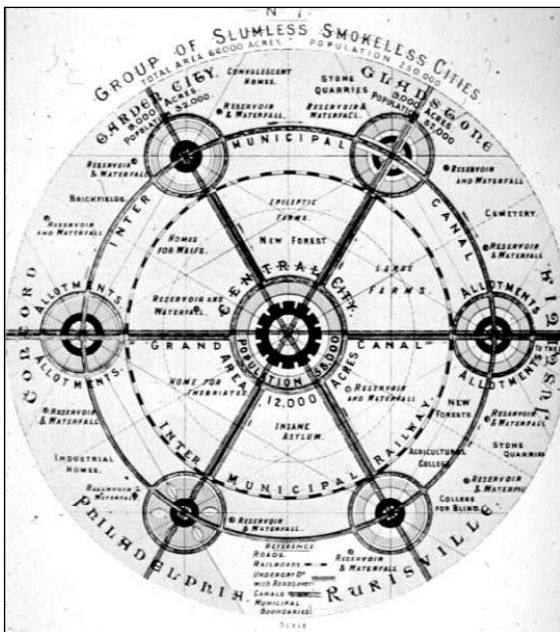
There was indeed a difference, as the former were envisaged as self-standing communities, whereas the latter, as urban extensions, would add to the size and problems of existing cities. But to the many people who only wanted to see an improvement in the general standard of urban housing this difference was largely academic, and a good garden suburb was as welcome in its way as a full-blown garden city. The respective garden city and garden suburb movements each attracted their own dedicated followers as well as an overlapping list of supporters; even the original garden city architects, Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker, felt comfortable in moving on from Letchworth to new garden suburb schemes. So, too, did Henry Vivian, who was warmly appreciative of the work of Howard but who was personally responsible for one of the most significant of all garden suburb experiments.

Vivian (rather like Howard) made his way in the world from humble beginnings. He was born in 1868, the son of a carpenter in a Devon village, and followed his father into the trade. At the earliest opportunity he moved to London and was soon drawn into trade union activity and the co-partnership movement. The latter, represented through the Labour Association⁶ (of which Neville himself was chairman at one time), was effectively an offshoot of the better-known cooperative movement which the co-partnership firebrands thought had rather lost its way. At the heart of the newer movement, the co-partnership campaigners promoted the idea of employees sharing in the management and profits of their place of work; in practical terms this amounted to the idea of workers being shareholders in their own companies. Far from aligning itself with the emergent Labour Party the association constantly stressed that it was not a threat to capitalism – a point that was turned on its head

by the Fabians and others with Labour allegiances who saw co-partnership as simply a capitalist ploy to defuse working-class opposition.

Vivian, himself, held the position of Secretary of the Labour Association and in that role met like-minded people who were later to be his associates in other ventures: Ralph Neville, Aneurin Williams, Earl Grey and Ebenezer Howard. In 1906 Vivian entered Parliament in the 'Lib-Lab' camp of the party. During the earlier part of his career, Vivian was at the heart of discussions on how best to proceed. In this context, it proved to be just one step from co-partnership in the workplace to applying the principles to housing, where profits could be enjoyed by tenants rather than landlords. An experimental scheme was launched in 1888, in which, with a minimum shareholding of £1, tenants would receive a dividend on their rent as well as on shares. Vivian was attracted to the idea and went one step further in combining co-partnership in the home with the same in the workplace. He set up his own construction company on co-partnership lines and by 1896 his workers were building houses that they could then live in. The problem with that, though, was that through £1 shares it was difficult to raise sufficient capital. Almost by chance a solution to this funding problem emerged.

Vivian was tireless in his promotion of co-partnership, and it was at a meeting in Ealing in 1901 that he met a group of like-minded men. Without saying it in so many words, they discounted the idea of a scheme for the poorest workers and set their sights, instead, on the needs of skilled artisans (like themselves) who could invest more and would more likely be attracted to the idea of profit-sharing. Their aim was to build houses that the members would own collectively and rent themselves, so that every man 'would be his



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neighbour's landlord'; it would strike a balance between self-interest and collective ideals. Vivian was elected chairman of the pioneering company, Ealing Tenants Ltd, set up to put it all on a legal footing. The outcome was a model estate, Brentham Garden Suburb – an amalgam of co-partnership ideas and the architecture of a garden city. Although some of its central ideals were eroded over the years, it succeeded in demonstrating a way to build fairly priced housing in a good environment and with a lively sense of community.

Brentham was by no means a large development (just sixty acres) but it was an important milestone in the emergence of progressive town planning. A company was formed, Co-partnership Tenants Ltd, with Vivian as its first chairman, to promote similar schemes nationwide. By 1914 there were more than thirty co-partnership societies across the country, responsible for building 7,000 houses. Some of these later schemes had a larger tally of co-partnership houses than Brentham itself, most notably Hampstead Garden Suburb which included three such developments in its own boundaries. Vivian, himself, took a close personal interest in another offshoot, Wavertree Garden Suburb, and became Chairman of that development and its management company, Liverpool Garden Suburb Tenants Ltd.

Moreover, for all the differences in provenance, there were always close links between the co-partnership campaign and the parallel garden city movement. In Letchworth, Howard was instrumental in promoting his own co-partnership experiment, while, in turn, at a dinner in 1912 in honour of Howard, Vivian (then Chairman of the Labour Association) headed a table of forty co-partnership delegates and spoke warmly of the common interests of the two movements. In the following

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year, Vivian joined the Council of the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association (successor to the Garden City Association). Some years earlier, in 1907, the appointment of Unwin and Parker to prepare plans for a newly acquired extension of Brentham had already exemplified this productive partnership. Unwin was enthusiastic about co-partnership, believing that it was at the heart of blending aesthetics and community: 'instead of the buildings being mere endless rows ... they will naturally gather themselves into groups, and the groups again clustered around the greens will form larger units, and the interest and beauty of grouping will at once arise'.⁷

It is easy to see how Liberals would have felt comfortable with this ethos of cooperative garden suburbs. An amusing footnote to this episode comes a few years later, just after the end of the First World War, when Prime Minister Lloyd George employed a group of staff to work closely with him at 10 Downing Street. Because their accommodation overflowed into the basement and garden area it was referred to as the 'garden suburb'⁸; no one in the circle would have been unhappy with that.

Taming the state

... an organic plan of social progress, which implies a new consciousness of Liberal statecraft.⁹

It was one of the architects of modern Liberal philosophy, J. A. Hobson, who spoke perceptively of 'a new consciousness of Liberal statecraft'. The issue was challenging: how could Liberalism, at the start of the twentieth century, use the state to its own advantage? How could it unshackle the enormous potential of the state without threatening the very liberties it sought to enhance? Certainly, there were social problems where it

seemed as if the state could be used to offer a solution, but the balance of judgement was always going to be fine.

By the time of 'the halcyon years of Liberalism' from 1906 to 1914,¹⁰ the need to do something about the state of the nation's housing was widely recognised. The arguments were by no means simply moral; poor environmental conditions led, in turn, to the debilitation of the labour force and this was an impediment to industrial productivity. So, too, were living conditions linked to the fitness of the country's fighting forces. In a period when there was increasing competition with other industrial nations, notably Germany and the United States, the incentive to improve the nation's housing stock was keenly recognised. Henry Vivian himself warned that unless the nation began to improve the state of the towns 'we may as well hand over our trade, our colonies, our whole influence in the world, to Germany without undergoing all the trouble of a struggle in which we condemn ourselves beforehand to certain failure.'¹¹ At least he and others could point to the shining examples of experiments like Bournville and Port Sunlight (both garden villages sponsored by Liberal industrialists, George Cadbury and W. H. Lever, later Lord Lever), Letchworth Garden City, and garden suburbs like Brentham and Hampstead. But was the scale of what needed to be done too great, by then, for voluntary effort alone? Was it time to create a new role for the state?

The idea of the state intervening in these matters was certainly not new. Important first steps had been taken more than half a century before in relation to public health and housing, and it was only a further step in that direction to embrace a more comprehensive approach in the form of town planning. Ideologically, the time was right for a venture of this sort. Social

reform had not previously occupied the centre ground for Liberal administrations but times were changing. Spurred on by the growing influence of the socialist movement and its direct threat to Liberal seats in parliament (if not to parliament itself), the party's philosophers, under the banner of New Liberalism, reconciled old traditions with new circumstances. State intervention in the social realm could be justified if it helped individuals to enjoy (rather than diminish) their liberties within a capitalist system; doubters in the party could be persuaded that it would be better to do things this way than suffer the upheaval of a socialist approach.

When the Liberals were returned to power in 1906, although the prospect of an unprecedented programme of social reforms, laying the very foundations for a future welfare state, was not immediately obvious this, of course, is what happened. In this wider context of extensive change, a seemingly modest measure in favour of town planning hardly seemed likely to create too many political ripples. Modest it may have been, but the very idea of potentially interfering with the rights of private property – stopping land-owners from doing as they wished – was highly contentious in itself. For this reason, in the hope of minimising opposition, a bill was framed without the more interventionist clauses that the town planning lobbyists had wished to see.

Ironically, it was a former socialist, John Burns (by then converted to Liberalism) who steered through the new legislation. Burns had previously been a member of the Social Democratic Federation, although he later represented Battersea as its Liberal MP. By the time that town planning was on the political agenda he held the position of President of the Local Government Board. He recalled, rather glibly, why he promoted this measure: 'I was born in a

slum and this made me a town planner'.¹² In fact, the Housing, Town Planning, etc. Act of 1909, did nothing to alleviate the kind of problem experienced by Burns in nearby Lambeth, where he was born. It looked, instead, to ways of planning suburban extensions but had only a minimal impact on those; attempts to do more had been effectively forestalled when the bill was drafted and, in the course of passing the legislation, by a group of Conservative Lords suspicious of what it might lead to. In the event, if the 1909 Act is to be recognised for anything it is simply for putting town planning on to the statute books and for locating it as a function of local government.

An interesting addendum is that Burns set up a unit within the Local Government Board with the job of making sure that the Act worked. The unit included a post of town planning assistant and that was filled by Thomas Adams, formerly Secretary of the Garden City Association. His biographer, Michael Simpson, considers it a shrewd move: 'he had been acquainted with Burns since 1906 and his Liberal background may have been significant'.¹³ Certainly, Adams made the most of his new position to advocate the wider cause of planning.

Postscript

It is interesting to record that early town planning, in its various forms before 1914, was consistent to such an extent with Liberal principles. The measures taken could be seen to fit comfortably in that middle ground between unbridled individualism and an omnipotent state; all were designed to alleviate social deprivation but also to improve the workings of the economy. A fit and healthy workforce was important on both counts.

To some extent, after the First World War there were still important connections with this pioneering period of Liberal

initiative, although very soon a drift towards a more interventionist approach was evident. The second garden city, Welwyn, dating from 1919, was a less radical venture than Letchworth, and the so-called third garden city, Wythenshawe, even less so. In many ways, the latter marks something of a watershed between the progressive social experiments of an earlier period, with their reliance on voluntary initiative, and the more regimented character of governmental action that was to become commonplace.

Wythenshawe, to the south of Manchester was designed to solve some of the problems of overcrowding in the great conurbation.¹⁴ It was the brainchild of two councillors, one Labour and one Liberal. The Liberal, Ernest Simon, was born into a Jewish industrial family and was first elected to Manchester City Council in 1912; he was later MP for the Manchester Withington division from 1923 to 1924 and from 1929 to 1931. It was as a Manchester councillor with a passionate interest in housing that he worked with his Labour counterpart, Alderman Jackson, to promote the idea of a new settlement for 100,000 people. A third figure in this formative period was Ernest's wife, Shena, herself a highly committed campaigner for better housing and wholly behind the Wythenshawe project.

Land was acquired in the early 1920s and the established garden city architect, Barry Parker, was commissioned to prepare the master plan. In spite of a sympathetic layout the very scale of the project, combined with its municipal provenance, meant that it bore little or no resemblance to a true garden city. It was, in fact, little more than a very large overspill housing estate. Simon, meanwhile, was becoming more enamoured with interventionist policies and eventually, in 1946, he joined the Labour Party; in the following year he became Baron Simon

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of Wythenshawe. He had, in fact, considered switching his party allegiance before then and it might be significant that his wife did so in 1935. Certainly, there would have been a degree of tension between the reality of a centralised, municipal bureaucracy and a Liberal belief in individual freedom.

As Wythenshawe indicated, the day of localised ventures was over. After the Second World War, social experiments were to be conducted through the state, with the post-war Labour administration setting the new pattern. Garden cities were by then seen as a concept from the past, to be superseded by a nationwide programme of new towns. For the best part of half a century that was how things were to be. More recently, however, opposition parties in a long period of Labour government are pointing once again to the limitations of the state. With sustainability at the top of the planning agenda and community an essential means of securing social change, environmental politics is taking on a new meaning; in this changing context, local as well as national Liberal politicians can again assume an important role. A glance back at the contribution of their predecessors in the pioneering days of planning might offer a timely source of inspiration.

Dennis Hardy is Emeritus Professor of Urban Planning at Middlesex University, and now works as a writer and consultant. He has written various books, including the two-volume official history of the Town & Country Planning Association, *From Garden Cities to New Towns and From New Towns to Green Politics* (both Chapman & Hall, 1991). His latest book is *Poundbury: The Town that Charles Built*, Town & Country Planning Association, 2006.

Acknowledgement: In writing this paper I am most grateful for helpful comments provided by three anonymous referees.

A glance back at the contribution of their predecessors in the pioneering days of planning might offer a timely source of inspiration.

- 1 Ebenezer Howard, in *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (facsimile edition, London, Routledge, 2003), pp. 2–3.
- 2 Howard includes this quote from a *Daily Chronicle* article at the start of Chapter 9 of *To-Morrow*; the article is discussing ways of reconciling Socialism and Individualism.
- 3 For this and other parliamentary records, see M. Stenton and S. Lees (eds.), *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament*, Vol. 2, 1886–1918 and Vol. 3, 1919–1945 (Sussex: Harvester, 1978 and 1979).
- 4 Mervyn Miller, *Letchworth: The First Garden City*, (Chichester, Phillimore, second edition 2002), p. 115.
- 5 George Orwell, in Aileen Reid, *Brentham: A History of the Pioneer Garden Suburb 1901–2001* (London, Brentham Heritage Society, 2000), p. 93.
- 6 The full title was the Labour Association for Promoting Co-operative Production Based on Co-Partnership of the Workers.
- 7 Raymond Unwin, 1910, in Dennis Hardy, *From Garden Cities to New Towns* (London, Chapman & Hall, 1991), p. 90.
- 8 Roy Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1971), p. 140.
- 9 J. A. Hobson, in Chris Cook, *History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (London, Macmillan, 1976), p. 48.
- 10 Chris Cook, *History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (London, Macmillan, 1976), p. vii.
- 11 Henry Vivian, in Dennis Hardy, *From Garden Cities to New Towns* (London, Chapman & Hall, 1991), p. 40.
- 12 John Burns, in Gordon E. Cherry, *Pioneers in British Planning* (London, Architectural Press, 1981), p. 12.
- 13 Michael Simpson, *Thomas Adams and the Modern Planning Movement* (London, Mansell, 1985), p. 55.
- 14 See, especially, Andrzej Olechnowicz, 'Civic Leadership and Education for Democracy: The Simons and the Wythenshawe Estate', *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 3–26.

REPORT

Defender of Liberties: Charles James Fox

Fringe meeting, March 2006, Harrogate, with Professor Frank O'Gorman and Dr Mark Pack; Chair (Lord) Wallace of Saltaire

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

On 13 September 1806, Charles James Fox, Whig statesman, defender of civil liberties, champion of the American and French revolutions and advocate of the supremacy of parliament, died aged fifty-seven. Determined to commemorate Fox's achievements and celebrate his liberal heritage in the 200th year since his death, the History Group was especially pleased to welcome Frank O'Gorman,

Emeritus Professor of History at Manchester University, together with History Group committee member Dr Mark Pack, to tell us about Fox the man, the politician, the liberal and his legacy.

Professor O'Gorman opened by acknowledging that Fox was regarded as one of the founding fathers of Liberalism, operating at the same time that Edmund Burke and Pitt the Younger were staking their claim to be founding fathers