

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 7
Harlow new town:
Remembering

c/o Hempstone
101 Eaton Terrace
London SW 1, England
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Mr. R.H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

A steady stream of between three and five thousand visitors from around the world tour the English new towns every year. They are usually greeted by representatives of the Development Corporations, given tea, a semi-official talk or two, lunch perhaps, and a drive around the town. Then they leave.

At first the tea ceremony reminded me of all those tourist accounts of modern China. No sooner do you get your notebooks out than the door opens and someone comes in with large cups of milky tea and biscuits. Then there is an enforced interlude of polite chatter because it is impossible to take notes and balance the tea cup.

Very few of the visitors return to the towns; hands full of pamphlets and statistical summaries they go on to the next and the next like modern pilgrims. There are 23 new towns in various stages of development. I have found that on second and third visits, conversations and chance meetings, in addition to formal interviews help to bring the new towns and their statistical profiles to life.

Harlow, in Essex, is one of the eight new towns planned to handle London's over-spill population. It is not a particularly exceptional new town, neither the largest nor the smallest, not the most famous or the least known. Although Stevenage was designated a few months earlier, Harlow did get its first buildings of the group before Stevenage because there was no local opposition to the new town. Most of the architecture is conventional modern, bordering on drab, though there are a few exceptional buildings, and, an anonymous trust has scattered some remarkable sculpture throughout the town to very good effect. Harlow is forty five minutes from London by train, has a current population of 72,000, and I keep going back there because a number of people in the town are interested, as I am, in the next phase, the second generation. The first interviews however, invariably touch on the beginning.

The company director leaned back in his chair, began a smile, and said, "I can tell you have the statistics and those books, but let me tell you a true story. You will understand the town better. This is an old company. Tradition has it that during the year the men pay tuppence for their tea and then, on Christmas Eve, the boss takes the one or two pounds left over, adds a few more and takes everyone to the local pub for a round or two. Well, the first year I was with the company we were in the pub and I was offering the whiskey round when I came to one chap, Lennie his name is, and he turned it down. 'No thanks' he said, 'I've

got shandy and that will do me fine.' When the boss is buying most men take whiskey, so I remembered that incident."

" We were still in London then, the business was beginning to grow rapidly and the shop was very crowded. But we couldn't get building permits. After a while I took the hint and began to investigate the new towns. I looked around and liked Harlow best. Do you know how these things are done? I'll tell you anyway. We arranged a coach tour for a Saturday morning, back in November 1952 it was, and brought everybody down here. All the men, their wives, the kids, even the single fellow's girl friends. In the morning they looked at where the factory would be, the plans for the town, the different styles of houses. Then we had lunch and some of the chaps from the Development Corporation talked to us. In the afternoon we let them go off by themselves to look at whatever they liked, though mind you, there wasn't much to see then. And back to London we went. Monday morning, early, I began to lobby among the men to make the move. I asked each of them what they thought. Lennie, who is a quiet one, said something interesting. 'I liked it fine' he said, 'the wife already picked out the house she wants. Only one thing. Did you notice, there isn't a pub nearby.'

"About nine months later we made the move. Not to this factory, this is a double medium standard, expanded. We were in a smaller one at first. The Development Corporation builds the factories and we rent them. There were 35 men working for the company, 34 made the move. I have a hundred more working for me now. Everyone seemed to settle in fine. There were just two pubs in those days, one in old Harlow, the other down the road. Then the Essex Skipper was built, the first new pub in England after the war. It was only a few hundred yards from where I knew Lennie was living. After it had been open a few weeks I asked him what it was like. He looked quite blank. 'The Essex Skipper, the new pub' I said, 'what's it like?' 'Oh' he said 'haven't been to it yet.' 'But Lennie, before we moved to Harlow you were worried that there weren't any pubs nearby.' 'Ah' said Lennie 'ah, that was before we had a sitting room.'"

The director is beaming now, but, just in case I've missed the point of his tale, he adds "I happen to know that in London Lennie was living with his wife and four kids in two rooms with the toilet down the hall. He's never been a drinker, as I told you, that's not what the pub was for. He and the wife would go, and, for the price of a glass of shandy for him, and cider or the like for her, they were renting a sitting room."

"Life in a new town, especially in the early years, is unsettling. The balance of the community is upset because the population is all roughly the same age. Young, with small children. The individual families are upset, too." Reverend Ronald Williams, Harlow's Industrial Chaplain and a long time resident continues thinking aloud. "Father has to work a little harder here for the same money he earned in London because of the Provincial pay scale, even though it is the A rate. But he has the easier time adjusting. He comes with, or to, a job. Usually he does

the same work; he has his mates, familiar faces, and importantly, familiar routine. For the women it is very difficult and loneliness is the worst part. And it is more than the ordinary loneliness of modern life I think. The women are at home all day in new surroundings with small children. Their routine is very different, especially the shopping. While time has mixed it up, and critical personnel like teachers have always been recruited nationally, Harlow's population was to be London overspill. The majority came from the East End. The women were used to little shops and stall marketing. Here we have neighborhood shops and, now, the big Town Center. No one who came to Harlow had ever lived in a new house before and that produced certain problems. There is a fervent desire to fill the new houses with all new furniture, which, in turn, means hire purchase. This is still true, by the way. But, unfortunately, many families quickly become financially over-extended, and a number end up in court. "

"It was awful when we came, just awful." Though she is smiling it is quite clear that the charming lady magistrate means every word. "My son was a year old, I was very young, my husband was, and is, terribly busy. We moved into an unfinished section. The house was finished but nothing else. No neighbors at first, no paved roads or walks, no garden. Just mud. (Note: everyone who has ever lived in a new town in its early days has nightmares of mud.) The mud was awful, my little boy lost his shoe in it, a crane was stuck in the back for several months. I couldn't drive, not that there were cars or any place to go. At first the only shops were in old Harlow. I was convinced that everything was overpriced and less expensive elsewhere, but I couldn't get any place else. Old Harlow seemed so far away then. Besides, I think women my age feel cheated anyway. I was 12 when the war began, and I never knew what it was to buy anything freely. And then, when we first came to Harlow we needed so many things. Everyone was pregnant. Or pushing a pram. Or pregnant and pushing a pram. For quite a while Harlow had the highest birth rate in England. I don't like to remember those days now."

"The men were so enthusiastic when we came, we even started a football team within the firm. Didn't realize how un-fit we were. Within three weeks half the staff was out with injuries, so we gave it up. Those that want to play join other teams." The company director continues, "Not one of our families wanted to live in a flat. Most of them wanted to try gardening, they're English, Four of them have become flower and vegetable growing champions."

Harlow's Liaison Officer, Len White, briskly reviewed the removal rate. "The critics said people wouldn't stay, being city dwellers they would rush back to London as soon as they could find housing. We learned that the first six months and then the first three years are the most critical periods. After six months the dish cloths begin to wear out, and if they haven't adjusted in three years they want to leave. The removal rate, however, holds steady at 5% a year, very low in a mobile society. So most, apparently, get used to new town living. Quite by accident we found out where most of the leavers were going. The Housing Manager requires a repairs deposit returnable after ten years, or after departure. Except for a few moonlight flits they all wrote back for the deposits listing their forwarding addresses. The 5% breaks down into four even categories. Only 1¼% go back to London, which was a surprise. Another group moves elsewhere in the countryside. That is mostly middle class and management personnel who want to buy homes. Often the men continue

to work in Harlow. About 5% of the work force, people who came to Harlow more to get housing than good jobs, leave their new town jobs and commute back to London every day. But back to the leavers. 1½% go on to other newer new towns, and the rest emigrate - to Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Living in a fledgling new town is a kind of pioneering. You can't judge it until you've tried it, and then some people can't stop.

Anything more than ten years in a new town is a long time. At last the population is beginning to stabilize, or at least less than 40% of the population is under the age of 15. In fact, more than a thousand children of Harlow families have grown up, left school, found jobs, married and been assigned Harlow housing in which to raise their families. The Harlow Development Corporation helps retiring relatives of Harlow families find accommodation in the town so that 40% of the families have at least one relative nearby (the best average among the new towns.) While the sheer size of the investment - in housing, schools, roads, sewers, factories, stores - and the tightness of the original planning - an average of 15 houses to the acre - somewhat inhibits radical alterations to the shape of the new town, the experiment has not ended. Indeed, in many ways it has just begun. The only lessons about new towns that have been fully appreciated are about what to do while the mud dries.

Sincerely,

Eden Ross Kipson

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